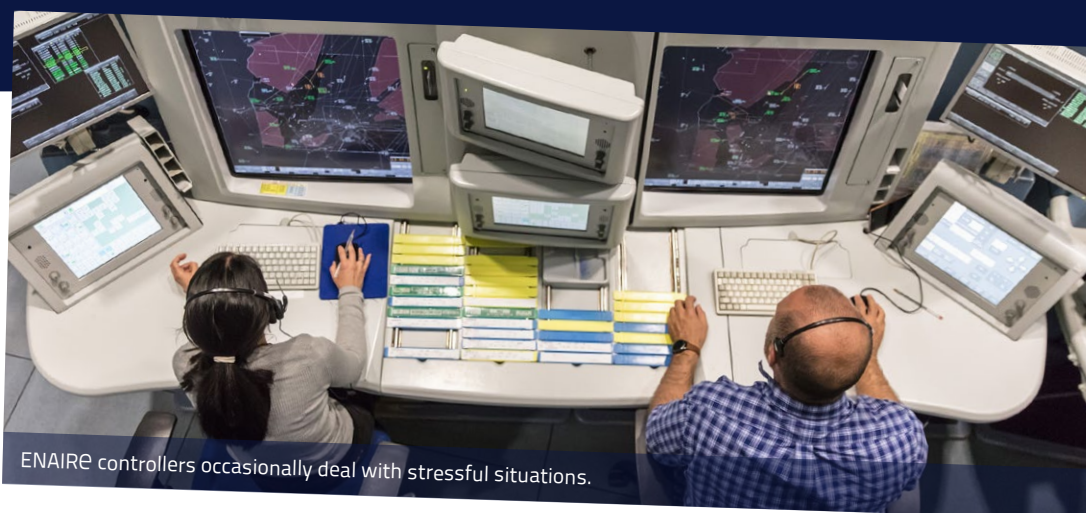




Stress, how to identify it and deal with it

31 July 2020



ENAIRe controllers occasionally deal with stressful situations.

COVID-19: an additional source of stress

Human Factors Department

Safety, Quality and Environmental Division



COSTA, G. (1995)
Occupational Stress and Stress Prevention in ATC. Working Paper CONDI/T/ WP.6/1995. Geneva: International Labour Office

***EASA (2019) Easy Access Rules for ATM-ANS (Regulation (EU) 2017/373). Brussels: European Union**

EASA (2020) Review of Aviation Safety Issues Arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Brussels: European Union

EUROCONTROL (2020) Managing Stress in ATM. Brussels: EUROCONTROL

The high demands and responsibilities involved in air control work can turn into a significant source of stress.

If we add to this the uncertainty and concern that the pandemic brings to everyday life, the likely result is a negative impact on a person's well-being.

Recognising the effect of this impact in personal, social and occupational settings is the first step in dealing with the intense social stress caused by the pandemic.

What is stress?

It is the body's psychophysical response to situations where it doesn't think it has the resources needed to deal with them.

This mismatch brings about changes in the person's behaviour, causes health problems and also reduces the person's effectiveness at work.

How does stress manifest itself?

EASA (2019*) categorises the main sources of stress for ATC personnel into three main groups:

- Environmental or physical.
- Work-related. Some potential sources of stress might include workload, emergencies, equipment failures, training received, relationships with colleagues, work climate, air traffic incidents, etc.
- Personal.

EASA also describes how stress can affect the performance of controllers.

Table 1 below shows the effects on air traffic controller performance which can be linked to stress and which can potentially have very significant implications for the safety performance of an operation.

