

Therapy, Psychotherapy, and Counseling FAQs for Pilots and ATCS

(Updated 05/27/2026)

Can pilots and ATCS seek therapy?

Yes. Many aviators benefit from therapy at different points in their careers. All are encouraged to seek help early before conditions get severe. Therapy may help with:

- Anxiety or mood symptoms
- Life transitions
- Personal development and resilience
- Relationship challenges
- Stress management

Where do I start?

Pilot Peer Support Programs, your AME, or your primary care provider may recommend someone. When seeking a therapist/counselor, make sure they are licensed with at least a Master's degree. On your first visit, you should provide a copy of "Information for Psychotherapists Treating Pilots and ATCS" to the provider.

Does it matter if my therapist uses the word "psychotherapy," or "counseling"?

No. For FAA purposes, the terms therapy, psychotherapy, and counseling are equivalent.

Must I report to the FAA immediately?

Pilots: No. You are not obliged to report until your next application for medical certificate.

ATCS: Air Traffic controllers must abide by FAA Order 3930.3C 9.e.1-5 and should consult with the appropriate flight surgeon prior to performing any safety-related duties.

Must I ground myself immediately?

It depends. Pilots must abide by 14 CFR § 61.53, which states in part, "no person may act as pilot in command, or in any other capacity as a required pilot flight crewmember, while that person knows or has reason to know of any medical condition that would make the person unable to meet the requirements for the medical certificate necessary for the pilot operation." If the severity of the symptoms is enough to impair concentration, memory, emotional stability, judgment, decision-making, alertness, etc., then yes. Otherwise, no.

What are some examples of the need to immediately self-ground?

Some examples include:

- Losing control with alcohol or the use of mind-altering substances, including misusing medications
- Major depression (low mood combined with difficulty doing day-to-day activities, loss of interest or pleasure in most normal activities, sleep disturbances, etc.)
- Delusions, hallucinations, or paranoia
- Severe anxiety or panic attacks
- Rapid mood changes, difficulty regulating your emotions, or increased sensitivity to stressors or conflicts
- Suicidal thoughts
- Any other mental state or situation that significantly distracts from appropriate in-cockpit functioning, controlling, awareness, or communication

Self-grounding is a professional safety decision and is also viewed as a sign of good insight.

Can pilots and ATCS continue therapy while maintaining FAA medical certification or clearance?

Yes. Psychotherapy is compatible with both an unrestricted medical certificate and special issuance/special consideration. Many pilots and ATCS continue therapy or have the option of resuming therapy while on special issuance or special consideration.

Does speaking with a therapist automatically create a diagnosis?

No. The therapist should make an assessment, which may or may not be a diagnosis. Again, you should provide a copy of 'Information for Psychotherapists Treating Pilots and ATCS' to the provider to assist in this determination.

What if the therapist does make a diagnosis?

Depending on the diagnosis, the current severity of symptoms, and associated risk factors, the AME may issue the medical certificate without further FAA review or defer to the FAA. The FAA will then review the case and issue or consider special issuance or special consideration.

Can I use medication as well as therapy?

Yes. For many conditions, medication with therapy is more effective than either alone. Aviators taking medication will have additional requirements. See "[Use of Antidepressant Medications.](#)"

What must be reported to the FAA regarding therapy or counseling?

All visits to licensed healthcare providers, including psychotherapists and counselors, must be reported on the MedXPress application. Educational counseling and religious counseling, unless the clergy member is also a licensed counselor, need not be reported. Couples counseling need not be reported unless the aviator has been referred for individual therapy. Consultations with EAP may be excluded UNLESS the consultation resulted in a referral for psychiatric evaluation or treatment.

Will the FAA see my therapy records?

Usually not. If documentation is requested, it is usually a brief summary from the therapist.

How does the FAA use information from therapy?

When therapy-related information is reviewed, the FAA focuses on diagnosis, insight, stability, current functioning, and risk factors.

The FAA also looks for insight and transparency from the aviator. These factors help establish that the aviator can responsibly manage their own safety. The aviator should be able to demonstrate the ability to:

- Recognize symptoms
- Seek appropriate help
- Self-assess fitness for duty on a daily basis
- Self-ground when necessary