Pilots are often put in situations where their personal minimums are tested. It is all too tempting to be coerced into pushing those minimums even though they know the associated risks and dangers with doing so. It’s not uncommon for pilots to face such challenges especially towards the end of a mission when external pressures can be the highest. Luckily, one of the greatest tools to prevent this situation is easily within reach.

Hopefully everyone has a set of personal minimums already but if not, here are some basic starting guidelines. Think about your experience as a pilot and based on that information, come up with a set of realistic minimums that you feel comfortable with. We should include minimums for us as pilots, for our aircraft, and for the environment. Personal minimums should help a pilot make decisions based on abilities, not external pressures. It is important to remember that these minimums are something you must feel comfortable with.

This first step should not be taken during a flight or when you are trying to make a go-no go decision. Your personal minimums should be developed prior to that flight and then used as a measuring tool to help you determine if today is a good day to fly or not. The card created by the USHST is designed as a quick reference guide for you to keep alongside your pilot certificate. By writing your personal minimums down on paper they are more than just an idea or “ballpark” figure, they become hard numbers, which cannot be ignored.

After the creation of your personal minimums, you will continue flying and using those minimums for your decisions both before and in flight. As you gain experience and fly closer to your minimums you will start to feel more confident and comfortable. Often this experience closer to your minimums is best achieved by flying with a more experienced pilot or flight instructor. It is also important to always leave yourself a good escape strategy (an OUT!) for times when you fly in less than ideal conditions.

If your personal minimum is three statue miles of visibility and today the visibility is one statue mile, you likely would not fly. However, it is a perfect opportunity to find a mentor or more experienced pilot to go out with you and help you obtain more proficiency and reduce your minimums.

If another pilot is not an option, you could take off on a day the visibility is three statue miles and stay around the airport to give you a good escape option if you become uncomfortable. After a test flight like this, it is a good time to re-evaluate your minimums.

Re-evaluation should never occur prior to or during a flight. The pressures your may feel to complete or take these flights can have a great effect on decision-making abilities. By making these changes with no added pressure, you will use the clearest mind and have the greatest chance for success.

Establishing a list of personal minimums will be different for every pilot and should not be dictated by regulatory or OEM minimums. A great mentor once explained that our goal should be to eventually work our minimums down to company minimums. This mindset offers a goal and it allows a pilot the chance to build experience at his or her own pace and to adjust the minimums when needed.

When deciding if the best choice is to take a flight or cancel, to continue or to land, our personal minimums can help us decide the best course of action in a logical and methodical way. Using these important sets of numbers will help pilots make the right decisions when lives are on the line and ensure the safe and successful outcomes of their missions.