

The Untapped Potential of Narrative as a Tool in Aviation Mental Health and Certification

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INTRODUCTION: Work-related stress is common in pilots, with broad implications, including the potential development of mental health symptoms and sometimes even psychiatric disease. This commentary argues for the use of narrative as a tool to promote preventive health behaviors in pilots and combat misinformation about aeromedical certification related to mental health.

KEYWORDS: mental health, aeromedical screening, prevention, public health, certification.

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There is a practical, cost effective, and easily scalable tool that has the potential to effectively promote preventive mental wellness practices in aviators and combat misinformation about certification. The tool is not new, can be used almost immediately, and would require minimal investment. Despite its potential, it appears to be relatively untapped. The tool is narrative—telling true stories that resonate with pilots on platforms that pilots will easily encounter. As the science around these topics evolves, we should employ narrative as a tool to promote mental wellness practices and combat misinformation about certification.

Work-related stress is common in pilots,³ with broad implications, including the potential development of mental health symptoms and sometimes even disease. While many factors influence work-related stress, certain health behaviors and coping strategies can partially mitigate its negative effects.³ The primary tools we have to encourage preventive health behavior when it comes to mental wellness is often data and logic. This includes long lists of the potential benefits of exercise, sleep hygiene, nutrition, mindfulness, and more. Whether this approach works or not is an open question, but it seems there is still work to do. Recent studies suggest that 1.9–12.6% of pilots experience mental health symptoms and potentially qualify for a mental health diagnosis.^{1,6} Worse is that emerging data suggest that 56.1% of pilots may participate in healthcare avoidance behavior due to fear of loss of their flying status.^{5,8} With a new generation of younger, more diverse pilots joining the workforce, some question whether these findings will only

become more relevant. Employing an alternative strategy to encourage preventive health behaviors and coping strategies related to mental health in pilots may help us to do better. This strategy is storytelling.

Robert McKee, Ph.D., award-winning screenwriter and former professor of cinema and television, whose students went on to write stories such as *Toy Story* and *Forrest Gump*, argues for the uniting of an idea with an emotion to persuade and transfer information.⁴ This method connects the listener to the information in hopes of making it compelling and memorable. This strategy works—it is the reason why many people can remember the plot of a movie years after seeing it a single time. In the case of pilots and preventive health behaviors, this is telling honest, firsthand, and compelling stories of pilots living these practices. Aviators function in an exceptional workplace with unique lifestyle stressors. Telling the stories of actual pilots has the potential to help others explore these practices, demonstrate how some pilots stick to them, and show the good that could come out of it. Beyond prevention, this tool can be

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applied to potentially combat misinformation related to aeromedical certification and mental health by telling true stories of pilots getting the help they need, successfully navigating the certification process, and returning to flying and could encourage pilots to get help early. Such a practice could harness one of the most powerful components of pilot peer support programs—the story of peers—and use it as a tool for prevention. While storytelling is often used in other parts of aerospace medicine and aviation, we see an opportunity to further encourage its use related to mental health topics.

Narrative as a tool in public health is not a novel concept. Dr. Neal Baer, a Harvard-trained pediatrician and writer for hit TV shows such as *ER* and *Law & Order: SUV*, argued for the use of storytelling during a recent interview with Yale School of Public Health and was subsequently described in a follow-up article.¹⁰ “Most people are not data-driven,” said Baer. “They are driven by emotional stories. Only then can we provide the data, give them context, give them evidence. But they need to be moved by the story first.” Interestingly, there are some data to support such an approach. In his 2001 study in *Health Affairs*, Dr. Baer showed that only 19% of participants knew that human papilloma virus caused cervical cancer, but 60% knew after watching his episode of the television show *ER* that included human papilloma virus in the storyline. Strikingly, 38% of participants retained that knowledge 6 wk later.²

We should look to disciplines such as screenwriting and cinema to guide us on how to tell compelling stories that will resonate with pilots. Stories ranging from mental wellness practices and healthy eating strategies to selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor certification protocols and special issuance processes will likely be of interest. Many stakeholders might lead such an effort, ranging from policy organizations and operators to advocacy groups and academic institutions. This strategy is not without precedence. For example, we can apply lessons learned from the innovative *Pilot Minute* instructional video series published by the Federal Aviation Administration’s Federal Air Surgeon to forward such a narrative campaign. An example of such a brief video could include the true story of an airline pilot successfully regaining a medical certificate after seeking treatment and achieving remission for anxiety through the Federal Aviation Administration’s selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor special issuance protocol. We know these experiences exist because of the number of pilots successfully enrolling in these programs and the authors hearing these informal stories in various settings. Stories must be easily accessible to pilots on platforms and mediums that they will naturally encounter.^{7,9} Most importantly, stories should be honest, firsthand accounts and show the range and diversity of what success might look like.

“People are often inspired by our stories, but they don’t know what to do,” said Dr. Baer. “So, we have to, in a way, take their hands and lead them to action.”¹⁰

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