

# Psychological aspects of the role of cabin crew

Chris Partridge and Tracy Goodman explore the impact at British Airways

*I want to work as part of a team and travel the world...*

This phrase, often heard at airline interviews, probably encapsulates the expectations and aspirations of airline cabin crew who apply for what is perceived as one of the most 'glamorous' jobs in the world.

What happens if glamour turns to grief and the travel to trauma? Behind the 'plastic' smile, the groomed façade and the creaseless uniform could lie a conflicting balance of home and work life; professional and personal relationships; and a demanding mix of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

In this article we examine the psychological problems and complexes that can arise from these kinds of dichotomies. We will look at the mental challenges faced when flying at 35,000 feet while trying to keep one's feet firmly 'on the ground'. We will also present an overview of the British Airways (BA) Crewcare counselling service, which has been an integral part of the support process for cabin crew throughout the last 20 years.

## Starting out – recruitment and selection

Throughout the current BA recruitment campaign for cabin crew, the organisation promotes the fact that working as a member of their cabin crew community is not so much a job, but in many ways a privileged life; with opportunities to visit places and cultures that are beyond most people's reach. However, the campaign carefully illustrates that the work is not all about jetting around the world and staying in exotic locations, it's about delivering outstanding customer service in all conditions. Ultimately, the key role of a cabin crew member is to be responsible for passenger safety.

BA is transparent about the job having glamorous elements while being an exhausting lifestyle that places tough demands on family and social commitments. It stresses the fact that it is not a vocation for anyone who craves routine. A key element of the job is that crew are expected to be totally flexible and prepared to work on a variety of routes across

the BA network. For those crew members entering the profession from a more traditional nine-to-five working environment, the inability to plan ahead, and constantly working with different people, can be particularly challenging.

The desired corporate skills sought for the role of cabin crew member include: a motivation to deliver excellent customer service, emotional resilience, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, team skills and commercial awareness. Required personal qualities include: a friendly and caring personality, competence in handling difficult situations, a confident communicator and good listener, supportive of colleagues, a team player, an ability to be calm and efficient under pressure and a willingness to treat everyone as an individual. In addition it is necessary to satisfy current BA and Civil Air Aviation health requirements and to take pride in personal appearance and grooming.

Following the recruitment process, which includes group and individual interviews, medical and language testing, the new cabin crew member embarks on a four to six week training course. This covers statutory requirements such as safety and emergency procedures training, aviation medicine, hijack/security procedures, conflict management, restraining and breakaway techniques, which are all required to conform to European statutory 'JAROPS' standards (Joint Aviation Requirements Operations). This course also covers the 'softer skills' such as communication and team working, service styles and standards, and personal safety both on and off the aircraft.

The trainee is assessed and examined at regular intervals throughout the course and it is a fairly arduous and demanding period for the new employee. Once this is successfully completed, cabin crew then start their flying roster, which is predominantly dictated by company and operational requirements. For the initial six-month period the crew member is on 'probation' and is regularly assessed on performance by a senior crew member. Having completed this six-month probation the crew member earns their 'wings', returns briefly to the training school to consolidate the experience gained and to refresh their initial training.

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Once out on the flying 'line' the new recruit joins the ranks of the professional jet set and depending on fleet allocation, will fly on shorter, mainly European routes, involving day return trips or 'nightstops' of up to three days away from base. Alternatively, worldwide crew will fly to destinations in the rest of the world, which may involve trips of up to 13 days away from base.

In the initial 'honeymoon' period, the opportunity to travel, to see the world and to meet a wealth of differing peoples and cultures contributes to the perceived 'glamour' of the role. The opportunity to escape the routine of many ground-based jobs adds to this attraction. Realities such as a lack of control of lifestyle, being away from family and friends and the difficulties in planning ahead, could begin to deflate the glamour 'bubble.' The physical implications of the job, such as compounded sleep deprivation, jetlag and dehydration can also take their toll.

