

Pandemic has put long-haul pilots in a stressful tailspin

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Stress levels among commercial airline pilots have skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic, putting their mental health at risk, according to a new study by the University of South Australia.

Survey data collected from 49 commercial pilots in the Asia Pacific region, Europe and North America reveals that 75.5 percent of pilots are stressed about their uncertain futures, anti-social working hours and the "divergence in values" between pilots and management.

The findings should be a wake-up call to the [aviation industry](#) to install targeted workplace measures to support pilots and mitigate pilot stress, the researchers told a [recent conference](#)

UniSA Senior Lecturer in Aviation, Dr. Silvia Pignata, says pilots have traditionally been reluctant to talk about their [stress levels](#), mainly due to concerns about medical certifications that require them to be both physically and mentally healthy*.

Grounded planes during the pandemic and the ongoing disruption to [flight schedules](#) have added to pilots' stress, with between 46-82 percent of pilots impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The issue of work stress has been neglected by the aviation industry, even before the pandemic," Dr. Pignata says.

"Due to consumer demand for travel, airlines strive to keep their fleet in the air for as long as possible. Higher turnover rates mean more flight legs, increased workloads and higher stress levels for pilots. The uncertainty around the industry and conflicts with management over the past two years has just added to their stress."

Prior studies have highlighted the mental fatigue that short haul pilots experience due to flying multiple routes in a typical day, where pilots' heart rates can reach 88bpm during landing. Repeated take-offs and landings may exacerbate this stress.

Long-haul flights also play havoc with pilots' body clocks, flying across

multiple [time zones](#) and working irregular hours. The UniSA study reveals that long haul pilots reported the highest levels of stress and medium haul pilots reported the lowest stress levels. While long haul pilots were stressed by quarantine restrictions and enforced distance from family, some short haul pilots who were temporarily grounded due to the industry shutdown reported that they enjoyed time with their family, improving their well-being.

"Is There a Relationship Between Pilot Stress and Short- and Long- Haul Flights?" was presented to the International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction in June 2022.

More information: Khai Sheng Sew et al, Is There a Relationship Between Pilot Stress and Short- and Long- Haul Flights?, *Engineering Psychology and Cognitive Ergonomics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-06086-1_33](#)

Provided by University of South Australia

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