

# Emotional Stability Training for Maritime Professionals in War-torn territories to Mitigate Occupational Stress

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of 20 Filipino maritime professionals regarding emotional stability training and its effectiveness in mitigating severe occupational stress while navigating war-torn territories. Semi-structured interviews revealed that while foundational training provides basic cognitive control during emergencies, standard mental health protocols act merely as a temporary measure against the acute trauma of hostile waters. Participants reported utilizing specific tactical grounding techniques, such as tactical breathing and operating on mental "autopilot," to prevent operational paralysis during kinetic attacks, piracy, and prolonged hyper-vigilance. However, the study identified significant systemic barriers hindering psychological preparedness, notably demanding operational schedules that sideline trauma training and cultural stigmas within multinational crews that complicate effective emotional support. The findings underscore the severe inadequacy of current resilience programs for modern combat zones, highlighting an urgent need for specialized, trauma-informed preparation. Integrating military-style combat-survival simulations, culturally customized psychological interventions, and mandatory post-voyage trauma debriefing is critical to ensuring the psychological survival of civilian seafarers and the operational sustainability of the global maritime industry...

**Keywords:** emotional stability, maritime professionals, occupational stress, war-torn territories, psychological trauma, trauma-informed training

## Introduction

While extensive research has documented the baseline occupational stressors of the maritime industry, a critical gap remains in understanding and mitigating the severe psychological trauma experienced by civilian seafarers navigating high-threat, war-torn territories. Historically, poor mental health issues have been common among mariners due to standard stressors like extended working hours, fatigue, multicultural conflicts, and prolonged isolation (Lefkowitz, 2020; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023; Janssen et al., 2026). Simply spending extended periods at sea directly increases depression rates, with married officers often suffering the most due to prolonged separation from their families (Janssen et al., 2026; Baygi et al., 2022). However, the rise of modern geopolitical conflicts, particularly missile and drone attacks in regions like the Red

Sea, has transformed commercial shipping into a high-risk combat environment (GALATAS et al., 2025). Experiencing human-driven violence, such as a hijacking or armed attack, inflicts significantly more severe psychological trauma than surviving natural disasters or accidental ship emergencies (Jensen & Oldenburg, 2019; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023). Because civilian seafarers are largely unequipped for armed conflict, they frequently suffer from extreme anxiety, emotional instability, and up to a 25% rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following an attack, surpassing even the trauma levels seen in military prisoners of war (Ziello et al., 2013; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023).

Navigating these hostile territories fundamentally alters human cognitive function and necessitates highly specialized coping mechanisms. Sudden, intense stress physically alters the brain by shutting down the neural networks responsible for complex problem-solving and flexible thinking, forcing individuals to abandon careful evaluation and react purely on instinct (Stefanski et al., 2026; Vartanian et al., 2020). Extreme fear disrupts the brain's ability to logically evaluate ideas, particularly when individuals feel a life-threatening situation is completely out of their control (Vartanian et al., 2020). Conversely, mild to moderate environmental stress can create an "optimal arousal zone" that heightens situational awareness and fosters cautious decision-making, provided the stress hormone release is not biologically overwhelming (Schilder et al., 2026; Yamakawa et al., 2016). Emotional control during emergencies, specifically managing the balance between danger control and fear control, is paramount for promoting protective actions and preventing operational paralysis (Chen & Chen, 2022). To survive extreme scenarios, such as captivity or hijackings, seafarers rely heavily on psychological defense mechanisms, self-reflection, and specific cognitive strategies (Froholdt, 2017). Furthermore, a leader who projects calm can drastically improve overall crew performance by mitigating the contagious nature of panic (Stefanski et al., 2026).

A maritime professional's experience of occupational stress in a war zone is heavily mediated by their rank, cultural background, and inherent resilience. While regular crew members experience higher daily stress due to physically demanding tasks, officers suffer from significantly higher levels of anxiety, depression, and uncontrollable intrusive thoughts following extreme crises, reflecting the heavy burden of leadership (Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023; Janssen et al., 2026; Baygi et al., 2022; Jensen & Oldenburg, 2019). Cultural background heavily dictates trauma expression; non-European and Asian sailors frequently report higher stress levels under the threat of piracy but are more likely to mask psychological distress as physical pain due to cultural stigma (Janssen et al., 2026; Jensen & Oldenburg, 2019). Despite these differences, high emotional stability prevents individuals from harboring harmful thoughts and acts as a buffer against severe job stress (Ahmad et al., 2017). Dispositional resilience, problem-focused coping strategies, and aerobic physical fitness act as universal protectors, preserving the brain's working memory and enabling sailors to maintain logical decision-making under severe pressure (Van Wijk, 2023; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023; Sekel et al., 2023).

