



International Civil Aviation Organization

ELECTRONIC BULLETIN

For information only

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PROMOTING, MAINTAINING AND SUPPORTING MENTAL WELL-BEING IN AVIATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has developed guidance specifically to promote, maintain and support mental well-being in aviation during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. COVID-19 has changed the aviation operational environment and the travel experience for both aviation personnel and passengers. The implementation of additional processes, procedures, public health measures and border control measures has increased the stress imposed on all concerned.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic, with all its associated consequences, has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of both passengers and aviation personnel, which could impact operational safety.
4. It is the responsibility of all aviation stakeholders to play a proactive role in maintaining aviation safety while preventing the transmission of COVID-19 and safeguarding the health and safety of aviation personnel and passengers.
5. In the context of providing a psycho-socially safe and supportive aviation environment for aviation personnel and passengers, “aviation personnel” refers to personnel such as pilots, cabin crew, air traffic controllers, technical operations personnel, ground service personnel, aerodrome personnel and aviation medical examiners (AMEs).
6. Stakeholders are requested to encourage the application of the principles to support aviation personnel and passengers and consider the peer support guidance described in the attached enclosures.

Enclosures:

- A – Principles to support aviation personnel and passengers during the COVID-19 pandemic
- B – Peer support: Contributing to a positive safety culture

Issued under the authority of the Secretary General

PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT AVIATION PERSONNEL AND PASSENGERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1. All Stakeholders

Collaborate in multi-sector, multi-stakeholder activities to promote, maintain and support mental health and well-being in aviation personnel to ensure operational safety by:

- 1.1 Recognizing that there are different cultural approaches and promoting a common understanding of supportive behaviors and activities;
- 1.2 Acknowledging the wide range of emotions in response to COVID-19; these are accepted as normal reactions to an abnormal situation; and
- 1.3 Providing a psycho-socially safe and supportive environment.

2. National Aviation Authorities

- 2.1 Ensure collaboration between the aviation authority, aviation medical examiners, aviation medical assessors, other healthcare professionals, peer support groups and aviation personnel to support the mental health and well-being for all aviation personnel;
- 2.2 Provide appropriate guidance and support to aviation medical examiners to manage the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being in a consistent manner;
- 2.3 Encourage stakeholders to make available appropriate resources and tools to minimize the mental health impact of COVID-19, including peer support programmes, by referring to ICAO guidance and other relevant supportive material; and
- 2.4 Communicate on a regular basis to all stakeholders the means to maintain licensing and proficiency to enable safe performance of duties.

3. Professional and Industry Associations

- 3.1 Provide access to appropriate services to support health and well-being; and
- 3.2 Make peer support programmes available to all aviation personnel.

4. Industry Service Providers (e.g. aircraft operators, airports, air traffic control organizations, training organizations, etc.)

- 4.1 Raise awareness among leadership and management to support well-being among aviation personnel;
- 4.2 Continue to offer existing resources to support aviation personnel including peer support, employee assistance programmes (EAP) or other programmes;

- 4.3 As far as possible extend access to supportive resources to aviation personnel that have been furloughed, laid off or made redundant;
 - 4.4 In the absence of employer-based resources, inform aviation personnel of other available resources;
 - 4.5 Facilitate access to support programmes for all categories of aviation personnel (e.g. pilots, cabin crew, air traffic controllers, ground crew, maintenance personnel, aerodrome personnel etc.);
 - 4.6 Educate on fitness for duty, self-care and the availability of peer support and encourage training programmes in this regard;
 - 4.7 Ensure that the safety management system (SMS) addresses COVID-19 related concerns including the biological and psycho-social risks and its interactions with flight safety; and
 - 4.8 Identify the best channels to reach out to passengers and provide the relevant information to assist passengers in their preparations to travel.
5. **Aviation Medical Assessors, Aviation Medical Examiners (AMEs) and related Healthcare Professionals**
- 5.1 Provide a supportive environment for aviation personnel to address their well-being;
 - 5.2 Proactively discuss work-related challenges during medical certification examinations;
 - 5.3 Refer for further appropriate support (e.g., to Peer Support Programmes or specialist mental health support in a collaborative framework);
 - 5.4 Actively collaborate with fellow AMEs to encourage support, scientific information exchange and inform decision making, which is consistent with national requirements;
 - 5.5 Maintain awareness of peer support groups (if available) and keep contact details updated to facilitate referral of aviation personnel for appropriate support; and
 - 5.6 Refer to health professionals, as appropriate, where peer support groups are not available or where more professional support is needed.
6. **Aviation Personnel**
- 6.1 Practice self-care in all dimensions including healthy nutrition, regular exercise, obtaining sufficient sleep, practicing mindfulness, reducing stressors, engaging in healthy behaviors and regular interactions with a personal support network; and
 - 6.2 Seek support pro-actively to maintain well-being and encourage fellow employees to seek support as needed.

