

What is Wellbeing, Why Should I Care & 3 Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Introduction to Wellbeing

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has defined Wellbeing as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Mental wellbeing, or mental health, is something that we are all familiar with. However, mental health is merely one pillar of our overall wellbeing, and just like our physical or social health, mental health does not exist independently of the other two pillars.

The ‘BioPsychoSocial model of Health’ allows us think of our health as a 3-legged stool, in which each of the legs represents one of the pillars of health; Biological (physical), Psychological (mental) & Social. Literally, our body, mind and soul. Any stool with two legs, or even one leg, will not stand up straight for too long. Equally, if we strengthen one or two legs of the stool, while ignoring the third leg, this weaker leg will buckle, taking down the entire stool with it. This analogy describes very well the inter-dependency that exists between the physical, mental and social aspects of our health, and the holistic approach that is needed to look after all three of the pillars.



Figure 1: ‘BioPsychoSocial model of Health’

Certain lifestyle factors have direct and well understood influences on each of the pillars. Physical health is very much affected by diet, physical activity and sleep. Our behaviours, attitudes, stress management and coping techniques have a profound direct impact on our mental health. Lastly, social health is very much affected by our support networks; those around us, our family, our friends, our tribe.

In reality, factors within a pillar (for example, sleep within the biological pillar) do not just influence other factors within that pillar (for example, diet and exercise), but instead much more holistic and complex relationships exist (i.e. sleep has an influence and effects across factors in psychological and

social pillars). For instance, physical activity has a profound on impact on our mental health, and if taken on the company of others can enhance our social health also.

2. Why Should I care?

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| Icon for wellbeing>performance>safety | Also, there are other impacts in relation to the impact of your wellbeing on others (family/friends), on your work/performance and on flight safety. |
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There is long **established relationship between a person's (1) wellbeing, (2) performance and (3) flight safety**. Our wellbeing influences the nature and quality of our relationships with others – thereby influencing the wellbeing of those around us (i.e. family, friends, work colleagues and community). Further, our wellbeing impacts on how we perform (i.e. awareness, decision making, concentration) – both in and outside work. Lastly, how we perform as aviation professionals impacts on flight safety.

A human being is an extremely complex system, and even more complex than the aviation system to which we are all so familiar with, yet both systems have a few things in common. In aviation, not everything goes as planned, but due to resilience in the system and adaptation, in the vast majority of cases things work out as intended. On the rare occasions when they don't, as in the case of incidents and accidents, rarely is there a single point of failure, but instead a whole multitude of contributory factors. Many of these risk factors might have been lying dormant for some time, but on a given day they can interact in a way not seen before, and before we know it, and unanticipated intended outcome arises.

Humans, although significantly more complex than airplanes and the overall aviation system, share some similarities. We too operate in a manner where our bodies might not always operate as expected, in that we can experience stress, be it physical or emotional, display signs of distress but then bounce back. Our resilience allows us to adapt to our environment. Just like an airplane component such as a wing or an engine, we can only sustain a stress to a point, beyond which we break. And in the same way that a wing or engine can be designed to improve its structural resilience, we also can improve our own physical and mental resilience.

A **recent study of 1,059 aviation professionals** undertaken by researchers at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, revealed that although many pilots were suffering with common mental health disorders, a significant number were not. Interestingly, the researchers identified key lifestyle behaviours and coping strategies which allowed the latter group to remain resilient while facing similar sources of work-related stress. Many of the sources of work-related stress examined in the pilots are common to other aviation workers, who are also shift-workers, such as cabin crew, ground staff, engineers and air traffic controllers to name but a few. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that **many of these lifestyle factors and coping strategies adopted by the resilient group of pilots**, might also offer substantial benefits to other worker groups within aviation.

In this study, the **significant lifestyle factors found to positively influence the psychological resilience of aviation professionals were**

- Sleep
- Physical activity
- Diet
- Social connectedness and social supports
- Stress Management & Coping Techniques
- Activities/Hobbies

3. Wellbeing & Covid 19 Crisis

Every challenging event leaves an imprint on us, which can be either positive or negative. It can make us stronger or damage us. With so much uncertainty around Covid-19, one thing is an absolute certainty; post Covid-19, the aviation industry will not be the same, and nor will those who remain working in the industry.

As aviation workers, we work in perhaps the world's safest and most heavily regulated industry. However, the current Covid-19 pandemic poses potentially one of the greatest Occupational Safety & Health threats to face our industry in recent times. When we now go to work, we don't really know what we're being exposed to. As aviation professionals, we are trained to manage risk. We are trained to look out for hazards and report them. How can we manage something, that not only can we not measure, we cannot even see? This hazard is invisible, yet it is all around us.

To compound this issue, this hazard is not just work-related. It is everywhere we go, and for many of us this is unnerving. With the constant reminders of the need for us to wash our hands, we have become obsessed with hand hygiene, and rightly so. Hand washing is a very effective defence. However, we need to also have mental hygiene, to flush our heads of the non-stop worry, rumination and fear of this invisible unknown. Covid-19 is not just a biological virus, it is also a psychological contagion.

The current Covid-19 pandemic is having far more than just a physical and economic impact on individuals. For many people, this is ripping apart the very fabric of society and their sense of community. Many of us are either working reduced hours, or not working at all, and this has had an enormously detrimental impact on our sense of purpose, not to mention our financial security. Others who are still working, whether it is on an airplane, in a control tower, in a terminal building or on the ramp, are working in very different environments, with an additional stressor.

The current restrictions regarding social distancing, plus the changes in how many of us are working is impacting all three pillars of our health, but possibly none more so than our social wellbeing. We can exercise to an extent within the confines of our home. We can still sleep, albeit perhaps not to the same quality. We are still eating, and some of us may now have more time than we are accustomed to, to prepare nutritious meals. Some of us are finally managing to get much of those household tasks finished that had been put on the long finger due lack of time. Books are being dusted off and read. However, the social lives of many of us have been impacted enormously. Many of us have not seen parents or friends in weeks. Yet, many of us are adapting to this unfamiliar social landscape in inventive ways, using social media in a positive manner.

4. Wellbeing Questions & Checklists

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| ICON for 3 Qs | How am I feeling? How am I coping? What can I do for myself and others? |
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By asking ourselves some simple questions, we can help ourselves get through these current challenges, and perhaps come out the other side a better version of ourselves.

You can start by asking yourself;

1. How are you feeling now?
2. How you are coping?
3. What can you do about it?

The first two questions might be easier to answer than the last. For many people, this is uncharted waters and they might not know how to help themselves. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance in this area.

By identifying and reducing the number of risk factors, and implementing appropriate mitigations where necessary, we have managed to make flying as safe as it currently is. A similar approach in healthcare has reduced the prevalence of many diseases. Although humans share similarities with the aviation

industry, we are in fact better. The aviation industry is resilient, but we have the potential to rise above resilience. Resilience just bounces back to its original state. Whereas '*anti-fragile*' systems thrive and become stronger when they experience stress and upset. This new landscape that we find ourselves in has the potential to offer opportunity for us to growth.