

# Little vetting of pilots for mental health, US experts say

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In this undated photo provided by the French Interior Ministry, French emergency rescue services work at the site of the Germanwings jet that crashed on Tuesday, March 24, 2015 near Seyne-les-Alpes, France. The co-pilot of the Germanwings jet barricaded himself in the cockpit and intentionally rammed the plane full speed into the French Alps, ignoring the captain's frantic pounding on the door and the screams of terror from passengers, a prosecutor said Thursday. (AP Photo/French Interior Ministry, Francis Pellier)

Despite U.S. and international regulations requiring that airline pilots be screened for mental health problems, little effective, real-world checking

takes place, pilots and safety experts say.

The crash of Germanwings Flight 9525 into an Alpine mountain, which killed all 150 people aboard, has raised questions about the mental state of the co-pilot. Authorities believe the 27-year-old German deliberately sought to destroy the Airbus A320 as it flew Tuesday from Barcelona to Duesseldorf.

In the U.S., the Federal Aviation Administration requires that [pilots](#) receive a physical exam from a flight surgeon annually or every six months depending upon the pilot's age. The International Civil Aviation Organization, a U.N. agency that sets global aviation standards, also requires that pilots receive a periodic medical exam including a mental assessment.

Technically, doctors are supposed to probe for mental problems, but pilots said Thursday that's usually not how it works.

"There really is no mental health vetting," said John Gadzinski, a captain with a major U.S. airline and former Navy pilot. In 29 years of physicals from flight surgeons he's never once been asked about his mental health, he said.

Bob Kudwa, a former American Airlines pilot and executive who maintains his commercial pilot's license, said: "They check your eyes, your ears, your heart—all the things that start going bad when you get older. But they don't do anything for your head, no."

There also is no confidential reporting, Gadzinski said. "If you had a mental health issue, you certainly wouldn't tell your flight surgeon about that because it goes right to the FAA," he said.

Pilots are also required to disclose existing psychological conditions and

medications on health forms they fill out themselves for the FAA. Failure to do so could result in a fine of up to \$250,000. The forms include questions about whether a pilot is depressed or has attempted suicide, Gadzinski said.

"Is this really the best way? Ask the guy who is mentally ill if he's mentally ill and if he says 'no' then, hey, we're good to go?" he said.

Europe has a single standard for pilot medical exams. "These medical assessments are done by doctors with a specialty in aviation health. ... They know what to look for, physically and mentally," said Richard Taylor, a spokesman for the United Kingdom's Civil Aviation Authority.

Lufthansa, which owns the regional airline, has no knowledge about what have might have motivated co-pilot Andreas Lubitz "to take this terrible action," said Carsten Spohr, the chief executive of Lufthansa.

Airlines typically ask pilots to take mental health screening exams when they apply for a job, but follow-up after hiring is cursory at best, experts say.

"If you've got 12,000 or 15,000 pilots like American Airlines has ... every now and then you're going to get a crackpot no matter how hard you try," Kudwa said.

When that happens, other pilots who fly with the unstable pilot "sooner or later (are) going to let the boss know and then a check airman will be flying with him" to see if there is a problem, he said.

A check airman is an airline pilot who monitors the skills of other pilots by flying with them and watching how they perform. Still, check rides prompted by [mental health](#) concerns are rare, Kudwa said.

"You try to get these guys who are on the edge out of the program, but even in my career I ran into guys where I thought, 'How did he get through the system?'" said Kudwa, who was with American for 28 years. "Or people change. Or, as we see in today's environment, people get radicalized by social media."

U.S. airline pilots generally receive training from their airlines about every six months to keep flying skills sharp. At that time, the chief pilot or check pilot monitoring their performance often asks pilots a few questions about their emotional stability, said John Goglia, a former National Transportation Safety Board member and aviation safety consultant.

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