THE CENTRE FOR AVIATION PSYCHOLOGY

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY

Personal perspectives on the COVID-19 related employment uncertainty for pilots in commercial aviation

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INTRODUCTION

How can pilots make sense of the psychological impact of the current employment uncertainty?

Looking after one's mental well-being turns out to be as important as caring for one's physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have all heard how the challenges we now face personally, at home, with friends and loved ones, at work, in our careers and financially, are unchartered. Taking a broader perspective on these challenges and also thinking through what this means to each of us personally is the surest way to cope better. There are many tried and tested ideas and skills we can each draw upon to help us to navigate through uncertainty, worry, limits to our usual sense of autonomy, how we relate to others, and our identity as professionals.

Pilots are arguably more affected than most as the impact on the air travel industry generally, and on job security specifically, has been profound and is likely to remain so for some time to come.

We applaud the growing body of good, general information and resources available on psychological well-being. However, in this article we wanted to provide some fresh, personal perspectives on the challenges to well-being that many pilots may currently face.

We are delighted to include these personal perspectives from Dr Gill Green, a clinical and aviation psychologist, and Captain Laurie Ling, a recently retired BA pilot who is also an experienced pilot peer supporter. Their combined and very human reflections hopefully provide a few essential 'skills and insights' to help pilots better understand and navigate the uncertainty that many are currently experiencing.

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Founders: The Centre for Aviation Psychology

AVIATION - FACING AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Laurie Ling has spent over 30 years as a British Airways pilot flying the HS748, 757/767 as a First Officer and the 777 as Captain. He was involved with development training, part of the Diversity and Inclusion Team and latterly a Peer Support Advisor in the SpeedbirdPAN team.

I have recently retired after having spent over 30 years in the aviation industry as a pilot; the last 19 as a long-haul Captain. I have experienced many 'ups and downs', all of which have had short term and dramatic effects on the viability of airlines. Gulf Wars, Foot & Mouth disease, Swine Flu, SARS, 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and volcanic ash to name a few. By definition each of these events were unprecedented and each led me to spend many sleepless nights worrying about my future as a pilot.

As I now reflect on the profession I loved, a few home-truths emerge. The aviation business has changed dramatically over the last 30 years with the reduction in 'legacy' carriers and the increase in 'low-cost' operations. Change seems to be the one constant that exists within the global aviation industry and this change can create great uncertainty for those employed within it. Sudden change due to external events such as we now face is the hardest for us as individuals to deal with.

COVID-19 and efforts to protect against escalation of the pandemic have wreaked chaos on the world's economy but this has particularly affected the Aviation Industry. Globally many airlines are facing a bleak future. In the UK some airlines are financially close to collapse and even those with healthy balance sheets have announced plans to reduce their operation and make a large number of people redundant and to introduce structural changes that will affect all staff.

Whilst the industry will survive, albeit in a new form, this is likely to take some time. The markets for business travel and the leisure industry will likely return at different rates and it is too early to say what the industry will look like into 2021 and beyond.

Crew will therefore be facing widespread uncertainty. Flying is more than job to most; it is often an achievement of a passion and a 'lifestyle'. Having achieved the goal of becoming a pilot after hard work and study, in their early career they may have the financial burden of training loans, and for those longer established in their career, a lifestyle based upon a salary and forward projection of income that may now be hard to sustain.

Just as organisations are having to adapt to survive so, as individuals, we now need to do the same.

The psychological effects of uncertainty

Uncertainty can play havoc with our thinking; our survival brains constantly take in information and judge what is safe, initially triggering a 'fight, flight or freeze' response.

In trying to think things through, our cognitive process seeks to 'fill in the gaps'. One of the downsides of the phenomenon of human consciousness is our ability to worry about the future. We know the future exists, but we don't know what's going to happen in it. We may try to process inaccurate or untested theories of what may happen and, without confirmed facts we default to 'worst-case' scenarios, jumping to conclusions. When our certainty is challenged our stress-response is triggered and anxiety increases. Uncertainty about job security and our thoughts can in fact create greater anxiety and take a greater toll on our mental and physical health than actually losing a job. Once we have an answer, we can act, see what happens, and stop living in anxious anticipation. It's often the not-knowing that's the worst.

Below are a few of the survival strategies I employed over the years when I believed that there was a real prospect of facing redundancy.

