

# ASTAR Pilot's Log

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## Taking Care of Yourself

A Follow Up to Doug Mitchell's 'Reflections'

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Hello My Fellow Airmen,

I take it that if you are reading this, you have just read Doug's thoughts on his recent heart attack. Doug has expressed a desire to help others not get cornered into the same set of overwhelming circumstances that led to his heart attack. It is with honor that I worked with Doug to encourage him to write down his thoughts and to help him to relate them in this communication. In discussing the following strategies in handling stress, I, in no way am trying to "hijack" the sympathies and concern that have been so warmly shown by the ASTAR pilot family towards Doug. Instead, I am completing some of Doug's wishes to make known what research and tools ALPA can give the pilot group in this time.

As co-chairman of the Peer Support Team (a sub group of CIRP) and Aeromedical Chairman, I have taken several courses from the ICISF (International Crisis Institute and Stress Foundation). This group certifies programs within Fire, Police, Rescue Workers, and Airlines that help in the aftermath of both major events (like Katrina) to more localized issues like a line of duty death. It is from this group of really smart guys, on the ICISF faculty with letters after their names, which I give to you some of the latest research and strategies having to do with stress management.

First of all, let's admit that we are facing something that I believe most of us would agree, is challenging our normal coping skills. It has been well documented that in the event of a job loss

as an adult, we are likely to go through the same grieving process as experiencing the loss of a loved one. The strong reactions this produces tend to be: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Think for a moment of a plane that goes through wake turbulence. The "upset" is followed by the correction back to straight and level. In the same way, an event like we have gone through is the upset and the body's normal way to correct itself is by working through the grieving process. To further understand this process, another study showed a linear progression in reacting to an event of: protest, despair, and then finally reorganization. What is important to note from this study is that it is "normal" to go through a time of pulling away and feeling "cruddy." What is not good, however, is to get stuck in a spot for months. With the current season we are having at our airline dragging on and on, there has been a challenge on almost anybody's coping strategy to work through the grieving process.

Some of us are probably thinking that they will just choose to not go through the grief and tough it out. This strategy of "stuffing it" can work, but with several precautions. When we face larger losses, which this potential job loss most likely is, the strategy above cannot be effective. The avalanche effect can then occur where past, unresolved grief cascades in. If you are caught in a cycle of emotions that are hard to figure out, this could likely be occurring. A second problem that arises in unresolved grief is that the energy it takes to hold the emotions in takes a toll in the stress we then put on ourselves. This stress shows up, leaking out in many different ways such as irritation, sleep loss, back problems, high blood pressure, or heart trouble. Here is where Doug can link

other risk factors to the event we are now facing as an airline, to get a high chance of heart disease.

I will stop the “psychobabble” now and give you strategies for coping with stress:

1. **Talk it out.** Try to have 1-3 guys that you can give “full disclosure” to on how you are really doing.
2. **“Face the monster.”** Allow yourself 20-30 minutes a day to feel cruddy and journal this.
3. **Volunteer.** Giving back gets you out and keeps you connected.
4. **Distancing.** Drop out and do something fun for an afternoon, (or a couple of days) and get away from it. Not a good strategy if you don't make it back in a timely manner!
5. **Job search activities (networking, applications, etc.).** Just do it. But, this should not be the only strategy you are engaged in. Only job searching, without combining with the strategies above, is not a good strategy.
6. **Healthy Lifestyle choices.** Let me put on my Aeromedical hat here and encourage diet and exercise. The stress hormones of Epinephrine and Cortisol react to caffeine and alcohol, so be careful to not increase consumption of these beverages.

6. **Exercise and hydrating.** Exercise and hydrating allows the body to flush the hormones out.

So when should you seek help to get through a tough time? Or, give advice to a co worker to do the same? If the needle goes outside the brackets of normal on an ILS we go around. If we get way outside our normal, help is good. If we “continue the approach” when the needles are pegged (get stuck in a bad spot), then we need to have help to get us to abandon the approach. 30 days is a benchmark for when things move from being a reaction to the event and towards being a symptom which needs help. On a low level, the ALPA peer support team is trained to listen and let you work through the stress of the situation we are facing. It is a confidential and safe program that will absolutely not report your conversations... period! To access the 22 guys on the ASTAR's ALPA 017 Peer Support Team, go to the Council 017 web site and click on the Aeromedical/CIRP committee. As Doug found out after he went through his recent heart attack, there are so many of the good folk he is flying with that care. The response of calls and emails was very touching to him. Please don't think that you are alone facing this. Reach out to a fellow pilot and tell them if this is starting to get to you. This is not a weakness; it is actually a good strategy to reduce the stress.

Thanks for letting me share some thoughts with you.

Sincerely,  
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Chairman, CIRP  
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