

Do mental issues mean you can never fly again?

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***[Tim Davies](#) is a flying instructor, public speaker and aviation consultant. He is also the author of the [fastjetperformance.com](#) blog, where, among various other things, he discusses the controversial topic of pilots' mental wellbeing. He agreed to talk with AeroTime about how active duty pilots cope with mental health issues.***

**You are quite open about mental health issues and your own experience with counselling. This comes as a bit of a surprise, knowing that you are a flying instructor in the Royal Air Force. There is this conception that for pilots – whether in military or civil aviation – admitting any mental issue is a huge taboo. Yet here you are, talking about these topics, encouraging people to get help and not suffer alone. So first of all, is talking about mental issues such as PTSD still a taboo?**

In the UK, we have always historically had a very closed mentality towards mental health in the military. If you were to say that you have issues with mental health, immediately you would be stopped flying, which made sense of course. I think what we have done now is we have realized that the better thing to do, because we spend so much money training these people, is to allow more understanding and reporting on... I don't want to use the word "problems", because for the people who have them it does not necessarily mean problems, but something they would like to discuss. So now we welcome people to be more open about it, we now have mental health specialists that they can go and see. That's what happened to me in 2012-2013. In the civilian arena it's a little more taboo.

*Image: Tim Davies, [fastjetperformance.com](#)*

**So you try to solve the issue before it becomes the problem?**

This is what is lacking at the moment. It's still up to the individual to understand that they may need to see someone. In American squadrons they have flight sergeants. The flight sergeant is a guy who has medical training, but also is a pilot. So what tends to happen is, that guy flies with people, gets to know how they are, what they are dealing with, how they are getting on. In our military that question is only asked once a year and only during annual air crew medical, where the doctor says "how are you feeling".

What I would like to see is more of recurring discussion about the pressures that are on pilots. Therefore, we could welcome someone if they say 'I think I might need to see someone, because I'm not feeling great'. But at the moment it relies on them to say that. I'd like that to be a little bit more of an intervention.

**What happens when a person actually admits to the doctor that he might want to see someone? Is it an issue? Does it stand in a way of their career?**

I have friends who have done both: admitted they have an issue and kept flying. A lot of people are worried about losing their career. But if we look at the amount spent on a pilot over his years; we talk about millions and millions. In the military, the pilot doesn't pay for his training; his training is paid for by the government, because we want people to defend the country. It is not in the military's interest to get rid of a pilot because he has a mental health issue.

If we take a look at two people who had recently gone to a doctor and said "I think I have a mental health problem, I need some help", one person was very close to suicide. He has family issues, money problems. The doctor said "let's stop flying for a minute, let's sort you out and then we put you back in the cockpit". The other guy whom I know wasn't stopped flying, because he just said "look, I think I need to talk things through with someone". He continued flying while he had sessions with a therapist. We know – the doctors know – that the worst thing you can do to a pilot is to stop flying, because sometimes that's all the pilot has.

*Image: Tim Davies, fastjetperformance.com*

As a flight commander, a guy responsible for high performing beings what I tend to do is, I tend to take a keen look at the guys and make sure that the flying that we are all doing is supervised and monitored I welcome them coming to me and talking these problems through.

**That's very refreshing to hear, because most of the vocal military pilot's accounts on PTSD come from people who do not fly anymore: they are either working office jobs now or changing careers altogether.**

We still need those pilots to carry out flying, we need their experience. What they got out can be brought back to teach the next generation. If we took every pilot from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq and stopped them flying because they didn't feel too good, we wouldn't have any pilots left and we wouldn't be learning from their operational experience. We have to recognize the fact that if you send people to conflict they will come back with problems. This has to be understood. As an air force we have to put many things in place where we could allow people to come and talk through their experiences, so they don't develop PTSD and other issues.

**Has the Germanwings tragedy affected military aviation in any way? In the commercial aviation sector there have been complaints of it becoming even more difficult to talk about mental issues, as they became more of a stigma.**

I don't think it has. When we look at the biography of the pilot, who had issues, these issues should have been picked up at earlier stages and they weren't. We do get suicides with pilots and it happened recently, in fact. One of my friends earlier this year took his own life.

He had to go to the desk job and the desk job is something we all have to end up with. I, myself, am going to stop flying next year and going to do something else instead, but I have flown for 20 years and I understand, I have prepared for this. Sometimes when you remove people from flying they haven't prepared for it. I know that my friend hasn't taken his life just because of flying; there is probably a whole world of other aspects.

*Image: Tim Davies, fastjetperformance.com*

The problem is when we have a pilot using aircraft to take his own life that becomes the big story, but if Germanwings pilot had hanged himself in a garage, that would not have been a huge story of course. When we look at Germanwings we look at trust, we trust pilots and this sort of thing is a horrible story.

In the military, nothing much changed. The military is very closed, organized and the squadrons are very tight, they monitor themselves a lot. If a pilot is not performing, not flying well then someone will say something, other pilots will say: do you want to grab some lunch or do you want to talk things through? We never saw procedures change in the military because of Germanwings.

They swung too far with the regulation and made the public very unassured. And, of course, pilots were made to feel like they are not trusted. Civilian aviation is a business and if you are not taking measures, then the public might not want to fly with you anymore. So you have to be seen doing something. The military doesn't have that problem, of course.