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HANDLING STRESS IN AN UNCERTAIN INDUSTRY



www.alpa.co.za

"I turn on the radio, I switch on the TV, I click on News24

just another devastating report regarding the precarious future of our airline adding to my uncertainty and anxiety. There's anger and frustration too! Family and friends call offering support and checking to see if I'm ok and what my plans are. I see the worry in my partner's eyes. I pretend that I'm not concerned. I'm in control, calm and collected...I need to be this way. et, I can't pretend that this tightening feeling around my throat again, the vague headache, the sinking feeling in my stomach and tension in my shoulders and neck muscles aren't there. I am short-fused, I sleep restlessly, my mind's preoccupied and I am tired all the time.

But I pretend that I'm fine...I can't afford not to be".

I recently read an article about safety amongst Italian Military pilots. The article talked about the need for mindfulness in high-risk, safety critical environments, such as airlines. Why is the military talking about 'mindfulness' you may ask? As we all know, safety is the name of our game. The reason they were raising the point of mindfulness is because to be safe in our operation, we need to have each other's back in order to manage error. Not only do we have to monitor one another, but we also have to look out for each other - threat and error management at a more personal level, if you will. The organization also needs to be mindful of the safety of its employees – perhaps this is not happening as it should at present.

As the human in Human Factors you are of critical importance

The Mayday-SA team are here to support you

Purely Pilot to Pilot

The situation at SAA has been hard to deal with mentally and emotionally for quite some time, especially, although maybe not only, for us as pilots. Until recently we received regular reminders asking each of us to be mindful of safety, but even those have stopped. Communications showing awareness of the stress we are operating under don't happen anymore. It feels to me as though each of us is hunkered down, battle weary and just trying to survive a situation that seems to be in a constantly deteriorating cycle. As the times become harder, more challenging, more uncertain and definitely more difficult to manage, we need to become significantly more mindful of our wellbeing and of those around us.

As pilots, we are trained to handle turbulence, to strap in tight, monitor the thrust, speed and attitude. Well, maybe there are similarities between turbulence and handling our own wellbeing and mental health in times of sustained stress and huge uncertainty.

Military commanders in modern times are taught the acronym **VUCA** when facing battle situations. To me, **VUCA** seems to describe the changes we are facing:

VUCA stands for:

- **Volatility:** the speed, nature, volume and scale of change that is happening
- **Uncertainty:** the inability or difficulty with predicting future events
- **Complexity:** the degree of unpredictability of the outcomes of our decisions and actions
- **Ambiguity:** the situation and what it means is unclear and therefore difficult to navigate

UNDERSTAND CHANGE

Change is unsettling. It upsets our sense of normality.

Change can cause us to feel like we are on an emotional rollercoaster.

Coping with change is similar to coping with grief and loss. Progress is seldom linear and cannot be short-circuited.

The curve looks like this:



HEALTHY WAYS OF RESPONDING TO CHANGE

With VUCA in mind, it is worth exploring some strategies for caring for ourselves and our families, and our fellow colleagues.

- Change is the only constant. Focus on what you can change.
- Be emotional intelligent. Emotions are like a messenger performing a function. Notice and identify what you are feeling. At an appropriate time, allow yourself to experience the emotion and then choose healthy ways to respond. Suppressing or blocking emotions can cause havoc, as they begin to control your thoughts and behavior. A volcano can build up inside until something small triggers a huge reaction and you explode or implode. Imploding results in feelings of burn out, hopelessness and other depressive symptoms.
- Identify how you have dealt with stressful and anxiety-provoking situations previously. Which internal or external resources have carried you in those times? Which additional resources and healthy coping mechanisms are available to you now? Resources are like tent poles: A tent supported on two poles during a strong storm is likely to collapse. The greater the number of poles, the greater the chance it remains standing and survives the storm.

- Consciously focus on what you can control and change and practice healthy coping mechanisms ESPECIALLY when you don't feel like it.
 - Practice belly breathing (you can do it in the cruise, in your car and in the sim)
 - Fill your emotional tank: make your family relationships, friendships and support network a priority so that they sustain you in tough times.
 - Focus on positive self-talk to help keep things in perspective and a healthy sense of self
- Prioritise your sleep. Without sufficient sleep your physical and psychological sense of well-being suffers. SAA's Fatigue Management Information is invaluable.



SEEK SUPPORT

How and where, you may wonder? Here are some ideas...

