

Glossary of Mental Health for Aviation Safety

François Brambati – 23/04/2024



Myths and Facts about Mental Health

Myth	Fact
Mental health issues are a sign of weakness.	Mental health issues are just as common as physical health problems. Anyone can experience them.
Therapy is only for severe cases.	Therapy can be helpful for anyone experiencing emotional distress, big or small.
Talking about your problems makes them worse.	Talking about problems can be a great way to externalise issues and find solutions.



Why the Glossary?

By openly discussing the safety impact of mental issues, MESAFE aims to reduce the stigma associated with psychological discomfort and mental incapacitation, with the ultimate goal of creating a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable seeking help and addressing their mental health needs.

The glossary is a support material to increase mental health literacy.



What is in the Glossary?

The glossary consists in 38 cards to raise awareness and promote open discussion about mental health and safety. They reflect main findings from the MESAFE project and support the adoption of a common terminology among the operational experts, the Aeromedical Examiners (AMEs) and Medical Assessors, the pilots and Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs), the Peer Support Groups and all those engaged in providing a safe and efficient air transport.



Who is it for?

Through transparent communication, MESAFE aims to ensure that all aviation stakeholders (including AMEs, Medical Assessors, Pilots and ATCOs), have access to accurate and relevant information about the relationship between mental health and safety.



How to use the Glossary?

The Glossary of Mental Health for Aviation Safety derives from the work performed in the 2 years of the MESAFE project, and it is structured as follows:

- Introduction
- Mental Health
- Understanding Mental Disorders
- Mental Health Specialists and treatment options
- Mental Health and Aviation Safety
- Aeromedical Assessment of Mental Health
- Stress Management at Aeromedical Level
- A Just-Culture for Mental Health
- The Value of Peer Support

**Let's showcase
some cards!**



GLOSSARY OF MENTAL HEALTH FOR AVIATION SAFETY



INTRODUCTION



WE ARE MESAFE

Mental health for aviation SAFETY

Our mission is to help Aeromedical Examiners and peer support groups detect signs and symptoms of psychological discomfort before they generate mental health issues and **associated safety risks**, and provide early support.

Committing to mental health is an investment towards a better safety for all.



MENTAL HEALTH



MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a **state of mental well-being** that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.

Mental health is an integral and **essential component of health** and it is not merely the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.

*SOURCES:
World Health Organization*

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL DISORDERS



WORKING WITH MENTAL DISORDERS

Having a job contributes to well-being, and many of the people who seek help for mental health issues are productive, socially integrated and able to achieve even high-level professional results.

Many of the people suffering from mental disorders prove actually to be fit to work: what is important to remember is that their skills and attitudes must be assessed and supported when choosing a job, especially if the desired job is a safety sensitive position such as becoming a pilot or an ATCO.



MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS AND TREATMENT OPTIONS



THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST

The psychotherapist is a licensed mental health specialist who is qualified to assess and treat psychological discomfort and symptoms of mental disorders. S/he can work with individuals, couples and groups.

Through scientifically validated psychotherapeutic procedures, the psychotherapist helps people manage crisis, reduce symptoms of mental disorders and cope with life challenges.

Psychotherapists cannot prescribe medication, unless they have a medical degree.



THE PSYCHIATRIST

The psychiatrist is a medical doctor who is specialised in the diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders. A psychiatrist can treat mental disorders using several means of therapy including medication, psychotherapy or a combination of measures.

Even today, around this figure there is still so much confusion. Some people believe that requesting the intervention of a psychiatrist is necessary only in case of severe mental disorders.

Actually, psychiatrists can intervene even in situations of mild or temporary discomfort; especially in those cases that can significantly compromise the quality of life of an individual.



MENTAL HEALTH AND AVIATION SAFETY



MENTAL FITNESS

Fit for duty means physically and mentally prepared and capable of performing assigned duties at the highest degree of safety. Mental fitness indicates the ability to think clearly and make effective and efficient decisions, which depends on a mix of factors such as mental health, emotional regulation, and cognitive ability.

