

# CLEAR TO CALM: A PROMISING FUTURE FOR MINDFULNESS IN ATM

Mindfulness-based stress reduction has showed promise in many aspects of industry and society, and aviation is no exception. ENAIRE's Clear to Calm project is integrating mindfulness practices for air traffic controller stress reduction, as **Alberto Rodriguez de la Flor** reports.

The introduction of the new EU Regulation 2017/373 has been quite a challenge for all ANSPs. Part of it, regarding new obligations to set up management systems for fatigue and stress have, ironically, stressed many ANSPs, and ENAIRE is no exception.

Now, organisations must define and operate new procedures to manage controllers' fatigue and stress in such a way that it mitigates the effects on the safety of operations.

Stress and fatigue can have many sources, from organisational to personal, and there are many ways to reduce and mitigate them. Not all mitigation means have the same effect over different individuals, though, and acceptance by controllers has to be taken into account.

While EU 2017/373 concerns operational safety, both fatigue and stress also have strong occupational health connections. These elements are managed with

different regulations, which are not fully consistent with EU 2017/373. A coordinated and holistic approach is therefore required.

Mindfulness is one approach to addressing stress and fatigue. In 2015, the UK Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group was set up to: a) review the scientific evidence and current best practice in mindfulness training; b) develop policy recommendations for government, based on these findings; and c) provide a forum for discussion in Parliament for the role of mindfulness and its implementation in public policy. The group published a 'Mindful Nation UK' report to address mental and physical health concerns in the areas of education, health, the workplace, and the criminal justice system through the application of mindfulness-based interventions.

Inspired by this 'Mindful Nation' project, ENAIRE wanted to test whether eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction interventions can be used for ATCOs' stress reduction in the longer term. This was supported by some of our ATCOs with previous experience on mindfulness to help mitigate, reduce and prevent stress. We called this 'Clear to Calm'.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction instructors certified by the University of Massachusetts were carefully selected. Over 50 volunteers from Barcelona ACC and TWR are currently participating in the project. Around half of them have already completed the first intervention. Controllers participate anonymously, so that their identities are protected. While analysis is ongoing, reductions in stress have been found. The effect on safety-related behaviour is also being measured in the participating ATCOs, and operational safety benefits are evident. Personal reports from

controllers suggest that this has been one of the most well-appreciated initiatives for ATCOs in the organisation. The study will also measure stress levels in the long run – six months and at least one year after the interventions.

The project provoked great interest in other ATS units, who are willing to run similar projects, and this time, fostered by their own unit managers. We are also creating meditation spaces in ATS units so that ATCOs can make use of these between operational times.

While the study has limitations, the results have been quite promising. Seldom have projects been so well accepted, with such interest across the whole organisation. We will continue to strive to offer mindfulness-based stress reduction programmes in the organisation with the aim to become a safer, mindful air navigation service provider. **S**



Alberto Rodriguez de la Flor is an enroute ATCO, working also as a specialist in ATM safety, team resource management, and human factors in the Safety Division of ENAIRE. Apart from being an Aerospace Engineer, he holds an MSc in Educational Neuropsychology and an MSc in Psychobiology and Cognitive Neuroscience.  
[ardelaflor@enaire.es](mailto:ardelaflor@enaire.es)