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Safety Management System

Safety Bulletin

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Difficult Conversations – Ageing & Less Healthy Pilots

Purpose. This Bulletin builds on SB 02/24 *Safety Differently 2 - Improving Collective Safety* and provides guidance for all clubs and members on managing difficult conversations regarding ageing pilots and those suffering declining health. This bulletin is intended to foster positive safety dialogue within and between clubs, underpinning improvements in safety culture. Pilots should seek professional medical advice when dealing with these issues.

Introduction: Building Better Safety Dialogue on Sensitive Issues

> "We are all getting older. None of us are getting younger. Yet we still feel young at heart, gliding keeps us young and, for many of us, we put effort into maintaining our fitness to fly. We glider pilots are often self-aware, wilful, focussed, achievement oriented and individualistic characters, with a disposition to explore what we can do, rather than what we cannot."

I first wrote these words when introducing a 2013 Gliding Australia article on having difficult conversations with maturing and ageing pilots. More than a decade later, as GAus Safety Manager, these conversations are happening more frequently with ageing cohorts. Technologies and training systems have advanced, human factors science has advanced, so we know more about inexorable ageing effects and limitations.

Occasionally we are asked about safety and behavioural concerns, dealing with senior or unwell pilots past their prime, club people needing to change roles or step down, risks of ageing pilots. We also see many ageing pilots working hard to stay sharp and fit, maintaining currency and proficiency, being good airmanship role models, extending themselves safely. Plus a few who are struggling…

Now, years later, I'm one of the older ones! My personal fitness, fatigue limits and slowly diminishing capabilities demand greater attention. My GP, specialists and optometrists keep me well advised, a little more often. I am acutely aware of my lapses and errors, with greater self-critical reviews. I also seek more flying for fun, not just for others benefit. There are clear limits to the range of new tricks that older dogs can learn, so I am more selective in what I am trying to do.

Human and Organisational Factors. When we analyse accidents and incidents, conduct accident investigations at GAus and Club levels, we explore pilot experience and recency, fitness to fly, medical status and potential human and organisational factors. When assessing human factors, we assess possible contributions of fatigue, dehydration, nutrition, heat stress, mental overload, distraction, filtering, other factors eroding a pilot's ability to maintain situational awareness, make safe judgements and decisions. Sometimes the problems arise on the ground, in maintenance, inspections, ground handling, not just airborne.

Maturing improves our ability to handle stress and challenges, to deal with increased workload demands. However, ageing affects our capacity to adapt to unfamiliar demands, maintain

airmanship and airworthiness, and uphold safety standards. Errors, lapses and fatigue issues can arise more frequently.

We have often found that human and organisational factors contribute to serious accidents. I invite you to look at GAus occurrence summaries online, ATSB reports, Flight Safety Australia, YouTube and online aviation channels, plus in Gliding Australia and see for yourself.

Challenges. Sometimes we are asked about managing the challenges of ageing pilots. Sometimes advice is sought about having difficult conversations with ageing pilots whose safety and airmanship might be falling below levels for safe cross-country or solo flight, or whose decisions and actions may cause increased risks to others.

The responsibility for dealing with this comes down to two sets of decisions:

- the individual pilot making responsible decisions about themselves, mindful of their responsibilities to family, friends and other pilots; and

- the training and operations panel, or club operations manager, mindful of their collective responsibility to all pilots, and their families and friends.

Every day, we make personal IMSAFE assessments of fitness to fly or undertake safety critical tasks on the ground. At longer intervals we must provide medical declarations; most pilots can self-declare their fitness, and some have General Practitioner or higher aeromedical certification of fitness. Regardless of where we fit in this regime, it is incumbent upon every pilot to be aware of disqualifying conditions or temporary conditions requiring a pause in flying, or flight with a safety pilot, or cessation of flying. With advances in medical diagnostics and treatments, tests and scans, amazing interventions for serious disqualifying conditions, some pilots may regain flying fitness. Touch wood…

Ageing pilots also need to maintain psychological fitness, positive behaviours, interact safely and well with others in the club environment. Evidence suggests that older pilots need to fly more, to stay alert and proficient. There are links between behaviours and positive club safety culture, ability to support good relationships and teamwork that drive so many collective safety outcomes.

This assumes a reasonable level of self-awareness and emotional intelligence, receptiveness to constructive feedback.

Well Managed Assessments. I reflect on several close gliding friends who have declared their intentions to give up solo gliding on reaching significant milestones. They enjoyed good health with high awareness of limitations and effects of ageing. In every case they wanted to go out of gliding on a high, with positive achievements and excellent safety records, positive relationships with flying friends, not on a low. That sounds great to me. I admire their clarity of thought and decision processes, their selfless consideration of others.

Other gliding friends are still flying solo in good health, yet conscious of their limited timespan of solo flying, and are looking at dual seater glider options. Some pilots are finding dual XC flying a particularly satisfying experience. I have heard several pilots discussing the strategy of mutual flying with a syndicate partner, doubling the lookout and enjoyment, then a graceful exit.

Difficult Conversations. So, how might we have those difficult conversations? I offer these comments as a past professional negotiation specialist as well as in my safety management role.

