

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN THE PILOT COMMUNITY WITH PEER SUPPORT

How can pilots raise concerns about their mental health and receive confidential support to work through such issues?

Pilot peer support programmes offer one method, as the **European Pilot Peer Support Initiative Board** reports.

"After extensive research and surveys, it has been proved beyond doubt that pilots are, in fact, only human." Dr Ries Simons, European Society of Aerospace Medicine

Pilots are perceived by the general public as intelligent and strong characters who are independent problem solvers and set high personal standards. They are accustomed to high workload and occupational stress, and indeed train regularly in techniques to stay proficient and calm in unexpected and high-pressure scenarios. So people may think that pilots can and should be able to cope with whatever life throws at them, because that is what they are trained to do.

The reality, however, is often very different. Problems and stressors on the flight deck are time-limited (or gravity-limited) and the professional skills, procedures and knowledge pilots use to deal with them do not necessarily work with the stresses of personal life. Furthermore, normal coping mechanisms can sometimes be overwhelmed by the traumatic effects of being involved in a flying incident or accident.

Pilots are also generally seen as high-achieving professionals with high standards. A perceived failure to cope

can negatively affect their mental wellbeing and can negatively impair their professional performance.

Studies have shown that pilots suffer similar levels of mental health issues to the general population. One study (Wu et al, 2016) has shown pilots have a high incidence of depression (over 12%) and some have suicidal thoughts (4%). For comparison, Wittchen et al (2011) showed that 27% of the adult EU population aged between 18 and 65 had suffered at least one mental disorder in the past year. These included anxiety (14%), depression (7%) and insomnia (7%).

Unfortunately, the acceptance of help, such as employee assistance programmes (EAPs), is relatively low amongst pilots. The BEA accident report into the Germanwings D-AIPX crash cited possible reasons for this: *"EAPs are sometimes under-utilized resources for reasons such as these: employees question the confidentiality of the service; they perceive a stigma attached to asking for professional help with personal matters; or, they are unaware of the programme and its capabilities"* (p. 38). A key reason is the common belief and fear amongst pilots that, if known to the outside world, mental health or psychological issues will have the immediate consequence of removal of their flying



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licence or medical certificate, with the consequent possible loss of livelihood. We can add to that the stigma attached to 'mental health' issues in society.

While these issues have been present for decades, they have largely been ignored until Germanwings flight GWI 4U9525, which crashed in March 2015, with the loss of all 149 passengers and crew on board. This turned the non-disclosure of pilot mental health issues into a matter of urgent priority.

Amongst the multiple solutions that have been identified by a dedicated EASA Task Force in 2015 to address the issue of pilot mental health and wellbeing, the most promising is the set-up of peer support structures by operators. For many years, peer support has been successfully used to allow people to address issues of mental wellbeing, both in aviation (e.g., Stiftung Mayday, Project Wingman) and beyond (e.g., law enforcement and firefighters). The term 'mental wellbeing' covers many areas, such as life stresses (e.g., divorce, financial pressures), training performance or professional standards issues, substance abuse and addiction issues, and concern over medical and licence issues.

Whilst operators may have internal processes for dealing with these issues, these avenues might not appeal to pilots due to confidentiality issues and fear of potential loss of licence and livelihood, or other repercussions.

Trained peers are essential. Experience has shown that a pilot is more likely to 'open up' about their problems and issues to a fellow professional; someone who does the same job and understands first-hand the unique stresses and demands that go with it. The barriers to 'opening up' are both historical and societal, but in the specific case of pilots it is important to note that the ability of a pilot to carry out their job is dependent on the external agencies of the licensing authority and the aviation medical authority. Fear of losing either a licence or Class 1 medical can lead to behaviours which are not compatible with exercising the privileges of the pilot's licence. It is important to note, however, that evidence shows that in the vast majority of cases pilots will retain their medical and licence after declaring a mental health issue (in the US, denial of medical certificates for mental health issues in 2017 was 0.08% of cases reported; Berry, 2018). The peer has a significant role in reassuring the pilot that they can seek assistance for their issues in a non-punitive way.

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Peers are trained to signpost the pilot towards appropriate help, and by having them operate under the close guidance and support of the mental health professional, this allows the 'best of both worlds': speaking to a peer who intimately understands the job and its peculiarities while still having access to high quality psychological advice via that peer.

As EASA regulation 2018/1042 is the first time that such support programmes are regulated, the implementation of these will certainly present regulators and operators with several challenges as well as opportunities to learn.

Nevertheless, peer support is a concept that we hope will allow us to support the mental wellbeing of front-line staff and make a real difference in the lives of the concerned people.

In that context, a non-profit initiative was formed in 2016 to gather the existing expertise on peer support programmes within Europe. It consisted of pilots (European Cockpit Association - ECA), aviation medical doctors (European Society of Aerospace

Medicine - ESAM), and aviation psychologists (European Association for Aviation Psychology - EAAP), together with the Stiftung Mayday Foundation in Germany and elsewhere, and the Pilots Assistance Network programme from British Airways. Given the name EPPSI (European Pilot Peer Support Initiative), its aim is to provide best practice and guidance for operators, regulators and interested stakeholders in the field of pilot peer support programmes. EPPSI has produced resources aimed at assisting airlines and employee representative organisations in the creation of their programmes. 

Note

For a more detailed examination of the pilot's professional and personal situation from a psychological perspective, see the British Psychological Society (2017) position statement on pilot mental health and wellbeing.

<http://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/aviation-and-aerospace-psychology-pilot-mental-health-and-wellbeing> or <http://bit.ly/2I7ZUCM>

EPPSI Resources

EPPSI (2019). *Pilot peer support programmes: The EPPSI guide. Vol 1: Design and implementation.* v.8.1 November. <http://bit.ly/32Gyq0H>

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