The constantly changing crews make it difficult to form stable and long-lasting working alliances, resulting in a lack of continuity and development in work relations. A commitment to this kind of lifestyle also necessitates a consequential lack of investment in home life and often results in difficulties with establishing and maintaining personal relationships. When this is compounded by the fleeting nature of work relationships, it can lead to a sense of loneliness and isolation. In particular the sense of loneliness within a crowd, or when working closely within a team of people, can often be difficult to manage. As one female crew member remarked on a recent BBC1 programme, 'Working in the dark – fly by night', 'It can be a brilliant job, however if you have problems at home, it can be purgatory'.

The lifestyle, which can act as a psychological retreat, allows certain individuals to continually deny themselves the opportunity of addressing a particular problem. Inevitably, at some point the problem will have to be faced. When this occurs, BA health services offer a robust support mechanism and will assess an individual's physical and/or psychological 'fitness to fly' should the need arise.

### Managing group dynamics

A typical duty day for a crew member begins with a 15-minute pre-flight briefing at base to meet with a group of up to 14 colleagues. Here, working positions are designated and crew are tested on emergency procedures and aviation medicine knowledge. Also specific information is given on the route and, in terms of security, the relative level of threat, from low to severe, designated to the destination by the foreign office.

When compared with Tuckman's model of group dynamics, the 'forming, storming and norming',



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stages of the working alliance must be quickly established. The only opportunities for this are the 15-minute pre-flight briefing, the bus journey to the aircraft and the seven minutes allocated to check all safety equipment and catering is onboard. Thus, the crew team needs to reach the 'performing' stage of the model before the passengers board.

Ideally, there would be a longer period for these group formation processes to be completed, but commercial pressures mean that the 'performing' stage of the Tuckman model needs to be reached relatively quickly. The requirement to reach this stage often leads to a number of ways of 'acting out' by individuals in order to achieve this necessary, but often fragile, group harmony. Typically these include succumbing to the perceived pressure to be

accepted and valued by the crew group through the projection of the perceived 'attractive' side of one's personality – such as by humour or use of personal anecdotes.

Once in the 'performing' role the crew member must quickly adapt to the group dynamics and often bypass individual needs in order to meet the needs of the customer/passenger. Ultimately the main purpose for the group forming is not to satisfy individual requirements but for larger organisational objectives. Primarily, these are the need to move the customer/passenger from point A to point B efficiently and safely, while caring for their basic physiological needs.

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Once the trip or duty day is over, the group then reaches the 'mourning' stage of the Tuckman model. Here, there is a sudden break in both working and social relationships, with a realisation that crews will not fly with each other again within the same grouping. Even for the more robust personality type, this constantly formed and then broken way of relating leads to a lack of stability and continuity. For the more vulnerable, this dynamic can have more serious personal consequences.

### **Adapting to the company culture**

The role of a cabin crew member requires a certain type of individual who is able to combine a whole range of qualities. These include being emotionally available, open, flexible, adaptable, empathic, dependable, reliable, independent and self-sufficient. Frequently, people who display characteristics from this range of qualities require a degree of a sense of emotional nurturing from the organisation too. Indeed, themes of BA being perceived as the 'nurturing parent' are sometimes apparent when cabin crew employees present personal difficulties at work.

This parental role assumed by the organisation can be seen to take responsibility for the 'control' of the employee by looking after the physiological needs of the individual once onboard the aircraft and while overseas. For example, meals are provided for crew members on the aircraft; hotels allocated overseas; allowances available to cover food; porters

to take cases to rooms and coaches to transport individuals to the airport. It follows that a good 'parent' will unquestionably take care of these 'needs' and so, in this way, the organisation becomes more than an employer. Often a large dependency is established and/or cultivated by the crew member as the organisation provides more than just financial remuneration; it provides a way of life.

However, with any 'family type' relationship, domestic tensions emerge. Given commercial and resource pressures, employees are required to work harder and cope with additional stressors, such as increased security under the threat of terrorism, within the constantly changing dynamic of the industry. This often leads to some resentment building toward the organisation at large, as the employee may sense that they are somehow less 'cared for'. Sometimes the employee can regress to an infantile state where they perceive that the parent organisation is not providing for all their needs. This dynamic can often be witnessed in clients presenting to the Crewcare counselling service.