To effectively protect crews, the maritime industry must urgently overhaul its approach to mental health. Standard maritime medical training is no longer sufficient to handle modern combat emergencies or the psychological toll of piracy (GALATAS et al., 2025). Researchers strongly advocate for adapting military-style tactical medical protocols and utilizing advanced simulations to prepare civilian crews for high-threat environments (GALATAS et al., 2025; Stefanski et al., 2026). Because severe panic strips away a person's ability to self-correct, providing crews with prior trauma-informed mental health education acts as a crucial shield that aids recovery (Stefanski et al., 2026; Abila & Acejo, 2021; Seyle et al., 2018). Furthermore, treatments and psychological interventions must be culturally customized to effectively help diverse crews heal after a life-threatening event (Abila & Acejo, 2021). Addressing this gap through advanced, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed emotional stability training is not merely an operational enhancement; it is an urgent, non-negotiable imperative to ensure the psychological survival of maritime professionals and the continued sustainability of global shipping in increasingly hostile waters.

## Methods

## Research Design

This investigation utilized an exploratory qualitative approach, employing individual interviews as the primary data collection method. The gathered information served to inform subsequent theoretical analyses and program development. This exploratory strategy was chosen because the specific topic of emotional stability training for civilian maritime professionals navigating active war-torn territories is not yet extensively researched. This approach allows for an initial, in-depth investigation to uncover key aspects, trauma responses, and coping mechanisms that can guide future, more focused studies on high-threat maritime operations (Calaro et al., 2023; Chavez, 2022).

## Sampling and Participants

The participants for this study consisted of Filipino maritime professionals, with a purposive sample of 20 individuals selected from various sectors within the maritime industry. This purposive sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling, involved choosing participants based on strict criteria deemed critical to the study's new objectives. Specifically, all selected participants were required to have completed at least one deployment through a designated war-torn territory or have direct survival experience involving kinetic attacks, severe piracy, or hostile boardings. This approach was essential to gather authentic insights that would inform the investigation into how reinforcing specialized, trauma-informed emotional stability training can assist maritime professionals in managing the extreme psychological stress of combat-zone navigation (Ceneciro, 2023). Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents.

**Table 1. Distribution of Respondents**

No. Of Respondents	Age	Years in service
Respondent 1	34	12
Respondent 2	25	7
Respondent 3	45	20
Respondent 4	26	5
Respondent 5	40	17
Respondent 6	27	5
Respondent 7	25	4
Respondent 8	37	14
Respondent 9	29	7
Respondent 10	33	5
Respondent 11	26	4
Respondent 12	40	17
Respondent 13	39	9
Respondent 14	28	8
Respondent 15	27	1
Respondent 16	34	8
Respondent 17	27	6
Respondent 18	36	13
Respondent 19	29	3
Respondent 20	43	16

### Instrument

In this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted using open-ended questions as the primary instrument to gather qualitative data. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences regarding emotional stability training and its effectiveness in managing the acute trauma and occupational stress associated with hostile environments. The open-ended format facilitated the identification of themes, patterns, and variations in how participants processed fear, hyper-vigilance, and life-threatening situations. Table 2 presents the research instrument used in the study.

**Table 2. Research Instrument**

Objectives	Interview questions
To explore the perceptions and experiences of maritime professionals regarding emotional stability training and its role in managing extreme occupational stress in war-torn territories.	1. How do you perceive the importance of emotional stability training when navigating high-threat or war-torn territories, and how has it influenced your ability to manage extreme fear and hyper-vigilance?
	2. Can you share a personal experience where emotional stability training helped you maintain cognitive focus and handle a severe security threat, such as piracy, or hostile boarding?
	3. What challenges or limitations have you encountered in accessing or applying emotional stability training in your workplace?
To examine the effectiveness of existing emotional stability training programs in helping maritime professionals cope with the psychological trauma of hostile work environments.	1. In what ways have existing emotional stability training programs prepared you to handle the severe psychological demands of working in conflict zones?
	2. Can you describe any strategies from your training that you found particularly helpful in managing panic and maintaining operational capacity under imminent threat?
	3. What specific improvements do you think must be included in training programs to make them effective for modern warfare risks at sea?

