




CLEARED FOR TAKE OFF!
A Pilot's Guide to Returning to Flying

Core Aviation Psychology 

What's this guide about?

The aim of this guide is to help prepare you – as a pilot who has been furloughed or laid-off as a result of current quarantine situations – to return effectively to flying duties. It's not just a case of getting the call and turning up for duty in uniform! The guide will help you prepare mentally, physically and emotionally for the return to work, and will give suggestions as to how you manage the change in family and close relationships that will result.

It is not intended to supersede your AOC's guidance and policies or indeed national regulations and advice on what conditions might be necessary for return to work. At the time of writing many countries have yet to announce what those might be. It is also not intended to take the place of whatever pilot support programme might be in place in your AOC. Similarly your operator will have a plan for return to operations which will include such things as ensuring ways in which your recency, currency and proficiency requirements are met.

The guide has been written by Paul Dickens BA(Hons) MPhil AFBPsS CPsychol FRAeS who is both a Registered Clinical Psychologist and an Accredited Aviation Psychologist. He works with a wide range of operators including scheduled commercial airlines, freight, helicopter and business jet operators, as well as with individual pilots.

Paul Dickens
Core Aviation Psychology
paul.dickens@core-bp.com
www.core-ap.co.uk
+44(0)7753 683960

Why is this guide needed?



At the time of writing in 2020 most countries are dealing with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of you will be familiar with those implications and be affected by the measures taken by nations to restrict the spread of the virus, most of which involve a level of mandatory quarantine – commonly referred to as “lockdown” – which restricts travel and social interaction. The result of these restrictions has been the shutdown or restriction of normal scheduled airline operations with the consequent laying-up of aircraft and

aircrew. Many countries are operating a furloughing scheme whereby employees are kept on contract with salaries being met by government financial assistance to employers, but with the requirement that no paid work is carried out by employees during that time. There are some voluntary work schemes – notably “Project Wingman” in the UK where aircrew including pilots and cabin crew provide support to NHS staff in hospitals by setting up hospitality bases. Other individual aircrew have been active in volunteering at a local level, but none of these activities approximate to a usual work routine and activity.

We know from research on the psychological effects of quarantine that there can be serious negative effects on people's wellbeing and mental health including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression and confusion. If the quarantine period is not voluntary, then these can be worse, and last for some time after quarantine is lifted. At the same time we need to acknowledge that there are some positive wellbeing effects from being in “lockdown” – a freedom from everyday routine, a chance to engage more closely with partners and family and an opportunity to learn new skills or become physically fitter.



At some stage people will return to work and this guide is intended to help you manage

that transition back into safe and effective aviation operations.

We know from research that it is not realistic to personally go from 0 to Vr effectively without preparation! People returning to work after other sorts of lay-off – for example maternity leave and long-term sickness – require a period of settling back into the workplace before full working effectiveness is reached. There is every reason to assume the same thing will apply when aircrew return from furlough and lay-off. It seems likely that the current general restrictions on movement will be lifted gradually, so there is an opportunity for AOCs to gradually ramp up preparedness for a return to whatever level



of activity is required in the future. ICAO has modelled a number of possible scenarios for this, most of which involve a gradual return to something approaching normal schedules.

Whatever the progression of the return to operations, aircrew will need to change from the conditions of “lockdown” to the conditions of normal operations with all that entails. In the pages that follow we will look at four areas where we think personal readjustment and preparation is needed. These are:

- Physical – including sleep management
- Cognitive – getting into the mindset
- Emotional – managing the transition
- Relationships – helping all to adjust

We hope that the guide will enable you to make the transition back into work – in whatever form that takes – as smoothly and effectively as possible so that very quickly you are able to once again operate an aircraft safely.

