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# Managing Your Passengers

Understanding the hazards associated with transporting other human beings can help you make smart choices.

**A**re passengers really something that presents a risk to safe flight? In some cases, they do exactly that. But passengers are risks that can be mitigated. It may even make our flights not only safer but more enjoyable. Let's look at some of the risks that passengers really pose.

## DISTRACTIONS BY PASSENGERS

Passengers can be wonderful traveling companions, but they can also be distractions to your flying duties, and not only mentally; they can also be physical distractions. If they are in the way of the controls, trying to take pictures over you, or just scared and in the way, they can inhibit your ability to manage the workload of a pilot, and that's what matters most.

There are three really important things to remember when managing your passengers:

- Brief them on your expectations and how to know when to not distract you. This is commonly referred to as a sterile cockpit concept, and it is used in professional piloting environments, but you can use it also. Discuss with passengers prior to departure how you will communicate with them and times that you need to focus, and they should keep interactions with and distractions of you to a minimum. It can be as simple as to raise a hand, kind of like saying "stop," if you need them to cease what they are doing for a bit. You can also brief them on specific times or events, such as an instrument approach or landing, at which time you will verbally tell them you need some quiet until you tell them it is again "okay" to talk again and not before.
- Isolate your passengers from your radio traffic either by using the "crew isolate" function on an intercom or, if necessary, pulling the plugs on their headsets or not giving them any. I know this may sound harsh, but when you are in a busy radio environment, passengers talking can make you miss radio calls. Isolating

yourself from passengers' discussions or their questions of you at critical times is key.

- Put them in rear seats. Just because there is a crew seat next to you doesn't mean that your passengers have to sit next to you. If you have a passenger who might be a distraction in the front, or you need the room on the seat next to you for charts and other piloting paraphernalia, putting them in the back can be the solution. Tell them just to think of you as their limo driver. Plus, then they can see out both sides of the aircraft without looking around or over you, the pilot, and distracting you.

## PASSENGER MOTION SICKNESS

A common risk that many pilots are familiar with but don't spend much time addressing in passenger briefings is motion sickness.

Ever have a passenger get sick? I have. How about on you? Think that might affect your ability to fly the aircraft to your best ability?

I still vividly remember the day a passenger of mine who normally had no issues got sick without telling me and without a bag to contain it. They were behind me in an Aeronca Champ. Yup. They vomited all down my back.

It was a day with over 90-degree heat, it was uncontained, and it was all over me. Covered in my passenger's vomit, I was not going to be an undistracted, top-of-my-game pilot for very long. In all honesty, a sympathy puke was probably in the cards if I didn't get on the ground pretty soon. It was a legitimate distractor to my flying abilities.

I made a quick decision to land at a private grass strip that just happened to be near us. The farmer who drove up to us is still a hero of mine for giving me the spare shirt he had in his truck to replace my vomit-covered one.

This is probably a worst-case scenario, but a vomiting passenger is a major distraction in an aircraft and can actually pose a risk to systems in the aircraft. Imagine what the effects of vomit are on an electronic instrument in the panel of your aircraft. I know it can't do good things.

After a couple of negative experiences, my "not feeling so well" briefing has gotten short but poignant.

Passengers don't want to tell you they aren't feeling well; it is embarrassing for them. I get that.

I tell passengers ahead of time that it is okay if they don't feel well. I teach them where bags are and how to use them. I tell them it isn't anything they are doing wrong, just that their inner ear and their bodies aren't working together sometimes and that on any given day virtually anyone may find themselves susceptible to a little motion sickness. I also try to impress upon them that even if they feel a little embarrassed about feeling



sick, it is WAY more embarrassing to puke on, around or next to the pilot in the cockpit. I also tend to joke (kind-of) that if they don't tell me, don't use a bag and vomit in an uncontrolled manner in the aircraft, I reserve the right to puke back on them. It usually makes the point.

## **ALCOHOL AND PASSENGERS**

Technically, the FAA doesn't prohibit passengers from having consumed alcohol prior to or even during a flight! But it does indicate that "except in an emergency, no pilot of a civil aircraft may allow a person who appears to be intoxicated..." (14 CFR §91.17 (b)). The practical application of this allows a pilot in command to take passengers who might have had something to some degree, but it does come with risks. A passenger who has a couple glasses of wine or beers at lunch or over dinner and then rides home with you is more likely to experience hypoxia symptoms, may be more susceptible to motion sickness, and, one of the most common problems I have experienced with passengers who consumed alcohol prior to or during a flight, more likely to need a restroom since alcohol is also a diuretic. This may seem like a small risk, but a passenger who starts asking the "are we there yet" question 30 to 45 minutes into a three-hour flight is going to become a distraction and will many times result in the need for a diversion.

Mitigating passenger risks associated with alcohol consumption can easily be managed by simply not allowing it at all. If you are going to allow passengers, and many pilots do allow this on larger aircraft where the passengers are in a cabin area behind the pilot and co-pilot seats, there are a few things you can do to minimize risks. Planning shorter legs, keeping passengers to minimum consumption levels, flying at lower flight altitudes, and keeping these passengers away from controls can all be helpful in mitigating the potential risks an alcohol-influenced passenger may present.

## **DELAYS, GET-THERE-IT-IS AND OTHER PASSENGER EXPECTATIONS**

One of the hardest risks to mitigate is keeping passengers' expectations of scheduled flight activities from clouding our own decisions as the pilot-in-command.

If we have set up a flight for fun, to travel on a trip or to get somewhere for business reasons, it can be hard



to critically evaluate things like weather, broken items on an aircraft or our physical fitness for flight. We want to get it done, and many times we push ourselves to "complete the mission."

Ahead of the flight, it is important to set realistic expectations of our own and our aircraft's capabilities for our passengers. We can't fly through every kind of weather, and that means there will be times we have to say "no" to a flight. Having a good fallback plan will alleviate some of the pressures.

Plan to have an in-person meeting with a client? Well, a good idea might be to have a backup date or the ability to set up a Skype meeting if needed. It may not be ideal, but it is better than flying when we shouldn't.

Sometimes passengers don't even realize the pressure they are putting us under. A simple question of, "Are you sure the weather isn't good enough?" can be enough to make a well-meaning pilot who had been questioning the weather decide to "give it a try" when more careful analysis would have resulted in a more conservative approach.

Set realistic expectations for your passengers, and it will help them be less of a distraction to your safety-of-flight decision making.

We don't need to mitigate the risks of passengers by never taking anyone with us. Awareness of some passenger conditions or behaviors can limit any potential negative effects. A little attention, a little briefing and a little management of passengers can reduce many of the risks they pose and generate. **PP**