### Data Gathering Procedure

Initially, potential participants were identified and selected based on the specific criteria of having navigated conflict zones. Once chosen, they were contacted via email and phone to provide an overview of the research and arrange suitable times for the interviews. Because the subject matter involved discussing potentially life-threatening events, informed consent heavily emphasized the participants' right to pause or terminate the interview if the discussion triggered severe trauma or distress. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing for both guided questions and the flexibility to delve into emerging themes regarding combat-zone survival. Each session took place in a quiet, comfortable, and secure environment to promote open and honest dialogue. With consent, audio recordings were made. The recorded conversations were transcribed, reviewed, and coded to identify key themes. Participant confidentiality was strictly upheld by anonymizing all identifying information.

## Data analysis

The primary data consisted of narratives from maritime professionals who have faced extreme maritime threats. A systematic and thorough thematic analysis was conducted on the interview data to identify and interpret key themes relevant to navigating war-torn territories. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. During initial readings, preliminary notes were made to capture patterns related to trauma response, cognitive control, and emotional regulation under fire. Relevant excerpts were highlighted, and codes were assigned to encapsulate the core essence of survival and resilience mechanisms. These initial codes were analyzed for connections, allowing for the categorization of related codes into broader themes. This iterative approach ensured that the themes accurately reflected the data and addressed the revised research questions. The final themes were clearly named and defined, providing a thorough interpretation of each identified theme (Chavez & Del Prado, 2023a; Inoferio et al., 2024).

## Results

**Research Objective 1: To explore the perceptions and experiences of maritime professionals regarding emotional stability training and its role in managing extreme occupational stress in war-torn territories.**

### *Theme 1: Mitigating Panic and Maintaining Cognitive Control During Active Threats*

Ten (10) respondents expressed that when navigating high-threat waters, the margin for error is non-existent, and sudden panic can lead to fatal mistakes. Emotional stability training has been critical in helping them detach from immediate fear, analyze life-threatening situations rationally, and act effectively under extreme pressure. Officers, in particular, emphasized that they are responsible for making rapid decisions that directly dictate the physical survival of their crew. Seafarers rely heavily on emotional control training to avoid impulsive reactions during sudden security alarms, hostile boardings, or kinetic threats, allowing them to focus on logical survival protocols rather than being paralyzed by fear.

*"When a sudden security crisis happens, like a drone warning in the Red Sea, there's no time to panic. Emotional stability training has helped me control my reactions, think logically, and act effectively under extreme pressure."*

*"Under combat-level stress, bad decisions can be costly. In high-risk situations, panic leads to mistakes. Training in emotional stability has helped me control my fear and focus on logical survival solutions instead of freezing."*

### **Theme 2: Managing Hyper-vigilance and the Psychological Toll of War Zones**

Ten (10) respondents noted that navigating through conflict zones creates a grueling state of constant hyper-vigilance and psychological burnout. The prolonged threat of physical harm, compounded by the isolation from family, takes a massive mental toll. Respondents expressed that emotional stability training provided them with crucial coping mechanisms to deal with the intense anxiety of not making it home. By utilizing techniques to maintain structured routines and mental grounding, they were able to prevent severe mental exhaustion. Training helped them recognize the early warning signs of trauma and burnout, empowering them to take action before the chronic fear completely compromised their operational capabilities.

*"Navigating through war-torn territories, the fear of not making it back to your family is tough. Emotional stability training gave me tools to cope with that extreme anxiety, like journaling and mental grounding, instead of dwelling on the constant threat."*

*"After weeks of nonstop hyper-vigilance and radar watches in hostile waters, I started feeling mentally drained and burnt out. Emotional stability training helped me recognize the signs of severe psychological fatigue and use relaxation techniques to recover instead of letting the fear take over."*

### **Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Accessing Specialized Trauma-Informed Training**

Despite the severe risks of their environment, respondents identified significant systemic barriers that limit the effectiveness of current mental health programs. Ten (10) respondents expressed that demanding operational schedules often push psychological preparation aside, with training frequently rushed or skipped entirely. Furthermore, existing programs are overwhelmingly focused on standard technical drills, lacking the specialized, trauma-informed curriculum required to survive a war zone. Five (5) respondents also highlighted that within multinational crews, cultural and language barriers severely complicate the delivery of mental health support. Different cultural stigmas regarding fear and trauma mean that emotional stability training is often not universally understood or accepted by all crew members.