Getting your body prepared

From your ATPL course days and your CRM recurrent training you will be familiar with the physical aspects of aviation – “Human Performance and Limitations” being one of the core subjects and which includes physiology and how the body responds to stress and aviation events. You will be aware then about how important it is to take care of your physical wellbeing during operations, and you may well have



spent some of the time during being off work in getting back to physical fitness through exercise, nutrition and rest. However transitioning back into the cockpit environment after a lengthy lay-off will mean that the body needs to accommodate into a changed yet familiar environment. You will once again be sitting down for lengthy periods in a pressurized cabin, with time dislocation, after a period of time where you were able to move freely and eat and sleep regularly. While it has been great to have no 0500 report times and been able to sleep for longer periods, there is bound to be a jolt to the body's functioning when those days are over!

Getting your body prepared checklist:

- Align your sleep patterns to your usual ones you experience while flying your usual schedule. Get used to earlier or later waking and sleeping patterns.**
- Put in place an exercise regime now that you can maintain once back at work – for example Flying Magazine's 10 Cockpit Exercises, or the FAA Fit for Flight programme.**
- Plan now for maintaining a healthy diet and regular mealtimes once back at work.**

Getting your brain prepared

You will all have experienced how hard it is to get back into the aviation “headspace” even after a short period away such as an annual holiday or short illness. It is likely to be even harder after a lengthy time away as will have been experienced during the current “lockdown”. For some operators contact between pilots and colleagues and management has been restricted because of the furlough requirements. During the lay-off you may well have been occupied with other day-to-day activities that will have meant that your attention to work-related things has been limited. Realistically many will have experienced a degree of preoccupation with the anxiety of the current situation particularly the financial considerations of reduced salary and the career implications of reduced flying hours.

A recent study has shown that pilot's skills can deteriorate in three key areas through lack of use:

- Situational awareness
- Problem solving
- Decision making



In addition being away from the usual workplace social environment means discussions with colleagues on aviation, AOC or technical issues will likely have been restricted, meaning that opportunities to get into the operational “headspace” will have been few unless contact with colleagues and peers has been maintained.

Preparing to return to work means sharpening up on all three, as well as beginning to “think aviation” by reading the aviation press and visiting aviation-related websites (and not just PPRuNe!). Certainly better than daytime television! Below we’ve listed some ways in which you can begin to get into the right “headspace” for work, although many of you may have spent the lay-off time teaching your children, learning a new skill or a new language, or perhaps doing more general reading, all of which will have kept your cognitive skills fresh. All of these will help maintain your cognitive skills in the three key areas listed above.

Getting your brain prepared checklist

- Put aside some time each day to spend in work mode, if you haven't already done so. Let your partner and family know so that distraction can be minimised.***
- Start reading general work-related material to keep up-to-date with developments***
- Make contact with colleagues for virtual conversations about aviation-related topics***
- Review your ATPL and CRM materials and any other documents you might have such as Type FCOMs, SOPs etc.***
- Do some visualisation – mentally put yourself in the left or right hand seat by shutting your eyes and visualising the cockpit layout and flight controls environment***
- In the absence of sim sessions, do a virtual sim session by visualizing how you might deal with a problem or incident. Visualise yourself in the left or right hand seat; get a clear mental image of your usual flight deck control environment; point to where controls and instruments would be; verbalise out loud commands and actions. Review how you may have handled something similar in the past in the sim or in operations. What was your learning?***
- Review any performance feedback you may have had recently. Put together a plan for the things you will work on once flying resumes***

Handling the feelings

The current situation around the world has caused huge changes to life in general, and in most people's working lives. One often neglected impact of changes such as we have experienced is the way in which our emotions are affected. As a result of lay-off you will have no doubt experienced many different emotions including:

