

## cover story

## A blip of a day

The right attitude can make the most stressful jobs manageable, writes **Anne Fawcett**.

If you think you're under pressure at work, spare a thought for Rowan Leavold. As an air traffic controller at Sydney Airport, Leavold's responsibility is to guide up to 48 planes an hour (20 during inclement weather) safely onto Kingsford Smith's runways from his desk.

A lapse in concentration could lead to dire consequences. "We have airplanes pointing towards one another and travelling at high speeds and our job is to decide when they make their final approach," the 47-year-old says.

Despite Leavold's 28 years of experience, things don't always go to plan. In one recent incident, a passenger plane instructed to climb to 5000 feet broke altitude. "I don't know why he broke, I had one pilot talking to me, the other wasn't and the planes were heading straight for one another."

Leavold had seconds to avert a mid-air collision. "I had to get one of those planes out of the way but if I turned one too far it could move into the path of another plane. Fortunately I knew one of the aircraft was fairly

manoeuvrable so I got him to turn out of the way." Crisis averted.

Leavold survives nail-biting moments like these by treating the blips on his screen like spaceships on a computer game. "If you start thinking that was close, [that] was 400 people almost gone, you won't last long in the job," he says.

Nor does he reflect on what might have been when he clocks off. Leavold, a black-belt in tae kwon do, trains at least three times a week.

According to the latest figures from the Australian Safety and Compensation Council, the most stressful occupations involve high levels of responsibility for the welfare of others, interaction with extreme circumstances or involvement with victims of extreme circumstances.

Those most likely to lodge a stress-related compensation claim include public transport drivers, police and prison officers, ambulance drivers, nurses, firefighters and teachers.

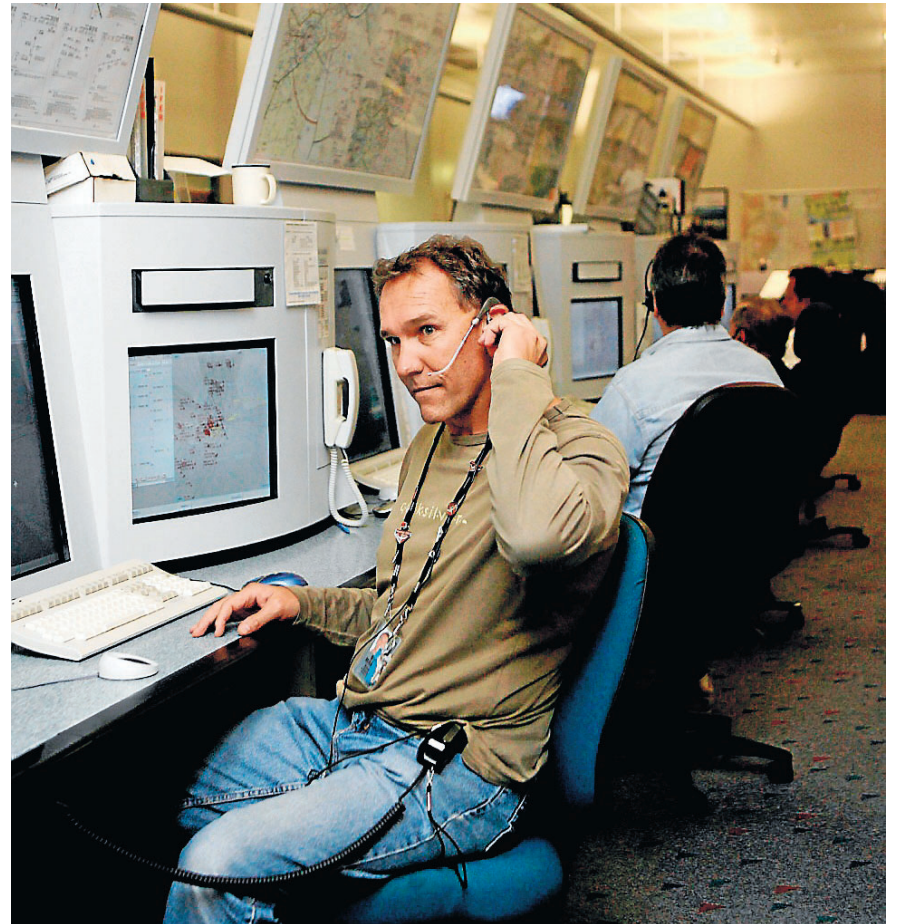
Former police officer Esther McKay agrees that chronic exposure to traumatic events can take its toll on law enforcement

and emergency services personnel. McKay, who documents her own experience with post-traumatic stress disorder in her book *Crime Scene: True Stories From The Life Of A Forensic Investigator*, was medically discharged from the force in 2001. "There was one major incident in which two boys had fallen down the inside of a bridge and died," she says.

The bodies had been decomposing for 18 days before they were discovered, deep in one of the pylons. "It was a difficult crime scene, the smell of the maggot-infested bodies heightened my senses, the encroaching media compounded the stress."

Instead of taking stress leave, McKay continued onto the next job - rescuing victims of the 1989 Newcastle earthquake. "I couldn't stop crying but because there was no education about the symptoms of post traumatic stress I didn't know why I was reacting."

These days McKay runs the Police Post Trauma Support Group. "We educate people to be more aware, to get exercise and engage their support network of family and friends and get



Nail-biting moments ... air traffic controller Rowan Leavold. Photo: Edwina Pickles

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counselling early on. We need police to be able to do their job in a healthy way rather than accepting they will have a breakdown at some point."

The longer you stick in the one workplace, the more stressful your job is likely to become. Figures compiled by the Workplace Research Centre show about 60 per cent of Australian workers who have been in the same job for more than five years feel that their work is becoming more intense. That is, more work is expected for the same amount of pay. This could be because with increased knowledge of an organisation comes increased responsibility.

"We are finding that reports of work overload are common among public servants such as police, teachers and nurses," says Dr Brigid van Wanrooy, author of *Australia At Work: The Benchmark Report*. "This is likely to be a result of growing demands on these services but within an

environment of limited resources."

Those who successfully deal with high-stress moments on a daily basis credit training and teamwork for their success.

Transplant surgeon Brendan Ryan relies on his medical team for support. "The most stressful thing we do in terms of surgery is transplant an organ from a live donor, such as the spouse or child of the recipient," says Ryan, 38. "You have a perfectly healthy donor who is having a potentially life-threatening operation to save someone else's life, so there is a lot of emotion and a lot at stake."

Ryan copes by focusing on the technical aspects of the task. "We don't stand there thinking, 'Oh my God, mum's kidney has gone blue and is about to bite the dust.' We're ready to initiate back-up measures and work through it systematically. I'm fortunate that I don't have to go through those moments alone."

## know your limitations

High-pressure jobs are best suited to people who are comfortable with their limitations, says organisational psychologist Christopher Shen.

"They are able to concede their limitations and weaknesses without feeling a sense of regret," he says. "That temperament enables them to identify and monitor emotions and remain composed in times of stress."

Shen, who works with military and law enforcement personnel, says there are steps we can take to cope with those high-pressure moments:

Remind yourself a stressful event is finite and

perform a ritual at the start and end of the event.

"For example, a firefighter might touch a particular banister with their right hand on their way to the truck, then touch that same banister with their left hand to switch off when they return from the job. That triggers a relaxed psychological state."

Schedule pleasurable events such as a massage or walk after work.

Stay fit. "A high level of physical fitness is correlated with a better response to stress. It takes energy to be vigilant for long periods of time, so rigorous exercise helps," he says.

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