



*As the human in the Human Factors you are of critical importance*

*The Mayday-SA team is here to support you*

*Purely Pilot to Pilot*

The situation in South African aviation has been hard to deal with mentally and emotionally for quite some time, and especially in the last few months during the pandemic. Airlines and other operators are facing liquidation, restructuring, redundancies, and those that are flying, are offering greatly reduced salaries.

Under normal operations we received regular reminders asking each of us to be mindful of safety, and communications showing awareness of the stresses under which we are operating – but for some airlines even these communications have stopped. It feels 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 the wellbeing 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. **VUCA** seems to describe the changes we are facing in the aviation industry.

**VUCA** stands for:

- **Volatility:** the speed, nature, volume and scale of change that is happening
- **Uncertainty:** the inability or difficulty in 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

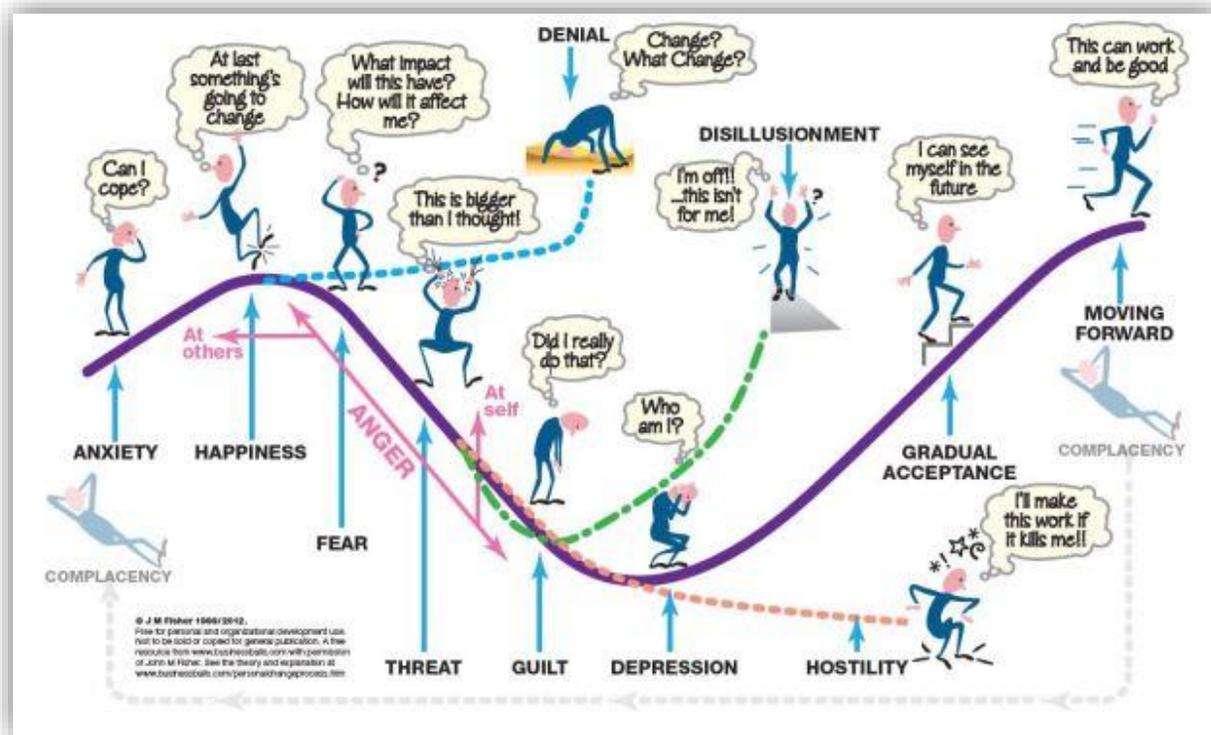
## **UNDERSTANDING CHANGE**

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 emotionally 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 behaviour. 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 successfully. 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 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.
- Practice healthy coping mechanisms ESPECIALLY when you don't feel like it.
  - Practice belly breathing
  - Fill your emotional tank: make your family relationships and support network a priority so that they sustain you in these 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.

## 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 Frustrated Moody Feeling overwhelmed (like you are losing control and need to take control) Difficulty quietening your mind Feeling bad about yourself Lonely, more than normal Avoiding others	Low energy Headaches Upset stomach/nausea Muscle tension/pain Chest pain and rapid heartbeat Insomnia Lowered immune system Loss of sexual desire Nervousness Cold/sweaty hands and feet Excessive sweating Clenched jaw and grinding teeth	Constant worrying Racing thoughts Forgetfulness and disorganised Inability to focus Poor judgement Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side	Changes in appetite Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities Increased use of alcohol, or cigarettes Unusually nervous behaviour, such as nail biting, fidgeting and pacing

## COMMON SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

Emotional	Physical	Mental	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Excessive fear</li> <li>▪ Excessive worry</li> <li>▪ Restlessness, or feeling tense, irritable, edgy</li> <li>▪ Anxiety</li> <li>▪ Apathy</li> <li>▪ Guilt</li> <li>▪ Hopelessness</li> <li>▪ Loss of interest or pleasure in activities you used to enjoy</li> <li>▪ Sadness</li> <li>▪ Restlessness</li> <li>▪ Fluctuating mood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panic attacks</li> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Excessive sweating</li> <li>• Hot and cold flushes</li> <li>• Racing heart</li> <li>• Tightening chest</li> <li>• Quick breathing</li> <li>• Trembling</li> <li>• Excess sleepiness, insomnia, or restless sleep</li> <li>• Changes in appetite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obsessive thinking</li> <li>• Impaired concentration and attention</li> <li>• Catastrophizing</li> <li>• Forgetfulness and memory loss</li> <li>• Repeatedly going over thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of situations that make you feel anxious</li> <li>• Hypervigilance</li> <li>• Social isolation</li> <li>• Excessive crying</li> <li>• Slowness in activity</li> <li>• Procrastination</li> </ul>

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STRESS AND 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 stays 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 relief from stress and anxiety.
- We tend to eat food which contains more sugar and fat. Pay attention to nutrition and drinking 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 struggle to sleep which adversely affects concentration and energy levels and perpetuates the depression habit spiral.
- 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.*

### 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 medication.

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](http://www.healthline.com)

**Reference:** Catino, M., & Patriotta, G. (2013). Learning from Errors: Cognition, Emotions and Safety Culture in the Italian Air Force. *Organization Studies*, 437-467

Fisher, John, 2012, Process of Personal Transition, Available from: <http://www.businessballs.com/personalchangeprocess.htm>

### SEEK SUPPORT

Family and friends, especially those going through similar experiences, can provide great comfort. In addition, Mayday-SA is here to help. You can contact us on 012-333-6000 and ask for Mayday, or find other relevant and related articles on our website [www.mayday-sa.org.za](http://www.mayday-sa.org.za). You can also follow us on [Facebook](#).