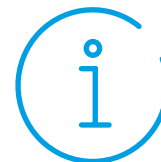
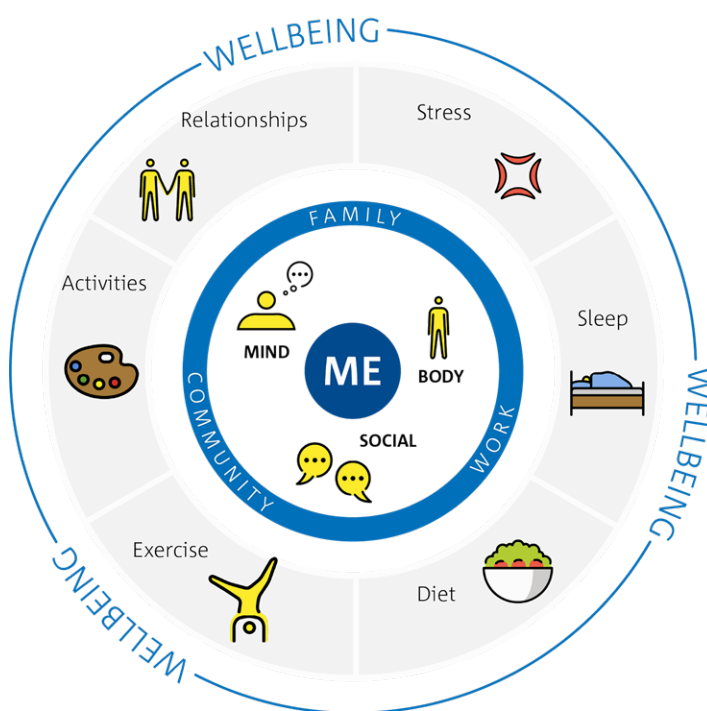
Difficulty in concentrating and reduced vigilance — easily distracted.
Errors, omissions, mistakes, incorrect actions, poor judgment and memory.
Tendency to cut corners, skip items and look for the easiest way out.
Either slowness (due to lack of interest) or hyperactivity (due to adrenaline).
Focusing on easily manageable details while ignoring serious threats.
Tendency to pass responsibility on to others.
Fixation on single issues or even a mental block.
Unwillingness to make decisions — decisions are postponed or take longer to be made.
Fewer plans and backup plans are made.
Increase in risk-taking, leading to an increase in the number of violations, especially when frustrated with failures.
Excessively hurried actions — due to adrenaline and alertness level, there is a tendency to act very quickly even when there is no time pressure. Hurried actions increase the chance of errors.
In cases of significantly high stress, a controller will often:
(1) return to old procedures that may no longer be applicable, appropriate or safe;
(2) use non-standard phraseology when communicating;
(3) return to the use of one's native language; and/or
(4) look for items in a place where they used to be, but are no longer located.

Table 1: Effects of stress on physical and mental performance of air traffic control tasks

How can I adapt to this situation without stressing out?

The body can show signs of stress, and then recover. This resilience allows a person to adapt to their environment. However, this capacity is limited and, past a certain threshold, it is exceeded.

The 6 factors that have the greatest impact on the resilience of aviation professionals are represented in the en la [Flight Safety Foundation's Wheel of Wellbeing \(2020\)](#):



IFATCA (2020) Coping with COVID-19. Montreal: IFATCA

FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION (2020) Aviation Professional's Guide to Wellbeing. Virginia: Flight Safety Foundation

ENAIRES (2019) G1-19-MAN-001 Framework Document of the Operational Safety Fatigue and Stress Risk Management System (FSRMS) Madrid: ENAIRES

ENAIRES (2019) A117-19-PLA-001 Plan to Prevent and Mitigate Stress in Air Traffic Controllers, 2020 Madrid: ENAIRES

Specifically, there are a number of resources that can be used to [improve one's response to stress](#):

- Learn breathing control techniques and apply them in stressful situations.
- Maintain a network of social peers who provide positivity.
- Regularly engage in a relaxing activity and do some type of physical exercise every day.
- Eat right.

FSRMS (Operational Safety Fatigue and Stress Risk Management System)

Since January 2020, ENAIRES's air traffic controllers have been able to report stress and fatigue via the [Cloud](#).

These reports may be linked to an operational safety occurrence, or they may be used proactively to report an event that causes fatigue or stress.

Remember

It is important to report any stress or fatigue involving [personal, social or occupational settings](#) that may have an impact on safety, due to the effect that these states can have on your job performance.

The investigation into the reported event will adhere to the Just Culture principles, with the sole objective being to improve operational safety.

The information you provide is essential if the Operational Safety Risk Management System is to consolidate and improve the fatigue and stress of controllers.