

Avoiding Distraction

Quit your hashtagging, put down your cellphone, and stop flicking through filters to make the Southern Alps look even prettier than they are. You're flying an aircraft, so that's what your mind needs to be on right now. The text to pick up some milk can wait. Just fly the plane!

An anyone doing any task can get distracted. But the potential for disaster is much greater in aviation. Some major air disasters have resulted from air crew and air traffic controllers being distracted. Sometimes inattention will result in only a cautionary tale, sometimes in a large scale accident investigation. Neither are good. So how do we mitigate the risks of distractions?

What is a Distraction?

Distractions come in different guises.

At the most serious end of the scale, in Madrid in 2008, 154 fatalities resulted from Spanair flight 5022 attempting to take off without the flaps extended. The flight crew were chatting during the checklists.

At the other end of the scale, you could be distracted by passengers pointing out some cute ducks, and crash the helicopter – this actually happened in New Zealand.

Or maybe you have a passenger violently vomiting? The sound and smell of that is going to be hard to push aside when you're trying to concentrate on flying.

Some distractions can't be avoided. A warning signal going off in the cockpit is going to distract you from what you're doing, but it's bringing your attention to something important. Or air traffic control may contact you with important information, distracting you from what you were doing at the time. All aircrew are potentially affected by such legitimate distractions. In 1972, 101 people died in a crash into the Florida Everglades, when the crew of Eastern Air Lines flight 401 got distracted by a faulty light bulb.



It is important to prioritise all the tasks you have on at the time. For example, the ATC call, or the cockpit alarm, may be the most important thing you need to attend to.

Otherwise, remove the distraction wherever possible. Then re-establish your situational awareness. Identify what you were doing; asking yourself at what point you were interrupted; and decide what action will get you back on track.

Always remember the basics of flying: aviate, navigate, and communicate.

When deciding what action to take, have a Plan B should things not go as planned. Keep a lookout for an alternative place to land. If the distraction can't be mitigated, you should get on the ground as soon as you can.

Checklists

If you're going through a checklist at any stage of the flight, be it a preflight or during an engine failure, and you get interrupted or distracted, start again from the beginning.

You might be sure you know where you're up to, but checklists are designed to be followed methodically, so you need to ensure you're not missing any step.

If you or your co-pilot are going through a checklist, or are on the radio, make sure anyone with you knows not to interrupt you unless it's urgent.



While Air Safaris' Matthew Hollands is aware of potential distractions around him, he keeps his focus on flying.

Sterile Cockpit

In commercial aviation, a sterile cockpit environment means the crew doesn't engage in any non-essential activities, including conversations, during critical phases of flight. This is usually from pushback until passing 10,000 ft on climb, and on descent through 10,000 ft all the way through to stopping at the gate.

These same principles can be applied to GA, including recreational flying.

Cameras

In-flight photos and video are spectacular. The views are incredible and it can give you a perspective that you can't get anywhere else. Plus it can record great memories for you and your passengers.

Before the flight, establish agreement with your passengers about the use of cameras. That way everyone knows exactly what's expected and when they can use their camera during the flight without causing distraction. A flash going off in the cockpit could temporarily blind your view – especially if flying at night – so ensure the flash is off before takeoff.

Cellphones

It should be obvious that a phone in the cockpit is a big distraction danger. No matter how hard you try, it's difficult to ignore a ringing phone, or even the chirp of a text message.

Even if you do ignore it, the sound will have potentially broken your train of thought. What important step could you have missed because of such a distraction?

Turn the phone off, or at least put it on silent and out of reach, especially when you're in the most critical stages of flight: preflight, taxi, takeoff, and descent/landing.

Several accidents, some fatal, have occurred when a phone call has been a factor.

But It's Not Just Pilots...

LAMEs have their own issues with distraction. Their work, often very technical, needs concentration. So it's just as important as it is for pilots, for them to turn off their cellphone before embarking on a task. That text message will still be there at the next break, and if voicemail is set up, an important call won't go missing.

The mere awareness of knock-off time approaching can be a distraction, as thoughts turn to post-shift activities and away from the task still to be done.

It's important therefore, that if a task can't be wound up by day's end, go back a few steps the next day, to make sure nothing was missed during that end-of-the-day concentration wander.

And if someone else is taking over the task after the end of the shift, ensure handover notes are detailed enough so any 'non-focus' moves will be picked up. ■