

# Vignettes: The Lived Experience & Wellbeing of Aviation Workers

## Introduction

These vignettes have been derived from research interviews undertaken by Dr Joan Cahill with aviation professionals.

The vignettes take as their starting point the lived experience and wellbeing of aviation workers (i.e., biopsychosocial).

In any situation, there are multiple factors and interactions. Not everything stacks up perfectly (i.e., series of holes in Reason's Swizz cheese theory and diagram). It is essential to map the overall lived experience and sources of WRS/psychosocial hazards both in and outside work (i.e., problem space), and the core impact of this in relation to individual wellbeing, performance, and safety.

These vignettes can be used to:

- Communicate issues to decision makers and leadership (action change/prevention, addressing psychosocial hazards)
- Support problem solving re addressing wellbeing risk in SMS
- Support staff wellbeing and MH awareness/education (allows basic self-risk assessment and awareness...answer question is this me/relatability)
- Support safety promotion and health promoting workplace
- Support fostering of health, wellbeing, and safety culture


**In this way, they can be linked to the 4 pillars in the SMS.**

In relation to change/prevention – this needs to be addressed at different levels. Vignettes can be used to identify change requirements, as part of risk/safety management processes.

## Vignette 1


**Lack of Support from Aeromedical System & Wellbeing Risk**

*"It could of gone either way – nearly broken by system"*  
*"The regulators should facilitate the development of a 'safe harbour' for disclosing mental health problems and receiving treatment"*



- James, male, 45 years**
- Pilot, > 20 years experience, short range (commercial)**
- Lives with partner, mortgage, no children
- Loves flying
- Good health, open to talking about mental health
- Educated on wellbeing and self-care


Situation 1 & Consequences



Job loss arising from COVID (airline collapsed, no redundancy) & difficult job market

- Increased financial pressure
- COVID lockdown and social isolation
- Lack of support from former employer & aeromedical system
- Sleep difficulties
- Loss of purpose and identity, impact on self esteem
- Increased stress and anxiety

Situation 2 & Consequences




Aeromedical Exam: Discloses increased anxiety and efforts at coping

- Punished for being responsible and seeking help**
- Receives OML on licence, resulting in worsening anxiety
- Nearly 'over the edge'


Resilience & coping (Individual Level)

- Seeks and obtains supports from others (peer support, family)**
- Practices self-care, self-compassion and awareness
- With support, challenges aeromedical evaluation and OML removed**
- Job search and coaching**

Final Outcome/Current Situation



PREVENTION & CHANGE



Weaknesses in aeromedical system & lack of attention to wellbeing risk. What ifs? Consequences?


- What if no social support/what if did not seek support (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- What does a 'tough day at the office' look like? (implications: performance/safety)?

- Individual?
- Organisation?
- Aviation Regulation?
- Health & Safety Regulation?
- Government & Society?

## Vignette 2

**Fatigue & Precarious Work for Cabin Crew**

*"I have to take the flight work when I get it – even when I am tired"*  
*"I can't rely on aviation job – I have to do other work to pay the bills"*  
*"I am constantly exhausted – thank goodness no safety issues so far"*





- **Vicky, female, 29 years**
- **Cabin Crew, > 8 years, commercial airline**
- Single, no children
- Good health, open to talking about mental health
- Practices yoga and healthy lifestyle

**Situation 1 & Consequences**

**Reduced hours/income arising from COVID**

- Increased financial pressure
- COVID lockdown and social isolation
- Sleep difficulties
- Lack of support from employer
- Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc).







**Situation 2 & Consequences**

**Return to Work – P/T Hours & Job Precarity**

- P/T hours only, contract changes
- Unpredictable and precarious roster
- Seeks P/T work in restaurant
- Exhaustion and fatigue on job






**Resilience & coping (Individual Level)**

- **Seeks and obtains supports from others (family)**
- Practices self-care, self-compassion and awareness
- Obtains second job as waitress in city restaurant
- Second job helps with financial pressure and job uncertainty, but exhausting

**Final Outcome/Current Situation**

- Employer not aware of situation (i.e., two jobs and fatigue risk)
- Has presented to work, with <3 hours sleep and 'not fit for work'
- Exhaustion is worsening her anxiety




**No peer assistance for Cabin Crew. Job precarity. What ifs? Consequences?**

- What if no social support/what if did not seek support (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- What does a 'tough day at the office' look like? (implications: performance/safety)?

**PREVENTION & CHANGE**

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## Vignette 3


Self Awareness, Disclosure & Org Wellbeing Culture


*"If people have issues, they are not going to say so – they would be sent home"*  
*"Protecting my licence – but at a cost"*



- Frank, 27 years, male
- First Officer, > 5 years
- Lives with family, no children, small social network
- Not open to talking about MH & very private
- Keeps fit/healthy lifestyle

**Situation 1 & Consequences**







**COVID: reduced hours and income, changed work terms/environment (rosters)**

- Social isolation with COVID
- Job precarity and insecurity (likelihood of new job, worsening environment/job terms)
- Sleep difficulties, social withdrawal
- Lack of support from org
- Rapid onset of serious anxiety

**Situation 2 & Consequences**






**Standby arrangements – costs paid by Frank – creates frustration, financial pressure**

- Pressure to hold down job/present as ok
- Increased anxiety, not sleeping, not talking to others
- Lack of awareness re reduced wellbeing and need for help**
- Not reporting wellbeing problems
- Lack of support from org

**Resilience & coping (Individual Level)**

- Not seeking support – either in work/outside work
- Not obtaining support from social network

**Final Outcome/Current Situation**




- Not managing health (anxiety, stress)**
- Risk to wellbeing and safety**
- Organisation no oversight on Frank's wellbeing**