The culture of the organisation is thus largely subjective since it depends on the relative emotional maturity of each employee in determining how much responsibility they take for satisfying their own needs. In a job, however, which can be deemed to be a lifestyle choice, there will be a greater tendency to expect the organisation to be more nurturing of personal needs, since the employee sacrifices much control and 'power'.

We accept Bor's<sup>2</sup> view that, on an unconscious level, the cabin crew in turn might also be regarded as maternal substitutes for the passenger. They are, after all, in constant view and take responsibility for providing food and drink. Passengers sit on board an aircraft in a non-participative role and can yield to a regressive 'pull', exaggerated by the fact that they are sat helplessly at 35,000 feet, cared for by parental figures of unknown experience.

Thus cabin crew have to demonstrate these 'parental' qualities in their everyday working lives. Consequently, they themselves will sometimes need to feel 'parented' by the organisation. Given the service-oriented airline industry, this hierarchical culture of caring has obvious benefits. As Butler<sup>3</sup> suggests: 'An organisation fulfils its mission if its community feels competently cared for and supported'. However, for the caring dependent employee, the consequences of subsequently not feeling cared for are often tangible.

### **How cabin crew manage these psychological anomalies**

Recently the emphasis in the recruitment process has focused on people who can be empathic, and

therefore emotionally available, where required. In contrast, they also need to show resilience and independence of character, in order to deal with the more 'isolating' aspects of the job and the pressures presented under a heightened state of aviation security.

The following 'types' have been identified as ways in which cabin crew defend or 'act out' in order to survive this set of competing needs, some of which will be less psychologically healthy than others:

**'Rescuer' types** – sums up a large percentage of cabin crew. The job attracts 'caring' individuals who gain self-value primarily by helping others. They may also be termed 'selfless' types who have a tendency to avoid their own issues by concentrating on others' needs.

**'Ain't it awful' types** – a traditionally distinctly British trait. Certain individuals will describe how badly they have been treated or how 'victimised' they feel. This is often used to aid group cohesion, as people around are often 'drawn' into sharing similar 'ain't it awful' type stories.

**'Personal disclosure' types** – perhaps in order to make fleeting and brief but intense relationships hold more meaning, many crew share a great deal of personal information relatively quickly.

**'Holding pattern' types** – as working relationships are brief but intense, some crew will use the same tried and tested formula for gaining group acceptance and attention. This means that various psychological complexities are played out again and again, but in constantly changing relationships they can be happily repeated many times, without the expectation to 'move on.'

**'Uniform used as facade' types** – given the fact that working alliances must be forged alongside social interaction while away from home/base, some crew will literally change personas when in uniform. There is obviously a requirement to behave in certain expected ways while representing the company, but if this is too far divorced from the essence of the real person, then problems can occur.

**'Stuck in limbo syndrome' types** – as crew's feet are never literally 'on the ground' for great periods of time, there is a temptation that life issues never quite have to be faced. Just when domestic or personal problems become too intense the next rostered trip is waiting to provide an escape from the impasse.

**'Avoidance' types** – similar to the previous trait but includes people who are attracted to the job as a form of 'escapism' from difficulties at home, this being their primary motivation for flying. When problems with this type of person occur, it is often worth investigating what problems are being 'left behind' on the ground. What are they using the

job to avoid?

**'Workaholic' types** – these types often see the job as their primary focus. They invest little in their lives outside of this single work dimension and so, when fulfilment wanes or retirement nears, they may realise that they have defined themselves too narrowly within the role.

**'Infantile' types** – this type happily regresses to an infantile state with the expectation that many personal needs will be provided for by the organisation. However, as previously discussed, at some point the 'parent' organisation will be perceived to let them down and this type of personality will assume little responsibility in seeking resolution through emotionally mature means. This often manifests in a general avoidance of responsibility for the self and leads to an unhealthy degree of responsibility being transferred from the individual to the organisation.