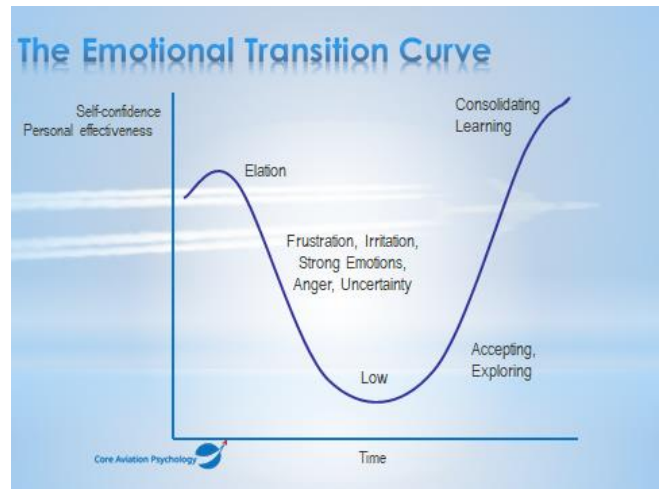
- Frustration – from not being able to do the job you trained for
- Anxiety – at the potential financial consequences or possible decay of skills
- Loneliness – missing the day-to-day interaction with colleagues
- Anger – at not having clear information about when things might get back to normal operations
- Depression – at the enormity of the situation and the death toll it has brought

At the same time for some there may have been a feeling of relief from the hectic life of rosters and schedules, and the joy of being able to spend a lot of time with family or in the outdoors.

We know from research that when a person is faced with change they are likely to go through a number of identifiable stages. These stages are useful in understanding the feelings that people experience when a change takes place at work. For many people the first reaction to change if the change is a positive one for the individual – such as getting back to work after “lockdown” – may be a feeling of relief and **elation**. Anger **and frustration** are the next step and may be accompanied by resentment and bad feelings towards your company and these feelings can come out at home too with the person closest to you. Soon a person can feel quite **low**, miserable and lacking in confidence to even think about returning to flying duties. In addition pilots may feel a great deal of residual anxiety about the future even after returning to work, and the long-term implications of changes in the aviation market and the personal financial consequences become clearer. The good news is that most pilots are resilient and come to terms with change and make the most of it. But for some the low feelings can take a long time to shake off, with thoughts like “I wish we could return to the way we were”.



Putting these feelings on a graph shows that people's self-confidence can go up and down as it is affected by the feelings experienced even after a positive change such as the return to flying duties. This is the **Transition Curve**. It shows how, over time (which can be days, weeks, months or years), self-confidence and personal effectiveness can vary under the influence of our feelings after the change has happened.



There are three key things that help people to move effectively through the change curve whilst minimising the impact on their effectiveness:

- Recognising and naming the feelings they are experiencing
- Understanding that those feelings are a normal part of adapting to change
- Talking openly with others about the feelings and about the change

Handling the feelings checklist:

- Reflect on how you feel about returning to flying duties. Are you relieved, elated, anxious, unhappy or just at ease?**
- Talk to a partner, colleague or close friend about how you are feeling.**
- If you need to talk confidentially to someone and if you AOC has a pilot peer support programme, then contact it and a peer will be able to respond, listen and if need be signpost you to other sources of support.**
- If you are seriously concerned that your feelings may affect your ability to operate an aircraft safely, then you have a duty to inform your Flight Operations management who will be able to assess the situation and take appropriate action to support you.**

Maintaining your relationships

For many pilots “lockdown” has been a valuable opportunity to spend time with family and have the sort of quality time together that happens only rarely during normal operational life in aviation. In particular children will have enjoyed the time with a parent around who is normally often absent for quite long periods of time. On the other hand close longer-term proximity might mean issues that remain under the surface during normal working life come to greater prominence and result in family and relationship tensions. These can also be heightened by the anxieties mentioned in the last section. Information on the results of Covid-19 isolation in China suggests that the rate of people applying for divorce has increased and there are concerns in most countries about an increase in domestic violence. Being in the current situation will most likely have meant some readjustment in relationships because the usual patterns and methods of interaction with partners, family and friends will have changed.