*"Operations always come first, and trauma training gets pushed aside. Many companies focus strictly on technical or safety drills but neglect the psychological preparation needed for a war zone. We often have to rely on personal experience to manage the extreme stress of these transits."*

*"With multinational crews, trauma-informed training isn't always understood the same way. In some cultures, talking about the intense fear or stress of a hostile transit is seen as a weakness, making emotional stability programs less effective if they aren't culturally sensitive."*

**Research Objective 2: To examine the effectiveness of existing emotional stability training programs in helping maritime professionals cope with the psychological trauma of hostile work environments.**

### **Theme 4: Evaluating the Adequacy of Existing Training for Combat-Zone Trauma**

While foundational emotional stability training helped seafarers regulate baseline occupational stress, respondents noted a stark contrast between their standard preparation and the severe psychological demands of navigating war-torn territories. Ten (10) respondents indicated that while general techniques helped them maintain a baseline of emotional control, the existing programs were fundamentally inadequate for the acute trauma of hostile waters. The current focus on general mindfulness or standard onboard conflict resolution lacked the tactical depth needed to process the constant threat of physical harm, leaving crews feeling unprepared for the severe anxiety and potential PTSD associated with modern maritime warfare.

*"The basic training helped me control my emotions to some extent during security alarms. Instead of completely panicking when we entered a high-risk zone, I tried to take a deep breath, assess the threat, and act logically, but it felt like putting a band-aid on a massive wound."*

*"When the proximity alarms triggered for a potential drone strike, my heart was racing, but I tried to lean on my training. Instead of freezing, I forced myself to focus on executing our emergency lockdown step by step."*

### **Theme 5: Tactical Grounding and Cognitive Strategies Under Imminent Threat**

When facing imminent threats, respondents relied heavily on specific cognitive and physical strategies extracted from their training to prevent operational paralysis. Ten (10) respondents highlighted the critical use of tactical breathing and progressive muscle relaxation to lower their heart rates, a physical intervention that helped prevent their brains from short-circuiting during moments of sheer panic. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of hyper-focusing on immediate, actionable tasks, essentially operating on mental "autopilot", to shut out the overwhelming fear of the broader combat environment and maintain their operational capacity.

*"When the threat level rises and panic sets in, I rely on tactical breathing exercises, inhale for four seconds, hold for four, exhale for four. It's a survival mechanism that keeps my brain functioning when an attack feels imminent."*

*"Instead of being paralyzed by the constant threat of a strike, I force myself to hyper-focus on the present, running the navigation checks, doing my job flawlessly, and taking the transit one hour at a time. It reduces the overwhelming anxiety."*

### *Theme 6: The Imperative for Combat-Survival Simulations and Trauma Debriefing*

Seafarers overwhelmingly advocated for a radical overhaul of emotional stability programs to explicitly address modern warfare risks. Ten (10) respondents stressed that theoretical mental health seminars must be replaced with immersive, high-pressure combat-survival simulations. They argued that practicing mental resilience during simulated kinetic attacks or piracy scenarios is crucial for preventing paralysis in real-life crises. Furthermore, respondents highlighted the critical need for dedicated, post-voyage trauma debriefing and continuous psychological support, emphasizing that mental health care cannot end once the ship safely leaves hostile waters.

*"The training must move beyond theoretical lessons and include real-life case studies and immersive simulations on surviving extreme hostility, piracy, and the severe trauma that follows."*

*"We already have standard safety drills, but we desperately need drills focused on mental resilience under fire, simulating high-pressure warfare scenarios like kinetic attacks or hostile boardings, while specifically training us how to manage our fear and stay operational."*

## Discussion

The findings reveal that emotional stability training plays a critical role in mitigating panic and maintaining cognitive control during active kinetic threats. Respondents highlighted that training helped them detach from immediate fear and maintain logical survival protocols rather than freezing. This aligns with the understanding that sudden, intense stress physically alters brain function by shutting down the areas responsible for complex problem-solving, forcing an individual to react purely on instinct unless properly trained (Stefanski et al., 2026; Vartanian et al., 2020). By successfully utilizing emotional control during emergencies, balancing danger control and fear control, seafarers are able to promote protective actions and prevent operational paralysis (Chen & Chen, 2022). Furthermore, the respondents' emphasis on officers needing to make rapid, rational decisions under fire reflects the established literature indicating that officers carry a much heavier psychological burden of leadership and crew safety, which often translates to higher baseline anxiety during crises (Baygi et al., 2022; Jensen & Oldenburg, 2019). A leader who successfully projects a calm state drastically improves the crew's overall performance by preventing the contagion of panic (Stefanski et al., 2026).

Beyond sudden kinetic attacks, respondents heavily emphasized the grueling psychological toll of constant hyper-vigilance and isolation while navigating conflict zones. The fear of physical harm and the intense anxiety of not returning home necessitate robust coping mechanisms. This finding reinforces the literature stating that experiencing human-driven violence and extreme maritime threats inflicts severe psychological trauma, often leading to PTSD rates that surpass those of military prisoners of war (Ziello et al., 2013; Szafran-Dobrowolska et al., 2023). However, respondents noted that utilizing mental grounding and structured routines learned through training helped buffer this extreme stress. High emotional stability acts as a critical shield, preventing individuals from harboring harmful, intrusive thoughts during prolonged isolation (Ahmad et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2026).