Mental fitness is a specific requirement set by European and national regulators for medical assessments of pilots and ATCOs, aimed at detecting and/or excluding specific conditions that might make the applicant unable to safely exercise the privileges of the licence.



MENTAL INCAPACITATION

In aviation, incapacitation means any reduction in medical fitness to a degree or of a nature that is likely to jeopardise flight safety.

Mental incapacitation is the reduction in medical fitness due to mental health issues. **Total in-flight, or on-duty, incapacitation of pilots or ATCOs is a rare event** which may be triggered by medical issues, including mental health ones.

*SOURCES:
ICAO, 2012; EASA, 2020*

MENTAL INCAPACITATION EVENTS (MIEs)

MIEs are mental disorders' symptoms potentially affecting the individual's behaviour, emotional regulation, or cognitive functioning to the extent that the safety of flight or air traffic control operations is compromised. Panic attack, self-harm, agitation, reduced alertness and executive functioning are some examples of MIEs.

Mental incapacitation risk assessments proactively address the probability that MIE(s) occur on-duty and their safety impact.



AEROMEDICAL ASSESSMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH



MIRAP

MIRAP stands for Mental Incapacitation Risk Assessment Process.

It is a risk assessment process that MESAFE has proposed to Aeromedical Examiners and Medical Assessors for addressing the safety risk that mental issues might pose to pilots and ATCOs.



THE AEROMEDICAL OPERATIONAL BOARD (AMOB)

An AMOB can be consulted when the evaluation of the safety risks caused by mental incapacitation events is difficult, in cases that are not clearly unfit or fit. MESAFE is proposing to have the AMOB composed of:

- Aeromedical Examiners (AMEs)
- Mental Health Specialists (MHS)
- Operational experts



STRESS MANAGEMENT AT AEROMEDICAL LEVEL



LOSS OF LICENCE STRESS

To mitigate the post-traumatic stress effects of the license suspension, the discussion between the Aeromedical Examiner and the applicant should cover the following:

- Transparent communication on the risk identified and reasons underlying the decision of issuing limitations/suspension;
- Clear identification and agreement about next steps, that should cover financial aspects, professional reorientation and mental health support when appropriate.



A JUST-CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH



SAFETY IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Mental health stigma in aviation can lead to underreporting of mental health problems. Unlike physical diseases, mental health problems are still considered an individual's fault. This can lead to fear of judgement, rejection, or discrimination. Stigma can also lead to social isolation and feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness.

These factors can prevent safety sensitive personnel from seeking help, which can impact the safety of the entire aviation system.



REASONS PREVENTING PEOPLE TO SEEK HELP

The main reason preventing people seeking help by a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist **is a widespread stigma** regarding weakness, defectiveness, inability to solve problems on their own and **worries about what others may think of it.**

Indeed, **the decision to initiate psychotherapy is based on self-reflection, which is acknowledged among the skills improving mental health.**

SOURCES:

Philippi C. L., Koenigs M. (2014)

A JUST CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Just culture for mental health in aviation is a safety culture oriented environment, where safety sensitive personnel can report mental health problems in a supportive atmosphere without fear of job loss, income loss, or punitive actions.

It ensures that employees receive timely treatment according to the highest standards, and that their medical information is kept confidential. It also strives to help employees return to their jobs safely, if possible.



THE VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT



BRIDGING GAPS BETWEEN AMES AND PEER SUPPORT GROUPS (PSGs)

Loss of license concerns or stigma act as a barrier for Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers to disclose mental health problems to the Aeromedical Examiner (AME).

PSGs can stimulate self-referral to a peer, offering a low threshold to seek help. AMEs might be provided with information about key principles and operating procedures of a PSP during training.



Where can you find it?

EASA website, under the MESAFE project:

<https://www.easa.europa.eu/en/research-projects/mesafe-mental-health>





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