

GMR HR FAQ and Resources for Pilot Mental Health and Wellness

Highly recommended reading for HR:

Flying Magazine article about Pilot Mental Health, May 17, 2022

<https://www.flyingmag.com/why-pilots-dont-want-to-talk-about-mental-health-and-why-they-should/>

CNN FAA Pilot Mental Health Committee, December 5, 2023

<https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/05/us/faa-pilot-mental-health-committee/index.html>

Why are pilots hesitant to admit to mental health struggles and reach out for help?

To obtain the medical certificate that allows them to maintain their licensure, the FAA requires pilots to complete an Aviation Medical Exam every six or 12 months, depending on age. It must be administered by a designated Aviation Medical Examiner, or AME. However, these examiners aren't required to ask specific mental-health questions and most of the exam is devoted to the pilot's physical condition. The AME can evaluate a pilot's mental health based on their conversation with the pilot during the exam.

Pilots are, however, required to fill out a health form in conjunction with these visits. Item 18 visits asks whether they've ever been diagnosed with or are being treated or taking medications for a mental illness. To attain a clear medical, pilots must report any health professional visits during the previous three years and disclose all existing physical and psychological conditions and medications. While examiners can decline to issue a medical certificate, they don't currently alert the FAA to mental health concerns.

What do the statistics say?

Although many pilots fear disclosing any mental health issues for fear of losing their license, the statistics tell a different story. Just 1.1 percent of U.S. airline pilots are denied medical certificates at the time of their exams and only .05 percent are finally denied a medical certificate after the FAA considers all the medical information, according to the FAA.

Does the FAA require psychological testing?

In 2016, the FAA announced that they would no longer require psychological testing for pilots and instead would encourage the industry to create enhanced mental health support programs. Michael Huerta, who was the FAA's agency administrator at the time, said psychological tests were ineffective because they reveal a pilot's mental health for

only a moment in time without providing insight into whether the pilot will suffer problems later. Proactive, peer-driven support has been recognized as more effective in maintaining a healthy pilot population.

How does the FAA respond to certain conditions and medications?

Certain medical conditions such as psychosis, bipolar disorder, and severe personality disorder automatically disqualify a pilot from obtaining an FAA medical certificate and prohibit them from flying. Treatable conditions may allow the pilot to obtain a medical through reporting and monitoring programs. These instances are determined on a case-by-case basis and reference a strict list of prohibited and permitted medications. There are four SSRI class medications typically used to treat depression that are accepted by the FAA: Zoloft, Prozac, Celexa, and Lexapro. Any other medications will be reviewed and may potentially disqualify a pilot from medical certification.

Recommendations for pilots who are feeling overwhelmed?

When struggling with overwhelm and stress injury, many pilots respond well to conversations with peer supporters or therapy with a culturally competent mental health professional. In many cases, a diagnosis and medication are not required as part of their recovery. General proactive mental wellness visits and support are therefore not required to be reported. However, delaying access to this care out of fear can exacerbate the problem, eventually jeopardizing the pilot's license unnecessarily. Pilots have long believed that struggling in silence with the mental health challenges of this demanding work was a requirement of the job. It is not. There is a lot of help available that does not jeopardize their medical certification.

Confidential peer support and proactive pilot-focused mental health programs can be very helpful and have grown in popularity among pilots in recent years:

Piloting to Wellbeing: www.piloting2wellbeing.com/

Airline Pilots Association: www.alpa.org/resources/pilot-peer-support

Flying has a great recent article on the topic of pilot mental health:

www.flyingmag.com/why-pilots-dont-want-to-talk-about-mental-health-and-why-they-should/

Within GMR, we have additional confidential resources through GMR Life, accessible via:

www.globalmedicalresponse.com/resources/gmr-medicine/gmr-life
GMRLife@gmr.net

Rhonda Kelly: 303.332.6310

Matt Philbrick: 541.613.5884

Shad Thomas: 971.260.7449

GMR Life Direct Line: 833.507.5433