

British pilots score high on burnout scale—but still perform well

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A study among British airline pilots shows that 20 percent of them have scores on a burnout scale that are comparable to those of people that are under burnout treatment. Surprisingly, the same study shows that only

one of the 1147 pilots that participated, did not meet the performance standards at the regular flight simulator training. The authors argue that airline companies need to offer better support and facilities to their pilots to help them cope with their stressful jobs. Their work is published in the journal *Ergonomics*.

Researchers of Eindhoven University of Technology and the British Airline Pilots' Association contacted all active members of the association (some 9000 pilots) of which 1147 filled in the researchers' online questionnaire. The results clearly show that the pilots have an exceptionally burdening job. 20 percent report clinical burnout levels, which consists of high levels of exhaustion and disengagement from [work](#). 88 percent often see colleagues starting their shift fatigued, 87 percent feel worn and weary after work, and 68 percent mention feeling becoming disconnected from their work.

Nevertheless, roughly half of the pilots report their last flight simulator performance to 'meet the standards', and the other half performed 'above standard'. So at first sight there seems to be little reason to have extra worries about air travel safety. However, the researchers did find a strong indirect relationship between the scores on the burnout scale and simulator performance. They saw that higher pilot burnout reduces the [pilot's](#) efforts to seek challenges and to streamline their job demands. However, undertaking these efforts was positively related to the [flight simulator](#) tests. Overall, burnout was related to worse performance at simulator tests because pilots made less effort to improve their job.

The burnout levels measured in this study are higher than those measured in any other occupation. Forty percent of the pilots have 'very high burnout levels' (which is a level below the clinical burnout level mentioned earlier). In an earlier study among 13000 employees of several occupations the average figure was 4 percent. In the same study the occupation category with the highest chances of burnout was found

to be health care professionals, with 'very high burnout levels' of up to 14 percent.

The researchers say that these results are in part not surprising, looking at the prevailing working conditions. Pilots face regular shift work across different time zones that leads to jetlag. Their work environment sees them spending a lot of time in small, confined spaces with low humidity and a lot of noise, with very high responsibilities. The nature of the job means they are away from home very often and hence have difficulties handling home situations. Also the increased competition in air travel leads to less job security.

Although safety appears to be not at stake currently, the well-being of the pilots is. The researchers therefore advise [airline companies](#) to face up to this fact and create programmes to diagnose high burnout levels and to address them by improving their working conditions. Also it should become easier for pilots to report [burnout](#) symptoms or even to report 'unfit to fly' without having to fear heavy consequences.

More information: Evangelia Demerouti et al, Burnout among Pilots: Psychosocial Factors related to Happiness and Score on Simulator Training, *Ergonomics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1080/00140139.2018.1464667](https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2018.1464667)

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