PEER SUPPORT: CONTRIBUTING TO A POSITIVE SAFETY CULTURE

Creating a Positive Safety Culture through promoting Personal Well-Being and Public Safety

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health *as* a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Mental health is further defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.



Diagram 1: Creating a Positive Safety Culture through promoting Personal Well-Being and Public Safety

Note: MH&W: Mental Health and Well-Being; MHP: Mental Health Professional; EAP: Employee Assistance Programme; EWP: Employee Well-Being Programme; AME: Aviation Medical Examiner

At the centre of this jigsaw puzzle is the Mental Health & Well-Being of those who work in safety critical environments within the aviation industry. It is essential to promote psychosocial safety of persons *working within* the aviation industry to support the *safety goals* of the industry and the needs of its stakeholders and the public.

Aviation is a high risk, high reliability, safety critical industry. Poor health may pose a risk to the safety of the system and the public. The safety management system (SMS), as provided for by ICAO *Annex 19 — Safety Management*, is intended to support the identification of hazards and the mitigation of risks associated with the potential outcomes of those hazards. The effectiveness of an SMS depends on a positive safety culture and an environment, which supports the health and performance of all persons working *within* the aviation industry.

Without a psychologically safe environment, aviation personnel will be less willing to divulge the impact of stresses and demands and ensuing consequences on their health, well-being and performance for fear of stigma and other repercussions. This in turn will have an adverse impact on Operational Safety.

A basic need of every individual is safety, including feeling safe at work (i.e., an environment where policies exist in which the risk and threat to the individual's health and well-being are recognized and managed). A means to accomplish this is to build layers or components of protection and support into the

system. One of those components is support from well-trained colleagues with appropriate skills (i.e., peer-based support).

Peer-support is an often-overlooked, under-valued and under-utilized component in providing a psychologically safe environment but can be a vital and critical first line of defense for personnel experiencing distress. Where appropriate or medically indicated, peer supporters may liaise with Aviation Health Professionals such as AMEs or Aviation Psychologists/ Psychiatrists to provide individuals with additionally required support.

The BEA accident investigation report for 4U9525, the Germanwings accident in 2015, stated as one of its safety recommendations: “promote the implementation of peer support groups to provide a process... to report and discuss personal and *mental health* issues, with the assurance that information will be kept *in-confidence* in a *just-culture* work environment, and that [they] will be supported as well as guided with the aim of providing them with help, ensuring flight safety” (BEA accident investigation report, 2016, p103). Although this recommendation was directed at pilots, it is applicable and appropriate to all safety critical personnel (i.e., pilots, air traffic controllers, cabin crew and maintenance personnel).

To maintain and improve operational safety a multi-faceted, collaborative approach to manage the health and well-being of aviation personnel needs to be strengthened. The services provided by the stakeholders in the jigsaw puzzle can work collaboratively to form a well-organized system. This system can support health and well-being and prevent health issues from having a negative impact to the individual’s career and the organization’s safety performance.

The different dimensions of Peer Support

Diagram 2 focuses on the Peer Support piece of Diagram 1, elaborating on its different elements and core topics.



Diagram 2: The different dimensions of peer support

Peer support is comprised of an array of different programmes whereby a colleague can obtain assistance regarding any topic that is impacting their mental health and well-being through the support of a fellow colleague.

A formal Peer Support Programme provides an emotionally safe, non-judgmental environment, where confidential information can be shared. Peers are well-trained and skilled colleagues, who are trustworthy,

share common professional qualifications and experiences, may have encountered similar situations, usually works within the same or similar operational context and can relate to his or her colleague's situation.

The core tasks of the peer volunteer are to actively listen, offer support and refer to relevant appropriate professionals when the problem is outside the scope of their training and experience. It is recommended that the peer team are trained and supervised by a suitably qualified mental health professional.

Peer support for safety critical personnel is becoming a common concept globally and is developing across a variety of organizations and industries. During the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, but in the future in general, peer support could provide benefits to all aviation personnel engaged in safety-critical activities.

Confidentiality is a core principle of peer support; however, it should never be at the expense of aviation safety. Peer Support Programmes need to maintain independence to ensure that they are trusted by the users and its independence should be supported by management.

They also require endorsement and validation as part of an organization's safety policies, and specifically, integration into the aspects of SMS, which support aviation personnel in performing their duties. In order for Peer Support Programmes to contribute to safety, anonymized data from peer programmes should contribute to the organization's safety performance monitoring mechanisms.