Despite the clear benefits of emotional stability training, respondents identified severe systemic barriers to its application, particularly demanding operational schedules and cultural disconnects. The finding that mental health preparation is frequently bypassed for operational priorities contributes to the massive lack of reliable data regarding the true psychological toll on these crews (Abila & Acejo, 2021). Furthermore, the respondents' observations regarding cultural and language barriers within multinational crews directly correlate with research demonstrating that cultural background heavily dictates trauma expression; for instance, Asian sailors are more likely to mask their psychological distress due to cultural stigma, experiencing trauma as physical pain rather than openly discussing their fears (Janssen et al., 2026; Jensen & Oldenburg, 2019).

When evaluating the adequacy of existing training, respondents overwhelmingly concluded that standard emotional stability programs act merely as a "band-aid" and are fundamentally insufficient for the realities of modern combat zones. General mindfulness and standard onboard conflict resolution do not prepare a crew for the trauma of a missile strike or hostile boarding. This confirms recent arguments that standard maritime medical and psychological training is no longer adequate to handle

modern combat emergencies in high-risk environments like the Red Sea (GALATAS et al., 2025). Basic preparation is insufficient to protect civilian sailors from the lasting impacts of severe violence; without specific psychological education regarding what trauma looks like and how to cope with it, seafarers are left highly vulnerable to long-term psychological degradation (Seyle et al., 2018; Abila & Acejo, 2021).

Despite the inadequacies of the broader curriculum, respondents did successfully extract and apply specific tactical grounding strategies, such as tactical breathing and operating on mental "autopilot", when facing imminent threats. These physical calming responses help manage the intensity of stress hormones released during an attack, allowing personnel to maintain a degree of operational focus (Yamakawa et al., 2016). Rehearsing specific calming routines and standardized emergency steps until they become deeply ingrained habits frees up valuable brain power, allowing crew members to execute basic logic and procedural tasks even when their higher-level situational alertness is compromised by extreme fear (Stefanski et al., 2026; Sekel et al., 2023). These strategies mirror the psychological defense mechanisms and self-reflection required to survive captivity or hijackings (Frohholdt, 2017).

Finally, the respondents' urgent call for combat-survival simulations and post-voyage trauma debriefing highlights the critical imperative for industry-wide training reform. Seafarers argued that theoretical seminars must be replaced with immersive, high-pressure drills. This directly supports the literature advocating for the adaptation of military-style tactical protocols and virtual reality simulations for civilian commercial ships (GALATAS et al., 2025). Gradually exposing individuals to simulated, high-pressure scenarios physically and mentally trains them to react less intensely to real danger, preventing the brain from short-circuiting when actual survival is threatened (Stefanski et al., 2026). Furthermore, the demand for continuous support reinforces the necessity that post-incident treatments and debriefings must be culturally customized to effectively help diverse, multinational crews heal from extreme maritime trauma (Abila & Acejo, 2021).

## Conclusion

Emotional stability training has historically served as a vital resource for maritime professionals managing baseline occupational stress. However, as commercial shipping increasingly navigates the severe realities of modern geopolitical conflict, this study reveals that standard mental health protocols are fundamentally inadequate for the extreme psychological demands of war-torn territories. While foundational emotional control techniques, such as tactical grounding and mental "autopilot", help seafarers mitigate immediate panic and maintain cognitive focus during kinetic attacks and hostile boardings, these basic interventions act merely as a temporary measure against the profound trauma of combat-zone navigation.

Civilian seafarers are currently facing unparalleled levels of hyper-vigilance, acute fear, and severe risks of PTSD without the requisite psychological armor. This vulnerability is further exacerbated by systemic industry barriers, notably demanding operational schedules that sideline mental health preparation and cultural stigmas within multinational crews that complicate effective psychological support.

To ensure the psychological survival of these essential workers, the maritime industry must urgently pivot from generalized resilience seminars to specialized, trauma-informed preparation. Integrating military-style combat-survival simulations, culturally customized psychological interventions, and mandatory post-voyage trauma debriefing is no longer optional. Addressing these critical training gaps is an absolute imperative, not only for protecting the long-term mental health of individual seafarers and their families, but for maintaining the operational safety and sustainability of global shipping in increasingly hostile waters.

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