



**ECA**  
Piloting Safety

## Peer Support Programmes – What is it & how it works. A short Summary –

‘Peer Support Programmes’ (PSP) have been in existence for many years in numerous airlines across Europe and beyond – like in the US, Canada, South Africa etc. Looking back at what is now decades of experience, such programmes have proven successful in identifying pilots that need help, treating them and, where possible, bringing them back to the flight deck. While today’s PSP cover substance abuse issues (mainly alcohol dependency) as well as training, performance and work-stress related issues and personal / grief / family problems, there is a need to further extend them to mental health issues. This is to provide help to those who have difficulties dealing with the increasing psycho-social stresses they are exposed to in their working and personal environment.

In early 2016, the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) suggested to make PSP mandatory across Europe to ensure they are available in each and every company and every EU Member State, building on best practices from existing programmes.

Against this background, this briefing note provides a short description of what a PSP is, what its aims are, and how they work, and provides selected examples of European PSP. A more detailed paper on the ‘success factors’ for PSP is being developed.

### 1. ‘PSP’ in short:

*“Pilots together with medical / psychological experts, helping their fellow pilots to deal with different kinds of work & life related issues and problems.”*

A Peer Support Programme (or ‘Peer Intervention Programme’) is an independent body/foundation – in practice usually the professional pilot association in cooperation with the regulator and the airline – that runs a programme, where pilots themselves can turn to for advice and help with a specific problem, and into which pilots can report concerns about their colleagues.

Pilots self-reporting into a PSP, rather than waiting for peers or others to contact them, is obviously advantageous to them as problems tend to grow larger without proper and early help. At the same time, as every time pilots go to work they are subject to a level of compassionate assessment by their colleagues, and because of the working environment and work structure, deviation from the “main stream” is noticed quickly. If a likely problem is identified, the peers in the PSP can be contacted and the pilot can be offered help.

Typically any issue would be resolved through this PSP intervention without direct involvement of the employer. If this intervention is not acknowledged, successful or appropriate, the PSP has the authority to remove a pilot from flying (the regulator's

medical staff would sit within the Programme at this level), though still without the employer getting to know any details or take any action.

If intervention and treatment is successful after this, the pilot is returned to flying without discriminatory or punitive action from the employer. It is up to the relevant experts within the PSP body to decide when and whether this happens.

Ultimately, if a pilot will not accept help or cannot be successfully treated, the regulator can be asked to withdraw his/her medical. However, even here – if the PSP were run in conjunction with responsible and appropriate Loss of Licence insurance or ill health pension provision – it would not destroy anyone's livelihood. Removing financial jeopardy in this way is very important as it means the pilot community can buy into the concept, and ultimately it encourages pilots to self-report, or peer-report, rather than cover up to protect a career or the 'ability to pay the mortgage'.

The concept has been around for years – in Europe, the US, and elsewhere –, is well developed, and benefits from support within the medical community.

## 2. EASA's view on PSP

Excerpt from EASA's Germanwings Task Force [Report](#) (07/2015):

Pilots work as part of a crew where they interact with other pilots as part of their daily duties. Most of this time is spent in the cockpit of an aircraft, by definition a closed space where close human interaction is unavoidable. The fact that the work is very proceduralised, with checklists, call outs and structured decision making, can allow for the recognition of issues. Pilot relationships with peers are easily formed and this often permits an understanding and insight that others in the organisation do not have access to.

A number of organisations have been able to make use of this by setting up peer support groups, usually with the involvement of crew representation bodies or professional pilot associations.

Peer support structures provide individuals a place to turn to in order to share their issues with trusted peers in as close to a non-threatening environment as possible, with the knowledge that fellow pilots are likely to help rather than immediately seek to penalise a colleague. The structures also enable organisations to more easily approach individuals that display behavioural or other issues via their peers. As a last resort, reporting systems may be used in case of identified unresolved perceived safety issues. A well organised support system may prevent mental or personal issues from becoming a greater liability to both the individual's career and the organisation's safety performance.

Peer support and reporting systems, however, present significant implementation challenges. For these programmes to work, mutual trust between the flight crews and hierarchical structures of the operator is necessary. The crew needs to be assured that mental health issues will not be stigmatised, concerns raised will be handled confidentially and appropriately, and that the pilot will be well supported with the primary aim to allow him/her to return to the flight deck. Organisations must foster the development of these systems by integrating them into the organisation's daily way of working. [...]