**'Glamour interject' types** – there are some crew members who carry out the job as a result of significant others' encouragement and/or expectations. For example, friends, family members or partners may persuade the individual that the job is wonderful and glamorous. Consequently they may interject this belief, often at the expense of their own true inner, and perhaps contrary, experience.

**'Addictive' types** – finally, many of the above ways of acting out may be totally avoided or at least 'numbed down' by the types who turn to readily available alcohol, or even drugs, in order to escape the inherent dilemmas.

## Psychological effects of the cabin crew role

'Air travel disrupts human relationships and behaviours, as well as bodily functions and systems.'<sup>2</sup>

Given the conflicting and contradictory demands in the cabin crew role it is not surprising that certain 'splits' can occur in the personality in order to try to appease these. An awareness of when it is appropriate to 'switch' between various public facades is healthy and is represented by individuals who can reach into their psychological toolbox of coping 'mechanisms'. However, problems can emerge when an individual over-identifies with one or more of these 'masks' and begins to lose a sense of their core self. For example, the requirement for group inclusion, a basic prerequisite for human happiness, can lead to an over-reliance on the plastic veneer. Consequently, vulnerabilities and psychological issues not representative of that 'smile' become suppressed and ignored, as Hughes<sup>4</sup> reflects: 'Potential psychological damage can be caused by the forcing or falsifying of emotions in order to carry out the required tasks of a job, ie the explicit and implicit demands for flight attendants to 'display' a friendly,



courteous disposition at all times, reflecting the mission statement of the company'.

Thus, as the individual attempts to deal with the 'splints' that can occur, detrimental manifestations may include anxiety, panic attacks, stress, manic episodes and other depressive states. Some crew members will present to health services with more directly related work problems, such as sleep deprivation and dietary issues. However further discussion often reveals a deeper level of psychological angst associated with this falsifying of emotion.

Alcohol could compound and blur any deeper routed personal problems. The lifestyle can act as a psychological retreat and alcohol effectively facilitates. However, the recent introduction of the statutory drugs and alcohol policy helps the early identification of underlying addictive symptoms. The consequences for not disclosing such problems within a safety critical role can lead to disciplinary action. We are thus finding that crew with addictive type issues are more readily presenting themselves for help and the organisation has support policies in place for this kind of proactive approach.

BA also has an attendance management policy in operation. This aims to effectively manage absence by offering support and an understanding of the reasons why employees cannot report fit for work. Similarly to the drugs and alcohol policy, this provides a forum for crew to speak more openly about any personal problems as they arise and before they become too unmanageable, as Park<sup>5</sup> suggests: 'By creating spaces for the pluralism within all of us, it becomes possible for people to discover what is really happening within themselves as well as within their organisation.'

For a certain number of crew members, particularly those employed in the role for 10 years or more, there is sometimes an unconscious reliance on the job, which indirectly supports an avoidance of dealing with underlying emotional struggles.

### **The impact of 9/11**

9/11 served to nudge many individuals' deep-seated existential fears into their awareness and heightened the need to support airline cabin crew across the world. Consequently, these events increased contacts received by the Crewcare counselling helpline. There were a significant number of cabin crew who had to remain stationed overseas for several days, unable to return home. Following the hijacking incidents some crew were desperate to talk about how they were feeling and what it meant to be away from loved ones in a world forever changed by terrorism.

Possibly for the first time, individuals' anxieties had a plausible 'outlet'. The inherent and/or latent fears around flying were dramatically given licence for expression through the mass outpouring of emotions associated with this event. As many questioned their own mortality an increase in self-responsibility was evident and those crew members with families and small children began questioning their motivation for the job. The terrorist attacks gave licence for cabin crew to talk more candidly about their other deep fears and anxieties as the psychological 'retreat' became less viable.

