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Letting Go of Pilot Stigma: A commentary on Hubbard (2016)

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Stigma can change. There was a time, not many decades ago, when a child who demonstrated autism would be institutionalized. Today, because of research and understanding, autistic children can be helped to lead a life in society. Could not the same happen for pilots with mental health issues? Could the stigma attached to these issues change with research and understanding and with proper, managed medical assistance?

The demand for pilots has led to some significant changes in pilot hiring. For some, this demand has opened the door to an airline career, which would have remained closed just a few years ago. In the past, a DUI was a disqualifying event for a pilot with aspirations of flying for an airline. Now, because of the difficulty of filling pilot seats at the regional airlines, pilots with a DUI have been hired to fill those seats.

The zero tolerance of infractions involving drugs or alcohol for pilots is an obvious stance when considering the responsibility a pilot bears for a multi-million dollar aircraft and the lives of the passengers that pilot transports. Relaxing that stance for the sake of protecting revenue is abhorrent; however, relaxing that stance in the hope of offering an opportunity to someone who has made life changes or learned from earlier mistakes is to be commended.

Hubbard (2016) asks, “Does safety at all costs preempt concerns for those trying to manage their own mental health issues? Can a perfectly good flying record be ignored, just because it is found out that that same pilot has been troubled by depression and has received treatment for that depression? Is there no judgment in this decision?” (p. 207). Addressing these valid questions represents the beginning of the discussion that may lead to a change in attitude toward mental health stigma.

According to Rice, Winter, Kraemer, Mehta and Oyman (2015), depression represents the most common disability in the United States. In order to help employees suffering from this form of mental illness, businesses are offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). These programs have been shown to reduce the symptoms of depression and reduce the occurrence of absenteeism (Rice, et al., 2015).

The FAA changed its stance on pilot medical certification in 2010. Prior to this year, pilots suffering from depression could not obtain a medical certificate. Now, these pilots are able to obtain a medical; however, they must meet certain medical requirements (Rice, et al, 2015).

With the advent of EAPs and the changes the FAA is willing to make in regards to mental health issues in pilots, opportunities that did not exist are now opening for pilots suffering from mental health issues. If companies can invest in employees with benefits like EAPs and airlines can change their stance on infractions involving alcohol when hiring pilots, could not airlines also change their hiring practices in regards to pilots with managed mental health issues? Could this be the beginning of change to not only the medical certification and hiring of pilots, but to the stigma associated with mental health issues in pilots? I hope it can be. I would be pleased to see airlines, the FAA and the public move past the stigma associated with mental illness. I would be pleased to see pilots, who have managed mental health care and who have demonstrated mental health stability, have the opportunity to realize their goal of being a pilot, and to do so without having to be concerned about stigma.

References

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Biography

Timothy Rosser, Ph.D., ATP, is an Assistant Professor of Aviation Science at Florida Institute of Technology. He received his MBA in Finance from Marywood University in 2008 and doctorate in Aviation Science at Florida Institute of Technology in 2016. He has in excess of 15,000 flight hours as an airline pilot and flight instructor.