The implementation of pilot support systems may benefit from being the result of a joint initiative from both the operator and a pilot association, contributing to buy-in from pilots. The systems need to be clear and transparent and be endorsed at senior management levels. It

needs to provide for a very high degree of confidentiality and data protection, which does not exclude that action is taken to address safety concerns. The Task Force notes that pilot support systems and the related necessary structures, policies and procedures are implemented within the organisation Safety Management System to ensure a proactive and integrated approach.

This approach goes beyond the classical compliance with prescriptive regulations to a systematic approach to managing safety, where risks are managed to an acceptable level.

A number of related aspects need to be taken into account:

- The support of the regulators must be secured. Oversight authorities should understand and support the organisation’s approach to pilot support, including showing restraint before prematurely revoking licences from individuals that openly seek assistance.
- The connection between different reporting systems should be ensured. The reporting loop should be closed to ensure that the actors in the system, including the oversight authorities, get access to information needed to make an informed decision, notably in critical cases.
- Requirements should be adapted to different organisation sizes and maturity levels, and should provide provisions that take into account the range of pilot contract types.

Taking into account the pilot working environment and the recognised benefits of pilot peer support programmes or similar channels, the Task Force recommends their implementation, linked to the employer Safety Management Systems.

In any future environment where mental ill health awareness is formalised, the bond of mutual trust and cooperation should not be compromised through an atmosphere of fear. The successful implementation of pilot support systems relies heavily on a supportive working environment. The risk of protection and confidentiality being perceived as inadequate is for pilots to deal with issues underground instead of using the peer support system.

### 3. Advantages of PSP

#### Peer Support Programmes:

- enable early identification of problem cases through the intervention of ‘peers’, i.e. colleagues/fellow-pilots;
- allow the pilots to be guided towards help, i.e. counseling and, if needed, to treatment and rehabilitation, and
- allow the airline to maintain crews if and after they successfully went through treatment, rather than losing staff and having to hire and train new ones.
- they build on specifically trained pilot volunteers, are supported (incl. financially) by the airlines, and draw on specialised external experts and advice.
- because of their light administrative set-up, the voluntary nature of the pilot peers’ services, and the (often) voluntary support provided by external experts, PSP are very efficient and cost effective.
- help airlines to save significant amounts of money by lower sick rates and absenteeism, as a result of PSP in their company, while keeping staff motivated and encouraged to deal with problems rather than hiding them, out of fear to lose their license, job and livelihood.

#### 4. Selected Examples of European PSP

Note: the following examples are only a small selection of PSP that are currently run in many airlines across Europe, in partnership between airlines, pilot associations and the national regulator. The list below is therefore not exhaustive, and is instead intended to provide a general idea about the type of programmes that exist in Europe and how they are organised.

**Stiftung Mayday / Mayday Foundation**: Support and help for pilots, crew members and their families. Initial contact is done by a 24/7 hotline and then through specially trained peers and psychological / medical experts. Programme is carried financially by the majority of German airlines as well as VC, the German pilots association. Stiftung Mayday is extensively connected worldwide with other support programmes. Patronage is through Mr Tom Enders, CEO Airbus Group.

**VC SupportLine** (Germany): Run by Stiftung Mayday, paid for by Vereinigung Cockpit (VC), is available for all VC members, supports pilots in training deficiencies and training issues, family issues etc. through the clinical experts of Stiftung Mayday. Initial contact is through 24/7 hotline via a call center.

**Anti-Skid Groep, ASG**: (Netherlands). Helps pilots with substance use issues (alcohol, medicine, drug). It is hosted by the Dutch pilot association VNV and supported by KLM. Currently open to KLM pilots and it is to expand to other Dutch operators. It can be reached via its website, email or phone. ASG team members are pilots, while further down support is given by a substance abuse help organisation and independent doctor(s). Cooperation is in place with another PSP group who can relay cases to the ASG. The ASG is supported by the Dutch government through an advisory council.

**Anti Skid, Rehabilitation programme**: (Germany) within the Lufthansa Group. Initial contact through phone number that is published & known throughout the LH pilots group. It deals with problems caused by the use or abuse of psychotropic substances (alcohol & drugs). Initial contact is done through peers that are especially trained for the job, and is supervised by an external and independent alcohol specialist. The treatment is a combination of peer group care and professional therapy. Run in co-responsibility by LH group, and supported by Vereinigung Cockpit. The programme is accepted by the German aviation authority.

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