Practical strategies

1. Don't believe all you read! Company communications may be particularly biased. Social media can fuel speculation and theories. If in a union, follow any advice given. Carefully consider the facts - they will unfold over time and will change as the situation moves forward. Things may not be so bad as they seem now.

2. Discuss your situation with family and friends – seek support – it's OK not to feel OK but it's not OK to lock away your feelings. Fear of loss of career can lead to experiencing a wide range of emotions and eventually, you'll reach a stage of adaptation. Don't go it alone – get help navigating the grief-like feelings and help to create a plan to move forward. If your sadness/anxiety explodes into full blown depression be sure to seek professional help immediately.

3. Whilst living through this period of uncertainty, don't engage in self-defeat and avoid behaviours that will keep you in a cycle of negativity. Keep a routine. Don't isolate yourself – get outside, seek out adventure and fresh air. Make a conscious effort to surround yourself with people who support and inspire you – avoid those who are angry.

4. Lack of structure can feel overwhelming. Reconnecting with things you haven't done for a while - hobbies you let slip, volunteering, friends, or family will reinforce the fact that your identity is more than a job. You may need, for a period of time, to be less dependent on "what do you do" and more on "who you are". There are many volunteering opportunities available to help – e.g. www.projectwingman.co.uk was specifically designed to enable crew to use their unique skills to support NHS staff.

5. Consider the changes being mooted by your company and how might you adapt to new ways of working. It's tempting to feel angry and frustrated but it is more important to focus on what these changes might mean to you, your lifestyle and income, and how you might manage these. Acceptance of a new reality is difficult so again, talk it through with family and friends. How might you personally adapt?

6. If the worst happens and you are made redundant, this can be a painful process. It may be temporary and in due course there may be an opportunity to return to flying, but it also exposes you to a world of opportunities you may have otherwise overlooked. It's one of the few times in your life when you will be handed a clean slate and given time to re-evaluate your career. You have the time to think carefully if you'd like to keep doing what you were doing, change fields, or start a business.

7. After surviving a layoff, you really learn a lot about your strengths and abilities. While you will need time to recover, remember to spend more time looking ahead and less time looking back.

8. Make a realistic assessment of your financial situation. If you think that you may be out of work set out all your necessary expenses and exactly what you need to survive. Talk to lenders and mortgage companies to re-negotiate deals and be brutal about cutting out 'discretionary spending'. Involve your family in this process and brainstorm ideas.

9. Get your paperwork in order: documents, licences, logbooks, medical. These are essential when looking for a new flying job. Consider if you are willing or able to change location or country.

10. Create new CVs and covering letters – one for pursuing any flying opportunities that may occur and another for any non-flying jobs that you may wish to apply for. In the latter case whilst the technical aspects of flying may be irrelevant, the 'competencies' will be and many of your managerial skills can be referenced.

11. Sign up to recruitment sites. There will, of course, be fierce competition for jobs that become available. Market yourself and seek career guidance if needed.

MAKING SENSE OF OUR REACTIONS

Dr Gill Green is a clinical and aviation psychologist having worked extensively for over a decade in the worlds of pilots, cabin crew, engineers, and flight operations. She has worked with pilots at all stages of their careers, from people applying for cadetships, to fledgling FOs and those coming up for command and beyond. She has also been married to a pilot for over 30 years and whilst she hates to generalise, she is tempted to say she knows something about what makes a pilot tick.

The current COVID-19 crisis means that most us feel we are sitting, waiting while someone else finds the solution to the world's problems. I think this sense of inaction is particularly difficult for pilots who are trained to take the lead and help find the solution. In this article I share my thoughts about the issues facing pilots in particular as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. I reference Prof David Rock's brain based SCARF model, because it appeals to engineering minds and offers a psychological explanation for what pilots might be seeing and feeling in themselves and others.

I spent March and April 2020 selecting pilots who had put themselves forward as volunteers for their airline's peer support programme (PSP). This was in compliance with EASA's regulations, which were due to come into force in August 2020. The German Wings tragedy had highlighted the particular isolation faced by many pilots and the difficulty they experience in seeking help; we know that training pilots to provide support to their colleagues when they most need it, is one of the most effective ways of addressing this problem.

I was spoilt for choice and had the privilege of interviewing 25 outstanding candidates, all motivated to "give something back" to their profession and play a very important role in keeping flying safe. We met on-line as the UK lock down had just started and I visited a variety of lounges, kitchen tables, and sheds from Manchester to Melbourne.

