
Conquer Your Fear of Flying -- for Good

Is your fear of flying keeping you grounded? Experts have tips to make flying the friendly skies less scary.

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Are you anxious about getting on a plane these days? You're not alone but, say both mental health and aviation experts, a little knowledge will go a long way towards calming those fears of flying.

With Sept. 11 images etched in our memories, travelers have terrorists on their minds, says David G. Myers, PhD, a social psychologist at Hope College in Holland, Mich., and author of *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*. "I'm going Greyhound rather than fly to California," Myers' cousin told him. "Al Qaeda's not so likely to target a bus." Others, also fearing the worst, says Myers, elect to drive rather than fly.

But these fears are often out of sync with the facts, Myers says, pointing out that the National Safety Council reports that in the last half of the 1990s, Americans were, mile for mile, 37 times more likely to die in a vehicle crash than on a commercial flight. In 2001, Myers calculated that if -- because of Sept. 11 -- we flew 20% less, and instead drove half those unflown miles, about 800 more people would die in traffic accidents in the next year. In fact, says Myers, a German psychologist by the name of Gerd Gigerenzer did indeed find that in the last three months of 2001, there were 350 more U.S. traffic fatalities than the average for those months in the previous five years.

"Flying may be scary, but driving the same distance should be many times scarier," says Myers.

Captain Ron Nielsen, an America West pilot based in Phoenix, who also teaches classes to fearful flyers both in person, and soon through teleclasses and a DVD, also stresses that flying is our safest mode of transportation.

Coping With Your Fear of Flying

Most people who are afraid of flying are most anxious about take-offs, turbulence, and aborted landings, says Nielsen, who advises a three-step approach to coping with a fear of flying:

1. **Educate yourself.** When we don't have enough information, we project what we do know on to what we don't know, says Nielsen. "We tend to assume that because we know how to drive a car, we know what is happening in a plane." For most of us, that's just not true. That doesn't mean you need to learn to fly, but it will help to learn how an aircraft is constructed, how it actually takes off, stays in the air, and lands, and how much training is required of the pilot. "One of the reasons flying is as safe as it is, is because of all the regulations and monitoring," says Nielsen.
2. **Distract yourself.** Nielsen, who developed *Chicken Soup for the Soul Presents the Fearless Flightkit: The Remedy for the Fearful Flyer*, created a flight CD that uses a combination of prose, poetry, and music to distract listeners. You can create your own CD to be used just for flights, or bring along a favorite musical CD or audiobook.
3. **Share your fears.** "Don't keep your fear of flying a secret," says Nielsen. A fear of flying is often a fear of embarrassment, perhaps that you're going to lose control of your emotions on the plane. "Don't suffer in silence." Of course, it's probably wise to use some discretion about whom you share your fears with. "You don't want someone who's going to slap you and tell you to get over it," Nielsen says. "That just won't do it."

Next: New Approaches to Conquering Phobias

John McGrail, C.Ht, a clinical hypnotherapist and former airline pilot himself, gives his clients a simple relaxation exercise to alleviate their discomfort on a plane. To calm preflight jitters, he says, close your eyes and take slow, deep breaths while visualizing a smooth, safe flight. Sometimes replaying an easy flight from the past can be a perfect image, McGrail says. For any subsequent jitters, just repeat the exercise. "The more one does it, the more effective it is," says McGrail.

New Approaches to Conquering Phobias

If your fear is more deep-seated, to the point where you avoid flying at all costs, hypnotherapy is an effective tool. It works by re-sensitizing your response to an environmental trigger in order to bring about a different behavioral response -- in this case, instead of panic, one of calm and confidence. Hypnotherapy can often work in as little as two or three sessions, and once treated, the fear of flying usually won't come back, McGrail says.

Several new "power therapies" are also effective in helping people to quickly overcome phobias, including the fear of flying, says Daphne Stevens, PhD, LCSW. Thought field therapy, for example, uses the systematic tapping of acupuncture points, and is effective in reducing fear and anxiety. This therapy uses key points, in specific sequences, to eliminate negative thought from the mind and the body's energy system. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is an approach that uses directed eye movements to desensitize fears and traumatic memories.