- **Begin by clarifying the desired outcomes:** shared safety, enjoyable flying in a supportive environment, a strong and positive reputation, and beneficial impacts on individuals, club

members, families, and friends when managed effectively. A clear understanding of these goals guides how we approach and adapt to these conversations to achieve meaningful results.

- **Second, don't avoid discussing safety risks or potential negative**s: particularly when others have raised concerns about a pilot's health, declining skills, situational awareness, teamwork or interactions within the club. Expressing concern for the well-being of the pilot and fellow members makes these conversations essential. Ensure you have a clear understanding of the safety facts and any objective supporting information.

- **Third, build on common ground and shared understandin**g: ideally around respectful exit strategies and voluntary decisions, to help draw the pilot to align with preferred options. If a two-seater is available, suggest mutual flying with colleagues or safety pilots as a supportive step. Emphasise the willingness of fellow members to assist and share the experience. If stopping flying becomes necessary, highlight the continued value of club involvement through social connections and other meaningful volunteer roles.

- **Fourth, highlight the shared responsibility each pilot holds**; not just to themselves, but to fellow pilots, families, friends, and the wider community. It's not solely about one individual; it's about safeguarding everyone connected to the flying environment. This collective perspective can help reframe the goals of this difficult conversation and guide the negotiation toward safer, more constructive outcomes.

- **Fifth, choose your language and tone carefully**. Pilots may respond with strong emotions, so a supportive and collaborative approach is more effective than using ultimatums or sounding accusatory. Maintain mutual respect throughout the conversation. Acknowledge differing perspectives and emotions, and present objective evidence with care and sensitivity.

- **Sixth, respect confidentiality and emotional sensitivity**. Trust is essential for navigating these conversations, is hard earned and easily lost. Handle all discussions with discretion and tact, avoid disclosing private information, and be mindful of the pilot’s dignity and needs. Steer clear of rumours or past disputes that could damage trust or reputations.

- **Finally, effective leadership and a positive club culture are essential.** Difficult conversations must be conducted with respect for all involved, never with blame or denigration. Respect addresses our most fundamental human needs and reinforces a strong reputation built on positive interactions with constructive relationships within the gliding club community.

Summary – Key Strategies for Navigating Difficult Conversations

- Focus on clear, constructive outcomes. Prioritise mutual safety, well-being, and a positive club environment.

- Acknowledge and disclose safety concerns. Address risks and potential negatives honestly, especially when concerns have been raised.

- Build on common ground, shared understanding and voluntary solutions. Support preferred options through collaboration, mutual flying, other respectful exit strategies.

- Recognise collective responsibility. Decisions affect not just the individual but also fellow pilots, families, and the broader community.

- Communicate with care and mutual respect. Choose language and tone that support trust, not confrontation.

- Maintain confidentiality and discretion. Trust is vital—protect reputations and avoid fuelling gossip or conflict.

- Demonstrate leadership and foster a positive culture. Respectful, values-driven leadership strengthens individual dignity and club cohesion.

Note that this will often be a continuing conversation over many encounters, not just a single, difficult encounter. Conversations with others in the pilot's trusted network can help to influence their decision, to shape the environment in which the pilot makes difficult decisions about their gliding future.

Other Interventions. In some cases, individuals may present challenges, such as exhibiting low self-awareness or emotional intelligence, an inflated sense of ability, increased risk appetite with eroding safety margins, intransigence, denial or resistance to collaboration. As these combine, they may lead to increasingly unsafe flying practices, poor maintenance standards, diminished airmanship, and unwillingness to contribute to collective safety. We don't want to go there!

In such situations, firm and direct evidence-based conversations are necessary. Regardless of age, if a pilot poses increased safety risk to others, decisive action may be needed, including restricting their flying privileges or reviewing their membership status. It's better if they self-assess objectively and self-limit their activities, modify their practices, reduce stresses, apply greater safety margins.

Note that age effects on pilots can vary greatly. For example, those who are facing high stress, or suffering from disease, or head trauma, or hereditary degenerative conditions, can be more affected, and at an earlier age. Our sensory acuity can change quickly too, so get hearing and eye checks, expert medical advice if in any doubt.

I offer these final thoughts. We were all young once, enjoyed some rash moments. We all learn from others, mature, and hopefully improve with age and achieve great rewards from gliding. There's a natural curve of development and skills maturation with experience, with age-related capability limitations. Our medical practitioners will inevitably express caution about our health and prospects, give advice beyond eyesight or hearing acuity.

We will all have to stop gliding one day. We might all reflect on how we would like to do this, on what terms. We need to be mindful of the thresholds that we might apply to ourselves to withdraw from competitive events, or limit flying activity, cease solo flying, fly dual only, or cease flying altogether. We might gradually change our roles in the club, in the air and on the ground.

It's best to have early positive difficult conversations with yourself, family or trusted friends. Good luck, stay healthy, self-aware and safe, enjoy the best gliding and best friendships while you can!

Recommended reading:
https://members.gliding.co.uk/safety/managing-flying-risk-index/ageing-pilots/

Recommended viewing:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrD_mkmM1Mc
https://youtu.be/uvJTcnSyoCE?si=sctnosQP8fFGst3L

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