The topics identified in Diagram 2 reflect the key dimensions where aviation personnel may need support:

- Critical Incident Response (mitigation of possible trauma following accidents and incidents);
- Substance Use and Dependency Programme;
- Well-being topics;
- Aeromedical concerns;
- Training and Performance Assistance; and
- Professional Standards.

Significant information on the design and implementation of Peer Support Programmes is contained in the following resources:

- The International Federation of Airline Pilots' Associations (IFALPA) Pilot Assistance Manual, 2018 (<https://www.ifalpa.org/media/2271/pilot-assistance-manual-march-2018.pdf>).
- The European Pilot Peer Support Initiative (EPPSI) Guide on Pilot Peer Support, 2020 (<http://eppsi.eu/news/eppsi-guide-on-peer-support>).

Levels of care in the Mental Health and Well-Being spectrum

The terms “Mental Health” and “Perceived Sense of Well-Being” are not synonymous, interchangeable terms. They represent two interrelated models that focus on factors that support mental health and well-being, rather than focus on factors that cause disease.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Continua

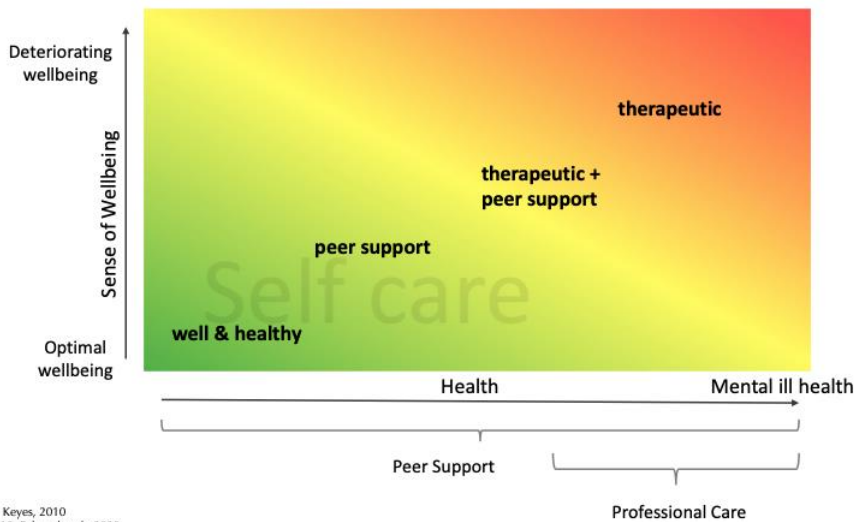


Diagram 3: Levels of care in the Mental Health and Well-Being spectrum

This diagram describes the relationship between an individual’s perceived sense of mental well-being, the spectrum of mental health and well-being (deteriorating from optimal health to mental ill health or mental disease) and the level of intervention that might be needed by an individual.

It illustrates that at any point in time, individuals may vary as to where they locate themselves on the spectrum of mental health and well-being. Different levels of intervention might be needed at different points of the mental health spectrum, with different options of assistance being available to them.

Self-care is a critical component of maintaining mental health and a sense of well-being at all points on the spectrum. The WHO defines self-care as “the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider”. Peer support can play a role in the early identification of a deterioration in mental health or well-being. Peer support plays a critical role throughout every stage of the spectrum to guide the person in need and facilitate early access to the appropriate level of support and intervention. It is also important in recovery and return to work processes.

Peer support offers a personal safety net that is non-threatening, preventive and empowering. However, should an individual deteriorate in their perceived sense of well-being (e.g., having difficulties coping with daily life or experiencing negative feelings) or exhibit symptoms or signs of a mental illness, therapeutic support and professional care is necessary.

Professional support from either an aviation medical practitioner, aviation psychologist/psychiatrist or a mental health professional remains relevant at any stage.

Dimensions of Self-Care

Self-care is a critical component of well-being and supports personal health in all dimensions (i.e., physical, mental and social well-being).



HOW TO KEEP MENTALLY WELL
Fitness to Fly – A Medical Guide for Pilots (International Civil Aviation Organization), 2018

Diagram 4: Dimensions of Self-Care

The processes and techniques of the different aspects can be self-taught through various accessible self-help resources or taught by others through information sharing and education. Such knowledge can enable individuals to identify their needs and determine the most effective means of self-care (specifically applicable to them) to support and optimise their health as an ongoing process throughout life.

Each separate dimension is important and forms part of a holistic approach supporting a balanced life. Specific dimensions may vary in importance or significance depending on the individual’s motivation and circumstances.

Aviation Medical Examiners, aviation psychologists/psychiatrists, Peer Support Programmes and Crew Resource Management Programmes should all promote self-care and reinforce the need for all aviation personnel to address all the dimensions as important components of health (and building resilience), contributing to aviation safety.