Fly the Aircraft First

NTSB accident data suggests that pilots who are distracted by less essential tasks can lose control of their aircraft and crash. In light of this pilots are reminded to maintain aircraft control at all times. This may mean a delay in responding to ATC communications and passenger requests, or not responding at all unless positive aircraft control can be maintained throughout. In other words,

Fly the Aircraft First!

It's as Easy as A-N-C

From the earliest days of flight training, pilots are taught an important set of priorities that should follow them through their entire flying career: Aviate, Navigate, and Communicate.

The top priority — *always* — is to aviate. That means fly the airplane by using the flight controls and flight instruments to direct the airplane's attitude, airspeed, and altitude.

Rounding out those top priorities are figuring out where you are and where you're going (Navigate), and, as appropriate, talking to ATC or someone outside the airplane (Communicate). However, it doesn't matter if we're navigating and communicating perfectly if we lose control of the aircraft and crash. A-N-C seems simple to follow, but it's easy to forget when you get busy or distracted in the cockpit.

A famous example of a failure to aviate is the December 1972 crash of Flight 401, an Eastern Airlines Lockheed L-1011. The entire crew was

single-mindedly focused on the malfunction of a landing gear position indicator light. No one was left to keep the plane in the air, as it headed towards a shallow descent into the Florida Everglades. Four professional aviators — any one of whom could have detected the descent — were so focused on a non-critical task that they failed to detect and arrest the descent, resulting in 99 fatalities. They did not follow established aviation priorities — they *failed to fly the aircraft first*.

Disconnect from Distractions

As we can see from the Eastern Airlines example, distractions can be deadly in an emergency situation and can rob your focus from more critical items or tasks.

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Do everything you can to minimize distractions from every source. If you have passengers aboard, set expectations before the flight. Take some time to explain your role and theirs, in addition to the standard seatbelts, exits, and emergency equipment brief. Insist on a sterile cockpit – no conversation that is not directly related to safety of flight during critical times. Give your passengers a job to do such as scanning for traffic or calling out altitudes.

When your workload is increasing, use the autopilot if you have one. A caveat — don't engage altitude hold if you're in significant turbulence. Basic wing leveling is what you want. That way the autopilot won't overstress the airplane or disengage while trying to maintain altitude. Make sure you're proficient in operations with and without autopilot.

Prepare, Plan, and Practice

Staying ahead of the airplane is another good way to stave off distractions. That way, if something comes up during a flight, you'll have more time to assess its impact on safety and determine an appropriate course of action.

⇒ *Prepare*:

- Know your performance numbers and best power-off glide speed for the aircraft and environment you're going to fly in.

- Have a good weather brief and get updates along the route. Have survival gear on board and know how to use it.

⇒ *Plan*:

- Plan and brief each takeoff, approach, and landing to include climb and descent expectations, go/no-go points, and escape routes. File a flight plan and request flight following.

- Plan your route with alternate landing areas in mind, or take a longer route with alternatives for off-airport landings. Keep within gliding distance of suitable landing areas as much as possible.

⇒ *Practice*:

- Practice emergency procedures, short and soft field takeoffs and landings, and power off approaches and landings at your expected mission weight.

- The FAA WINGS Pilot Proficiency Program is a great way to improve your skills and knowledge through on-going training programs, courses, and seminars. Check out the WINGS program at faasafety.gov. And don't forget to seek regular proficiency training with your flight instructor.

Resources

⇒ **FAA Airplane Flying Handbook, Chapter 16, Emergency Procedures**
http://1.usa.gov/2lYzSoN

⇒ **FAA Risk Management Handbook, Chapter 6, Single Pilot Resource Management**
http://1.usa.gov/18ioRba

⇒ **"# Fly Safe, Your Guide to Preventing Loss of Control," March/April 2016** *FAA Safety Briefing*
http://1.usa.gov/2iC71dH

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