PILOT PEER SUPPORT

# SAFE SKIES

An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Airline Pilots and the Factors that Contribute to Stress, Performance and Emotional Wellbeing

RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

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# THE RESEARCH

Safe Skies used a qualitative approach to explore the lived experience of modern-day airline pilots. The research used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

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| **Participants** | Six employed airline pilots |
| **Gender** | Three male and three female participants |
| **Age range** | 30–50 years |
| **Experience** | More than 33,000 flying hours collectively |
| **Operational background** | Regional, legacy and low-cost airline experience across Ireland, the UK and international operations |
| **Analysis** | Thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke |

# FOUR THEMES EMERGED

**01** **Work-related stressors affecting performance**
The pressures of the operational environment and how stress, fatigue and other demands can intersect with performance.

**02** **Work-related stressors affecting personal and family life**
How the demands of an aviation career can extend beyond work and influence relationships, family life and personal wellbeing.

**03** **Health & wellbeing**
Physical and psychological wellbeing, fatigue, sleep and the management of stress were important parts of maintaining the capacity to perform safely.

**04** **Work-life balance**
Despite the pressures described, participants expressed strong commitment to flying. For the pilots interviewed, aviation was often described as a way of life rather than simply a job.

# WHAT STOOD OUT?

One of the strongest threads running through the interviews was the tension between the highly professional, resilient identity expected of pilots and the reality that pilots are also human beings who experience stress, fatigue, family pressures and difficult life events.

The research found that pilots remained highly committed to their profession and spoke with considerable passion about flying. The findings were not about portraying pilots as unable to cope; rather, they highlighted the importance of recognising the human factors that can sit behind operational performance.

> *"We like to think we are resilient and that we can just get on and do it, but actually we are human beings."*

Participant P6, as reported in the original dissertation.

# TRUST, CONFIDENTIALITY & SEEKING SUPPORT

The study identified trust and confidentiality as significant considerations in relation to peer support. Participants expressed concern about how information disclosed through internal support or medical structures might be handled, particularly where medical certification and livelihood were concerned.

A perceived lack of trust in management structures could act as a barrier to using available support. The research suggests that peer support is more likely to be effective when pilots have confidence in the people providing it, the confidentiality of the process, and the organisational environment surrounding it.

# THE HUMAN SIDE OF SAFETY

The research argued that aviation safety cannot be considered only in terms of systems, procedures and operational performance. The people delivering those systems matter too. The study recommended greater attention to wellbeing, stress management, mental health, leadership, mentoring and resilience within aviation.

**Recommendations from the original study included:**

- considering wellbeing, stress management and mental health within CRM training;
- developing leadership skills, emotional intelligence and mentoring for new captains;
- resilience and emotional-intelligence training for first officers;
- reviewing how airlines assess and support pilot and licensed-engineer wellbeing; and
- further research into the effectiveness of pilot peer-support programmes.

# AN OBSERVATION ABOUT SAFETY AUDITING

As part of the literature and policy review, the original dissertation examined the IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) Standards Manual, 13th Edition. The researcher reported finding no reference to mental health or pilot wellbeing in that edition and identified this as a potential gap in safety-auditing protocols. The dissertation recommended that IOSA consider an audit point addressing how airlines assess and support the mental health and wellbeing of pilots and licensed engineers responsible for aircraft, crew and passenger safety.

**Important context:** this is a finding and recommendation from the 2020 research, not a claim about the current IOSA framework. A future update to this work will examine how aviation safety standards and wellbeing expectations have evolved since the study was completed.

# WHAT THE STUDY DOES — AND DOES NOT — TELL US

• It provides rich qualitative accounts from six experienced airline pilots.

• It identifies themes and perceptions within that sample rather than establishing prevalence across the pilot population.

• The participants were Irish and UK nationals and the sample may not reflect pilots globally.

• Some interviews took place before COVID-19 and others during COVID-19 lockdown.

• The researcher knew four of the six participants, which was acknowledged as a limitation.

• The sample included three male and three female participants and may not represent the wider pilot community.

# WHY THIS RESEARCH STILL MATTERS

Safe Skies was completed in 2020, at a time when European pilot peer support was becoming an established part of the aviation safety landscape. Its central question remains relevant: how can aviation create support systems that pilots trust enough to use when they need them?

The research points towards a practical principle: **support needs to be both psychologically credible and operationally trusted.** For pilots working in a safety-critical environment, confidentiality, independence, professional understanding and appropriate onward support are not peripheral issues — they can influence whether someone feels able to reach out in the first place.

**ABOUT THE RESEARCH**

Safe Skies was completed by Margie Burns as a Master's research project in Counselling & Psychotherapy at ICHAS in 2020. The original study used ethically approved qualitative research and in-depth interviews with six employed airline pilots.

This synopsis is based on the original dissertation and is intended as an accessible summary for pilots, aviation professionals and air operators. It does not reproduce the full dissertation, participant transcripts or literature review.