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National Air Traffic Services Ltd
Aeronautical Information Service
Control Tower Building, London Heathrow Airport
Hounslow, Middlesex TW6 1JJ
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Distribution: 0870-8871410
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POST TRAUMATIC STRESS

1 Introduction

1.1 This circular provides some guidance concerning the psychological effects traumatic events can cause. Fortunately, for most professional pilots and Air Traffic Control officers, such events are uncommon but when they do occur it is important appropriate action is taken to ensure flight safety is not compromised and for the benefit of the individual(s) involved. Examples of significant events (called 'critical incidents') are those which involve a licence holder in one or more of the following:

- (a) Aircraft accident;
- (b) involvement in disasters/major incidents;
- (c) hijack;
- (d) colleague seriously injured/dead;
- (e) terrorism;
- (f) use of firearms;
- (g) children injured or dead;
- (h) situations of extreme strain, eg of long duration, high intensity and/or involving extreme sensory input;
- (i) turbulence which threatens continued flight.

1.2 It is recommended that any individual exposed to a critical incident such as those mentioned above should be withdrawn from duty immediately. This will ensure that the following can take place:

- (a) Rest from immediate operational pressures;
- (b) availability for a medical examination, which should be carried out at the first available opportunity, and which may indicate the need for a psychological assessment;
- (c) completion of necessary reports;
- (d) availability to assist any investigation team.

2 Procedures after the event

2.1 Many individuals will recognise the value of 'talking through' a traumatic episode, either through personal experience or the experience of colleagues. A further stage of recovery may require 'defusing' which involves professional input. It can be undertaken by a CAA Authorised Medical Examiner (AME). Those who have been significantly affected by their experience may need further assessment and/or treatment to ensure that they can return to operational duties as soon as possible. This is likely to involve more extensive debriefing, giving an opportunity for the individual involved to discuss with a professional any emotions and memories of the critical incident with which he/she may be finding difficulty.

3 Conclusion

3.1 Individuals involved in critical incidents react in a variety of ways, depending upon the incident itself and their individual perception of it. They may experience emotions which have previously been alien to them and find these difficult to express. Symptoms such as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, reduced confidence, poor sleep and other indicators of unusually high arousal are not abnormal in this context and rapid assessment and, if necessary, treatment is to the benefit of the individuals concerned and flight safety. If involved in such an incident, consider seeking assistance for the reasons outlined. More detailed information is available to AMEs to supplement this Circular.

This Circular is issued for information, guidance and necessary action.