Find a therapist who is specifically trained in one of these techniques, and try a couple of sessions prior to your flight, says Stevens.

If you're truly fearful of flying and need to make quick plans for a flight -- perhaps for a death in the family -- Stevens suggests asking your doctor for an anti-anxiety medication. It won't help resolve the fear in the long run, she says, but it might help you out in a pinch.

Lisa Lazarczyk has found that using the complementary treatment of Rescue Remedy, a Bach Flower Essence, has helped her cope with her fear of flying, while medical writer Denise Mann found that with a note from her physician, she can now bring along her dog, Trixie, to sit on her lap as an emotional support companion. "Pets are very calming," says Mann.

Nancy P. Hemenway found help for her fear of flying at the Center for Travel Anxiety in Bethesda, Md. The tips she learned allowed her to board a plane to pick up her youngest daughter in China, as well as to fly on business trips as the executive director of the InterNational Council on Infertility Information Dissemination.

The chance of something happening on the day you're flying - and on the plane you're flying on -- is very small, says Jean Ratner, director of the Center for Travel Anxiety, and a former fearful flyer herself. For many fearful flyers, however, telling themselves that is not enough. "Even though there hasn't been a major airline accident in three years," says Ratner, "many people suffer from an anxiety that is not at a rational level."

Next: Fear of Flying Tips

Fear of Flying Tips

If your fear of flying is related only to flying, rather than a generalized anxiety, Ratner endorses finding a fear of flying program that will address each of your specific concerns. If your anxiety is more generalized, then look for a therapist who can teach you how to pull out of your panic by changing your thought processes. "Thought-stopping is a mental exercise that can be practiced in

everyday life," says Ratner. "But you have to practice it ahead of time. Don't wait until you're panicking to start."

Finally, whether or not you're fearful of flying, most of us are more anxious when traveling now simply because of the added stress of long lines, security checks, etc. The American University Counseling Center in Washington, offers these suggestions for coping with travel anxiety:

- Plan ahead to avoid last-minute panic. Leave time to pack, make arrangements in advance for pet care, mail suspension, etc. Check that you have your ticket, wallet/bag, and passport before you leave the house.
- Get to the airport in plenty of time to check in, find your gate, clear security, etc.
- Don't pack anything that might not clear security. Be sure medications are labeled and bring a copy of your prescriptions.
- Don't "check" anything you can't do without if your flight is delayed or your luggage is lost, such as eyeglasses and medications.
- Select an aisle seat or emergency row seat to allow freedom of movement.
- Call the airport ahead of time to be sure your flight is on time.
- Let the flight attendants know you are a fearful flier, so they will check in on you periodically.
- Cut back on sugar and caffeine before and during your trip. They will exacerbate your anxiety.
- On long trips in enclosed spaces, or trips to a different time zone, drink plenty of water to help your body adjust (be sure you have access to bathroom facilities along the way).
- Exercise whatever control over your environment you can (i.e., fiddle with the fan above you).
- If you notice yourself thinking of everything that could go wrong, tell yourself, "Stop!" Then focus on more positive and realistic thoughts, such as, "Everything is going well. I can see other people are quite calm. I have fun things I can do right now (such as eat a treat, read a book, or listen to music)."
- And finally, remember what the experts have to say -- air travel is by far the safest form of travel.

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SOURCES: David G. Myers, PhD. John Dirk Werkman, professor of psychology, Hope College, Holland, Mich. Ron Nielsen, captain, America West Airlines, Phoenix. John McGrail, C.Ht, clinical hypnotherapist, Los Angeles. Daphne Stevens, PhD, LCSW, Macon, GA. Nancy Hemenway, executive director, INCIID. Jean Ratner, director, Center for Travel Anxiety, Bethesda and Kensington, Md. Lisa Lazarczyk, Warner Communications. Denise Mann, freelance writer, "Do You Have Travel Anxiety." American University Counseling Center.