Some of the candidates were ex-policemen who had seen violence and trauma in their previous careers; some were ex-military with combat experience. All, however, were leaders, whether junior FO's or seasoned skippers. They were characterised by their ability to listen objectively and to display empathy. Very few had any formal counselling qualifications or experience but they could convince me that they would not try to "rescue" someone seeking support; rather their skills lay in helping people to find their own solutions.

Back in March pilots were speaking about furlough and the opportunity this presented for mending the fence, painting the spare bedroom or starting yoga. Typical of pilots, they were confident that they would be back flying by September and they saw this short term break from flying as a welcome calm before the storm of a late summer rush. High levels of energy are common at the beginning of a crisis and this is fortunate because this enables us to mobilise our resources and prepare for what is to come.

So, fast forward several months and as many nations move towards a COVID-19 recovery phase of some description, for most pilots this feels more like an anxiety fuelled wait-and-see phase.

One thing which is clear, is that for most pilots, cabin crew and their colleagues on the ground, there will be no "getting back to normal" by September. A significant percentage of the pilots I interviewed feared they might never fly commercially again and even if they did, they recognised that things will be very different. Despite sporadic and welcome pin holes of hope, the outlook for commercial aviation looks and feels bleak at present. Enthusiasm for DIY is fast waning and pilots are becoming increasingly anxious that they may fall victim to their company's brutal restructuring as it prepares for a future of reduced demand and capacity. Many pilots are wondering if their particular seniority number, seat, fleet or base makes them more or less vulnerable to redundancy.

While the lived reality of this continual uncertainty can be draining for many, it can sometimes be helpful to understand the psychological impact of what we are experiencing. Sometimes, this can help us regain some control over our circumstances – and there is no shortage of good advice out there. Mostly though, just understanding what is going on in our minds and making sense of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours is enough to take the edge off of what might feel overwhelming and frightening at times.

One way we can make sense of the human impact of the current circumstances is to refer to the SCARF model that was proposed by Neuropsychologist PDavid Rock at UCLA.

The SCARF Model of Threat & Reward

Put simply, our brain constantly scans the environment for potential threats or rewards. The 'minimise danger and maximise reward' principle is an overarching, organising principle of the brain. There is a small almond-shaped object called the amygdala which is part of our limbic system. The amygdala plays a central role in remembering whether something should be approached (a reward) or avoided (a threat). Rock identifies five key factors that can activate this threat/reward circuitry. Each person is different and how they relate to these factors will depend on their genetics, upbringing, values, personality, etc. In times of extreme uncertainty, these factors will resonate more powerfully for some than others and their reactions to the activated circuitry will be varied in both strength and manifestation.

Status

The first of these factors is Status (or standing). Many pilots, particularly those who may be permanently grounded post COVID-19, will have lost their status. Status is important to all humans. We need to know where we are in life's pecking order and that we feel valued by those around us, especially our employers. When our status or standing is challenged we feel attacked. We will resort to fight or flight behaviours to defend our position.

Now, this isn't about "one up-manship" or concern for what the neighbours will think, it is something much more fundamental. For many pilots the challenge will be accepting that they may no longer have a place in the profession they fought so hard (and paid so much) to join. Their identity and their way of life has been stripped from them. Also, contrary to common perception, only a very few will have financial cushions to fall back on or will feel entirely bullet proof. Particularly affected will be the hundreds of newly qualified and heavily indebted pilots who are facing extreme financial hardship. Equally, there are those who may have been flying for decades and are concerned about having to start again elsewhere. This is likely to be on significantly reduced terms and conditions, with loss of income and a completely different way of life to the one they have worked so hard to achieve.

Taking a step back though, what I have observed over the years is that pilots possess a wealth of skill and leadership potential, and many occupy positions of authority and trust outside their aviation roles. Many have experienced periods of redundancy in the past, and have drawn on these skills, reinvented themselves and moved into non-flying roles until the industry picks up. The skill, determination and resilience to become a pilot will stand many in good stead. These are the very skills required to bounce back from adversity and will deal with the current crisis, however challenging it may be.