However things have been for you while you’ve been away from the cockpit, a further readjustment will happen when you resume flying duties. This may or may not mean going back to old familiar rosters and schedules, or it might mean getting used to new realities of duties and ways of working. This may be easier for you as you are actively involved in the process. However for partners and family it is less easy as they will only experience the effects of your return to work. They will have recently adjusted to you being around and having more time available for family activities. Now they have to readjust to you being away again and often not easily contactable. It is also likely that children will not return to school as quickly as adults may return to work, so they may now be left with only one parent taking the load of home schooling and/or child care.



Whilst the date for returning to operations may not yet be defined, it is not too early to start to discuss the likelihood of you returning to work with partner and family, so that they are prepared for the eventuality in an effective way. If you have children then that discussion with a partner needs to include how child care etc. will work, and how that might differ from what was done before, and what has happened while you’ve been home. With children the discussion might be around their feelings and how you can maintain the quality of relationship that you have had with them whilst being off, once you are back at work.

Maintaining your relationships checklist:

- Reflect on how your closest relationships have been during the time you have been off. How can you maintain the good things about that time and the quality of home life when you are back at work?*
- If you have children, discuss your likely return to work with them giving them as much information as you can and let them know that you understand it will be hard for them*
- Discuss future child care arrangements with your partner*
- Help all at home see the positive side of your return to work! (They may be glad to see the back of you!)*



Looking after yourself

The final part of this guide is about you. Through all the aspects and process of returning to work it is important that you maintain as high a level of personal wellbeing as you can, as we know that positive physical and mental wellbeing is the key to effective work performance. Remember that most people's self-esteem is highly influenced by their capacity to work effectively in their chosen profession. Aviation is no exception and your identity as a person – how you see yourself – will be shaped and maintained by being able to do the job you trained for and, for most pilots, love. So, despite some of the issues we've raised earlier in this guide, getting back to flying is likely to be a hugely positive experience.

Pilot mental wellbeing is gaining more attention and it is recognized as being a key part of safe operations. We've listed below some resources to help you maintain your physical and mental wellbeing that will also be useful during regular operations and not just before and after your return to work. We also suggest you monitor your mental wellbeing regularly using the scale below. A score of 21 or over indicates positive mental wellbeing.

Should you score less than 21 we suggest you look at some of the activities described earlier in this booklet as they may suggest ways in which you can raise your wellbeing in advance of returning to the flight deck. If you have serious concerns then contact your pilot peer support programme, or any other pilot support systems that your operator may have in place.

The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.

Please tick the box that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks

STATEMENTS	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
I've been dealing with problems well	1	2	3	4	5
I've been thinking clearly	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling close to other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	1	2	3	4	5

Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)
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You may find the following resources useful:

[Flying Magazine's 10 Cockpit Exercises](#)

Ways to maintain physical wellbeing while flying.

[FAA Fit for Flight guide](#)

Ways to develop and maintain physical fitness when undertaking flying duties.

[Flight Safety Foundation Guide to Wellbeing](#)

How to monitor, develop and maintain your overall wellbeing – physical, mental and social – as a pilot.

[Turbulent Times: The Lived Experience of a Pilot](#)

Emphasises all aspects of wellbeing from a pilot's perspective.

[AOPA Rusty Pilot's Resource Guide](#)

Mainly aimed at leisure pilots, it still contains useful thinking about returning to duty after a lay-off.

Specific resources on Covid-19 responses – please note these are current at the time of writing and circumstances, knowledge and advice may change as the pandemic effects and responses develop.

[Flight Safety Foundation COVID-19 Roadmap](#)

[IATA advice on Covid-19](#)

[EASA advice on Covid-19](#)

If your operator does not have a pilot peer support programme in operation I can highly recommend that you speak to Kura Human Factors. Their [Multi Airline Pilot Support](#) programme MAPS is being used by many operators to support pilots from across a number of companies. If you wish to comment on anything in this guide, or think you need to speak to an aviation psychologist regarding how you are feeling then please contact me via the information on the first page of this guide.

Paul Dickens: April 2020



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