- **MAYDAY-SA: 012-33-6000** and ask for "Mayday"
We are all pilots trained to support you. We call you back!
No matter the topic, it is a below the radar, confidential conversation, one pilot to another...
Or if you want to find out who are the peer team members, ask SAAPA or ALPA (www.alpa.co.za or www.mayday-sa.org.za)
- **ALPA-SA: 011-3945310** and speak to Anita
- **HEARTBEAT:** Go via the SAA Medical section
- **WHO IS IN YOUR OWN NETWORK THAT YOU KNOW?** GP, your faith community, counsellor or coach

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Here are just some common symptoms of stress that we may be ignoring or even thinking there is something weird going on for us: normal symptoms in highly stressful circumstances:

Emotional	Physical	Mental	Behavioural
Easily agitated	Low energy	Constantly worrying	Appetite changes
Moody	Headaches	Racing thoughts	Procrastinate and avoid responsibilities
Feeling overwhelmed (like you are losing control and need to take control)	Upset stomach/ Nausea	Forgetful and disorganised	Increased use of alcohol, cigarettes
Feeling bad about yourself	Muscle tension	Lack focus	Unusually nervous behaviour, such as nail biting, fidgeting and pacing
Isolates and Avoiding others	Chest pain and rapid heartbeat	Poor judgement	
	Insomnia	Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side	

The list is a shortened list of symptoms of feeling anxious or depressed.

There are many more, and the physical and psychological are interconnected.

If you are battling, please don't feel you need to hide it. Talk it through with someone.

Emotional	Physical	Mental	Behavioural
Excessive fear or worry	Fatigue	Obsessive thinking	Avoiding anxiety provoking situations
Restless, or feeling tense, irritable, edgy	Excess sleepiness, insomnia, or restless sleep	Difficulty paying attention or concentrating	Hypervigilant
Anxious	Excessive sweating	Catastrophizing	Socially isolated
Apathy	Hot/ cold flushes	Forgetfulness and memory loss	Excessive crying
Guilt	Pounding or Racing heart	Repeatedly going over thoughts	Feeling slowed down
Hopelessness	Rapid breathing		Procrastinating
Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy	Panic Attacks		
Sadness	Changes in appetite		

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STRESS/ANXIETY

Stress is a response to a threat in a situation or feeling under pressure.
Anxiety could be seen as a reaction to the stress and excessive worry that stay with us.
If stress is chronic, we end up in a vicious cycle of negativity and exhaustion.
This may lead to depressive symptoms.

When we are experiencing stress, anxiety and/or depression we tend to cut down on some of the very necessary coping mechanisms and resort to less helpful strategies, such as:

- * We withdraw from others. Social connectivity releases oxytocin which triggers the release of serotonin, which on its turn activates the 'reward circuitry' resulting in a happy feeling. Sometimes just expressing emotions to others you feel safe with, can provide great relieve from stress and anxiety.
- * We tend to eat food which contains more sugar and fat. Pay attention to nutrition and sufficient water.
- * We cut down on exercise which help reduce the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol.
- * Exercise stimulates the production of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators.
- * We consume more alcohol which affects REM sleep, impairs concentration and creates various other secondary problems including the risk of not being fit to fly. *Alcohol temporarily decreases stress and anxiety while the stressor remains at its strength and becomes more stressful.*
- * We struggle to sleep which adversely affects concentration and energy levels and perpetuates the depression habit spiral.

ALCOHOL AND ANXIETY/STRESS

When dealing with stressful days or nervous situations, you may be tempted to have a glass of wine or beer to calm your nerves. However, drinking alcohol, especially heavily and over a long period of time, can actually increase your anxiety. Alcohol is a sedative and a depressant that affects the central nervous system.

At first, drinking can reduce fears and take your mind off your troubles. It can help you feel less shy, give you a boost in mood, and make you feel generally relaxed. In fact, alcohol's effects can be similar to those of anti-anxiety medications.

Occasionally unwinding with alcohol isn't necessarily dangerous. But once you start drinking, you can build a tolerance to the de-stressing effects of alcohol. This can make anxiety and stress even more difficult to cope with.

Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol can also have noticeable physical and mental consequences and can lead to dependency or addiction. Over time, consuming too much alcohol can lead to blackouts, loss of memory, and even brain damage. These issues can create more anxiety as you cope with their symptoms.

Source: www.healthline.com