### **The Crewcare counselling service**

The BA Crewcare counselling service is a unique, confidential, airline counselling service that has been in operation for 22 years. The department is operated by a team of 20 trained counsellors, all of whom are crew members and have been operating as cabin crew for at least two years. They combine flying duties with working a six-day counselling roster every four to five weeks. The peer group aspect of the service is something that users value greatly. The service receives positive feedback relating to how reassuring it is to speak to someone who understands the lifestyle and uniqueness of the job. If problems raised by the client cannot be resolved in a single counselling session, Crewcare have the facility to refer a crew member to the BA Employee Assistance Provider (EAP) for ongoing counselling. Additional referrals may be offered via BACP (of which Crewcare is an organisational member, adhering to its codes of ethics and practice), or the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP).

Throughout the last 20 years Crewcare has developed a range of services and support systems. These include a 24-hour free phone helpline; a drop in counselling facility located on site; follow-up

help and guidance for crew involved in critical incidents; a support group for working parents who are combining family and working life; an opportunity to re-orientate crew returning from long-term sick; awareness campaigns on issues facing the community; workshops on counselling skills for managers; stress management programmes; a web presence on the company intranet and the continual updating of an extensive resource directory.

Critical incidents can range from a passenger's death on board to air rage and any work-related event that may be traumatic for the individual. In these cases, the role of the Crewcare counsellor is primarily a defusing one, listening to the crew member's experiences and responding to their immediate needs. Literature is also provided on possible symptoms of post-traumatic shock.

Quarterly statistics are provided to the relevant managers within BA. This data illustrates current trends and issues that are raised without compromising the position of the service as a confidential facility. It provides an opportunity for organisational change and development. As Kutek<sup>6</sup> explains: 'We are change agents whether we like it or not. If people come to us and talk about bullying and harassment, that means pointing to something that needs changing in that organisation.'

### The crew perception of Crewcare

After 20 years, the Crewcare function is now firmly embedded in the support systems offered to cabin crew both at home and overseas. During this time utilisation rates of the service have increased substantially.

Statistics for 2001 show that the service received approximately 1,082 contacts from an employee group of approximately 14,000. This figure comprises information and referral contacts through to active crisis counselling calls and/or personal visits. This represented 7.7 per cent of our then total client base – a high take-up rate compared to most EAPs.

Given this level of usage among the department's client base there is evidence that it positively impacts on the whole of the cabin crew culture. Indeed the service can be seen as a 'safety net' into which not everyone will fall, but whose presence is nevertheless valued. We concur with Briner<sup>7</sup> when he says: 'Changes in a client's mood and emotional state may also play a significant role in changing the feelings and behaviours of co-workers. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that we can "catch", through a process known as emotional contagion, the feelings of other people.'

During 2001 we also sought client feedback about our service. The following comments are a selection of the many anonymous responses received:

**Positive** – 'Having used Crewcare I feel this is a service that is well needed and it helped me so much to get back on track when I felt there was nowhere else to turn. I am truly grateful.'

**As a safety net** – 'I think it is an excellent service – even knowing that it's there often provides support. The times I have used it the counsellors have been discreet, professional and efficient.'

**Individual perception** – 'I think people who haven't used the service tend to think it's only for suicidal, depressed alcoholics; more could be done to let people know about the kind of problems you can help with, big or small.'

**Implications of peer support service** – 'Crew life can be fatal for some people sometimes and Crewcare is helpful because they are crew themselves, so they can understand crew lifestyles. None of my immediate friends ever understand why I am tired, lonely or jet-lagged. As far as they are concerned I am on a permanent holiday.'

**Effect on organisational culture** – 'I'm glad that BA as a company can offer this service. I have never had this service at previous companies.'

### The future of Crewcare

Learning from our past has helped the Crewcare counselling service to build for the future and to enhance the counselling and support functions. As the industry is constantly changing, the Crewcare counselling service recognises that it cannot be complacent. It is constantly fine-tuning the services on offer to the cabin crew community.

With the continued need to offer a duty of care in the increasingly litigious working environment, to the constant evolution of the job in the modern changing world and as a sanctuary of retreat in a dynamic organisation, we like to think that our services will be valued well into Terminal 5 and beyond. ■

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*A version of this article first appeared in Aviation mental health: psychological implications for air transportation, September 2006 – reproduced with kind permission of Ashgate Publishing Ltd.*