Job precarity. Lack of support. **What ifs? Consequences?**

- What next for wellbeing (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?
- Missed opportunity – avoidable situation/prevention, early intervention to address


**PREVENTION & CHANGE**



## Vignette 4


Need to define AME for Wellbeing Reporting - Punished for reporting Fatigue to Employer / Airline


*"If you raise too many red flags, you get a black mark by your name"*  
*"People with black marks more likely to be selected for redundancy – trouble makers"*  
*"Reporting fatigued in flight or citing fatigue as a reason for a near miss/safety event is a non runner - the safety manager will say you should of not come to work – and file a report with the regulator (non compliance)"*



- Peter, male, 40 years
- Captain, cargo operations, short range > 17 years,
- Married, three young children (1, 3, & 5 years)
- Not open to talking about mental health, prone to stress
- Unhealthy diet,
- Sleep issues (young children and commute to work)

Situation 1 & Consequences







Pre COVID, Safety event/landing overrun – reports 'exhaustion' as a contributory factor

- Pressure – investigation (reporting of fitness for duty)
- Worsening sleep
- Increased alcohol
- Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc).

Situation 2 & Consequences






COVID, Working Reduced Hours, Extended Quarantine

- Increased financial pressure & concern that will be laid off (black mark against name, given reporting)
- Increased stress and anxiety (about career in aviation, job precarity etc).
- Family stress – time away from home/quarantine requirements
- Alcohol dependency

Resilience & coping (Individual Level)

- Seeks and obtains supports from Peer Support -- managing anxiety and stress
- Referral to alcohol program
- Addresses diet and exercise


Final Outcome/Current Situation



Job precarity. Punished for reporting fatigue. Lack of prevention (fatigue management). What ifs?

- What if no social support/what if did not seek support (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting re fatigue (implications: performance/safety)?
- Missed opportunity – improve rostering/wellbeing & preventative approach

PREVENTION & CHANGE




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## Vignette 5


**Leadership, Culture & Change**


*"Leaders drive the culture and change. If our leaders do not prioritize wellbeing and are not comfortable talking about wellbeing and making changes, who will?"*



- Sam, 60 years, male
- Safety Director/Accountable Post Holder, aviation company, >7 years
- Married, high stress job
- Not open to talking about MH
- Unhealthy lifestyle

**Situation 1 & Consequences**







**COVID: increased job demands and hours, but reduced income**

- New demands on job – managing safety in COVID operations, managing staff experiencing extended quarantine
- Remote work and impacts on teamwork/communication
- Lack of support from CEO in relation in terms of addressing wellbeing risks and safety implications
- Increased anxiety and stress

**Situation 2 & Consequences**






**Safety event: Captain return to work post extended COVID quarantine, declares unfit for work post landing (runway over-run)**

- **Pressure from management – investigation from regulator**
- Lack of support from management in terms of addressing COVID needs (wellbeing)
- Increased anxiety, not sleeping, not talking to others
- Poor communication in work (outbursts)

**Resilience & coping (Individual Level)**

- **Awareness of need for help, but not willing to report to employer or seek help from employer**
- Seeks support outside work (GP) and obtains referral to counsellor
- Reluctance to seek help within social network (partner and family)

**Final Outcome/Current Situation**




- **Marriage breakdown**
- Organisation no oversight on wellbeing and implications for decision making (strategic role & risk)

**Job precarity. Lack of support. What ifs? Consequences?**






- What next for wellbeing (implications: individual wellbeing)?
- Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?

**PREVENTION & CHANGE**



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Vignette 6

Training Costs, Work Contracts & COVID	
<p><i>"1 hour contracts have replaced zero hour contracts"</i>  <i>"COVID has changed everything, I have lost so much"</i></p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Richard, male, 24 years</li> <li>First Officer, &lt;2 years, completing line training with airline, commercial operator</li> <li>Lives with family, no children</li> <li>BOK training loan to pay back</li> <li>Mild anxiety (ongoing management 10 years)</li> </ul>
<p>Situation 1 &amp; Consequences</p> 	<p><b>COVID: reduced hours/pay, changes in contract</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changed work terms/environment</li> <li>Pressure to accept poor job terms, 1 hour contract (unpredictable hours), extended quarantine arrangements</li> <li>Need to complete training hours for licence</li> <li>Increased financial pressure – capacity to pay back loan</li> <li>Increased stress and anxiety</li> </ul>
<p>Situation 2 &amp; Consequences</p> 	<p><b>COVID: sudden bereavement in immediate family (parent)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bereavement</li> <li>Lack of support – coping with loss (employer)</li> <li>Emotional and physical fatigue (roster that suits airline, standbys; no certainty)</li> <li>Onset of severe depression, coupled with anxiety</li> </ul>
<p>Resilience &amp; coping (Individual Level)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced ability of family to provide support (bereavement)</li> <li>Contacts airline PPS – obtains support and referral for counselling</li> <li>PPS requests referral for aeromedical assessment (rated at risk/exceptional circumstances)</li> <li><b>Not seeking help within airline (job uncertainty/licence/stigma)</b></li> </ul>
<p>Final Outcome/Current Situation</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awaiting assessment: serious anxiety relating to assessment of professionals (aeromedical &amp; licence)</li> <li>Worsening health (depression + anxiety)</li> <li>Airline not aware of MH risk</li> </ul>
<p>PREVENTION &amp; CHANGE</p> 	<p>Job precarity. Lack of support. No AMC for wellbeing.  <b>What ifs? Consequences?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What next for wellbeing (implications: individual wellbeing)?</li> <li>Lack of reporting (implications: performance/safety)?</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual?</li> <li>Organisation?</li> <li>Aviation Regulation?</li> <li>Health &amp; Safety Regulation?</li> <li>Government &amp; Society?</li> </ul>