Certainty

Even though we have apparently passed the peak of the virus, there is even less certainty in our world, not more. Nothing has really changed since the pandemic was triggered: we still have no fool-proof treatments or vaccine and there is so

much about the virus that medics and scientists still don't understand. Yes, countries will be opening their borders and we will be "open for business" again, but we don't know if customers will require quarantining or for how long; we don't know if they even want or need to fly again to the same extent as pre-COVID-19.

You don't have to be a psychologist or human factors expert to know that managing uncertainty is difficult. The brain likes to know what's coming next. It will respond with fight or flight reactions if its need for a plan or way out is not satisfied. As a result, our brains will sometimes seize on quick, irrational solutions to end the pain or discomfort of not knowing. Sadly, this can include maladaptive thinking and behaviours such as ruminating thoughts, confirmation biases, rushed decision making, and the distraction and temporary oblivion that substance abuse offers. Pilots know all too well the dangers of acting and behaving under pressure. Just having a structure to the day with familiar milestones, repeated habits and a reason to get out of bed can provide some rhythm and purpose.

Autonomy

Whilst pilots work as part of a team, they are not known for their love of being micro-managed. Like everyone, pilots need some degree of autonomy – having a say in how or what we do and the chance to influence our future. Without choices we feel trapped. For many pilots, their futures are currently being decided by others and decisions are beyond their personal influence and control. When we have no control and no escape, we get stressed and the threat circuitry is activated.

Give people choices – no matter how small – and the stress reduces. The cliché "work on things you can change and accept the things you can't" remains as pertinent as ever. Taking control of what you can in life, setting achievable plans and goals, researching alternate options and having a plan for various scenarios, however unpalatable, can partially restore those feelings of mastery and control. Of course, pilots are very good at doing this in their day jobs and the challenge is to adapt those skills to their personal circumstances.

Relatedness

Humans have survived because we cooperate with each other; we all need to belong to a tribe or team. In order to cooperate we need to know who we can trust. The process of determining whether someone is friend or foe happens very quickly and can be detected in our brain activity. For example, when someone we perceive as being like us, shares information, we process it using similar circuits for thinking our own thoughts. When someone is perceived as "not like us" (a foe), different circuits are used.

Belonging to a community or tribe in times of threat and insecurity makes perfect sense. For many pilots, the rise of WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms provides a this sense of community, belonging, and information sharing in a time of crisis.

Let's be honest though, some of these groups are dysfunctional and simply pour fuel onto an already smouldering situation. It takes self discipline and restraint to ignore these and can be detrimental to our psychological well-being if we become embroiled. (I'm not immune to this myself! So, my approach is to first ask myself if I actually feel better or worse for participating in a group or forum - it's then much easier to decide if the group meets my need for relatedness or sense of community).

Fairness

When we perceive injustice, a threat response in our brains is easily triggered. Our need for fairness will be tested during and after this COVID-19 crisis, by the manner in which employers make their decisions and support their employees, both in aviation and elsewhere.

For those who might lose their jobs, the sense of injustice will be raging. No amount of consolation, fair process and alternatives will compensate them for the unfairness they will feel about the situation. For those who remain in work, there may be a sense of "survivor guilt" and genuine feelings of loss for valued colleagues who have been let go. The delicate psychological contract between pilot and airline is likely to be fractured if people perceive unfairness or injustice in the way they or their colleagues have been treated. Repairing this is no small task and will have to be entered into willingly by all parties once the 'new normal' has been established.

Our need for fairness may explain why so many pilots had volunteered for the peer support programme we were launching in March. Everyone I interviewed had experienced some past misfortune or had supported someone they cared for, through adversity. Many of them saw volunteering as a means of helping address some of the unfairness they perceived in their world.

Conclusion

As you have read through these five factors, maybe some have resonated more than others for you. My aim was to give you some food for thought and some understanding of the psychology of what we are experiencing in these turbulent times.

I remain optimistic for the profession I have come to know so well. Whatever transpires, I know that the world will still need pilots and that aviation will be at the centre of any economic recovery. More importantly though, I have the belief and confidence in the resilience of the diverse range of pilots I have worked with over the years. They have grit, ingenuity and a sense of community that is second to none.

ABOUT US

Centre *for* Aviation Psychology

The Centre *for* Aviation Psychology promotes psychological well-being through confidential access to our managed peer support programmes, psychologists and resources.

www.centreforaviationpsychology.com

References

David Rock: SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. Leadership Journal Issue One 2008. www.NeuroLeadership.org

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