

# FATIGUE AND CURRENCY: HOW MORE DOWN TIME MAY INCREASE RISK THIS SUMMER

Fatigue has always been a familiar foe in aviation. With the return to flying, the challenges will increase as old coping strategies have lost currency. Pilot **Katy Lee** offers some reminders to controllers and pilots.

Around the world, many airline pilots have been furloughed for significant periods of the last year and, for the majority of those who have not, workloads have been much lower. The same can be said of air traffic controllers, cabin crew or any group of aviation professionals. For most of us, this down time has meant that we've managed to get into a regular sleep routine for the first time in many years: going to bed and waking up at more or less the same time every day, rather than being a slave to the rostering gods. From a health perspective, this is undoubtedly a positive thing. But it can't last, and aviation will return.

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If booking predictions are to be believed, and assuming that governments let people travel, late summer 2021 will be a busy period for airlines, meaning that all services, from security to ground handling to air traffic control, will be equally in demand. Aviation professionals will find themselves working a much more 'normal' roster, with likely many back-to-back long shifts and ever-changing

working times. I have no doubt that staff will be thrilled to be back working in the industry that they love, but we need to be mindful of the risks that this sudden ramp-up of flying may bring.

Fatigue has long been a risk for airlines, especially amongst pilots, and with good reason. Roster patterns and demanding work can be challenging to juggle, and we will always have crew required to fly at times of circadian lows. Yet these statistics all come from when crew are in more recent flying practice and more accustomed to shift patterns.

When crew return to flying, the idea of getting up at 0300 for work on day one, flying until mid-afternoon and then returning on day two for a deep night flight, going to bed in the small hours of day three, will be a distant memory. The coping mechanisms that we all developed over years of trial and error will have faded somewhat. Combine this with the cognitive challenge of returning to line flying and all the pressures that brings, and we face a risky scenario.

Airlines are aware of this and most have adopted a pragmatic approach, eschewing the usual on-time performance and fuel efficiency in favour of pilot comfort, at least in the beginning. Rushing crews will lead to more errors being made and, when

everyone is rusty, this simply isn't worth it.


While crew who haven't been flying regularly will have been back in the simulator for currency purposes, nothing can really replicate a real-life line flight, and these will bring challenges. If, as air traffic controllers, you encounter pilots taking more time than usual, please do consider whether this may be the reason; our normal slick continuous descent approaches and single-engine taxiing are likely to have been put to one side while we familiarise ourselves again with our workplace. Our cognitive load will

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be higher, meaning it takes longer to switch between tasks, and things that used to be automatic now require more conscious effort.

Mistakes are inevitable, even more so as everyone is less current than usual, and this requires all of us to ensure that these mistakes are picked up. SOPs will be more important than ever. A few extra track miles on our

approach, and giving us time to set up in slow time, may make the difference between a successful approach and a go-around. Familiarity and more flying will, of course, herald the return of minimum track miles and high-speed approaches, alongside a return to crew's bodies coping with the irregular roster patterns.

There is no avoiding the risk of fatigue to all staff, no matter where they're working, but being aware of it and helping to mitigate this risk may well make a difference. Taking a little extra time to think over what you're doing, confirm your switch selection or your transmission, and regain that comfort and confidence in your work, will bring benefits. It's been a challenging year for everyone and the most important thing, as the world returns to normal, is to work together as aviation professionals and colleagues to ensure that we maintain the safety levels in our industry and in our skies. 



Katy Lee is First Officer (B737-800), based in Birmingham, UK, with a keen interest in CRM and human factors in aviation, as well as mental health. She holds an MSc in Human Factors in Aviation and is a qualified flight instructor.

