

STEADYING THE MIND: A PILOT'S PERSPECTIVE

Seven years ago, I stumbled across the book 'Finding Peace in a Frantic World'. I assumed that meditation was just for weirdos and hippies. However, I was fascinated and signed up for an 8-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. I was hooked. Since then, my daily routine starts with RPM – Rise, Pee, Meditate. No excuses. Although I can't control what each day throws at me, 10 minutes of meditation sets me up and helps me get through the day with poise. If a storm comes my way, rather than being swept away, I want to be in the eye of it, where all is calm.

Pilots place huge importance on 'situational awareness'. Equally important, but frequently overlooked, is awareness of one's self. Meditation has greatly improved my self-awareness. In particular, it has improved how certain situations and stressors affect my state of mind and overall wellbeing. As a pilot, this is very beneficial, considering the links between our mind and

performance. Being mindful allows me to identify earlier when stress, anxiety and/or frustration might be building, and mindful techniques can quickly lower the intensity of these emotions. This could be as simple as mindfully taking a series of deep breaths or scan of my body.

Frequently during a quiet time in-flight, I will advise my fellow pilot that I am going to recline my seat and close my eyes for 10-15 minutes. Who says 'controlled rest' must involve sleep? I'm not zoning out. It's the exact opposite: I'm zoning in. Flying involves long periods of low stimulation, and even during busy times – perhaps due to the high reliability of the operation – it's easy to 'mentally go on autopilot'. It is natural for our minds to wander, but this is not ideal in a safety-critical situation. Meditation has improved my focus, attention span and awareness of when I am distracted.

Research has shown that meditation weakens our 'fight or flight' response by 'taming our amygdala'. With risks of altitude bust, flap overspeed or misconfiguration, go-arounds are a known issue. Regardless of how often they are briefed and practised, they can still result in surprise and startle. I believe that meditation has made me less reactive and more responsive, reducing my susceptibility to being startled.

Stress doesn't stop once I'm out of the Airbus, and nor do the benefits of meditation. The resilience and sense of calm that meditation gives me helps in dealing with the trials and tribulations of a busy family life, allowing me to be present when at home and focussed on what really matters in life. Mindfulness helps me preserve my work-life balance. Once the uniform is off, it's off...

I believe that meditation has made me less reactive and more responsive, reducing my susceptibility to being startled.



Captain Paul Cullen has been an airline pilot for over 20 years, with over 13,000 hours flying A320, A330 and B737.

Cullenp4@tcd.ie s.



BRUSSELS AIRLINES PILOT PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMME

What are airlines doing for pilot peer support? **Veronica Taliano** outlines the arrangements at Brussels Airlines, in light of relevant regulatory requirements.

Brussels Airlines believes that employee wellbeing is at the heart of every successful business. Recently it has set up its own Peer Support Programme dedicated to Flight Crew. In compliance with the European Regulation (Commission Regulation (EU) 2018/1042), the structure includes fully trained peers (a group of Brussels Airlines pilots), a peer coordinator, an oversight committee and mental health professionals to support both peers and pilots seeking help.

COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) 2018/1042 of 23 July 2018 amending Regulation (EU) No 965/2012, set the requirements for Operators in regards to support programmes.

CAT.GEN.MPA.215 (a) The operator shall enable, facilitate and ensure access to a proactive and non-punitive programme

that will assist and support flight crew in recognising, coping with, and overcoming any problem which might negatively affect their ability to safely exercise the privileges of their licence. Such access shall be made available to all flight crew.

Flight crew members need to trust that raising concerns about their mental wellbeing will not be punished but instead supported with the primary aim of safely returning them to the flight deck as soon as possible.

CAT.GEN.MPA.215 (b) Without prejudice to applicable national legislation on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and

on the free movement of such data, the protection of the confidentiality of data shall be a precondition for an effective support programme as it encourages the use of such a programme and ensures its integrity.

The peers, selected in two stages following voluntary application, will be trained in the coming months by both Red Cross experts and a psychologist with an aviation background.

In most cases, people do not need further assistance beyond peer-to-peer contact. Often, this means that pilots simply need to 'ventilate' their feelings and emotions with someone able to listen and understand.

So, why are the peers the best option the company can offer?

- Peers share the same job, and understand its challenges, rhythm and atmosphere.
- Peers have been selected based on specific criteria, such as: empathy, care for others, ability to cope with the emotions of others, being ethically non-judgemental.
- Peers have undertaken training on topics such as: active listening techniques, how to deal with crisis situations, and the legal framework.

The structure also covers, naturally, cases requiring professional mental health treatment or counselling. Any flight crew member in need of psychological help has access to a specialist for confidential support. Medical confidentiality is indeed protected under EU Regulation 1178/2011 (MED.A.015 Medical confidentiality), which states that “All persons involved in medical examination, assessment and certification shall ensure that medical confidentiality is respected at all times.”

Building such programmes (especially when integrated in the airline, rather than an external company), requires significant effort from all involved parties. National laws also have an impact: for Belgium specifically, finding the balance between State and European regulations was quite a challenge. For this reason, all the peers will also be trained as “vertrouwenspersonen; personnes de confiance” (confidants or persons of confidence).

We must not forget that the ultimate goal of peer support programmes should be to always operate safely. To do this, flight crew members need to trust that raising concerns about their mental wellbeing will not be punished but instead supported with the primary aim of safely returning them to the flight deck as soon as possible. In light of this, Brussels Airlines doesn't simply aim to comply with the applicable regulation, but to commit to a cultural change making the programme part of its 'just culture'.



Veronica Taliano is an aviation professional with an operational and safety background. A former flight dispatcher in business jet aviation, she now works at Brussels Airlines' safety department where she focuses on safety risk, assurance and human factors. Since 2015 she is a technical task force member of 'Fondazione 8 ottobre 2001', a flight safety foundation born after the Milan Linate air accident.

References

EPPSI (2019) Pilot Peer Support Programmes, The EPPSI Guide, Vol 1: Design and Implementation. Retrieved from <http://eppsi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/EPPSI-Guide-v8.1.pdf>