



Fear of Flying

The September 11 terrorist attacks on America have taken fear of flying to a new level. Those who already had a phobia about flying now have a new reason to be frightened. People, who were apprehensive, but still able to fly, are now more afraid and may feel full-blown terror about getting on an airplane. And even normally blasé flyers now may have mixed feelings about air travel.

But even after such a catastrophe, fear of flying can be overcome through treatment. A phobia is more than just an exaggerated version of fear. Fears serve a useful purpose: They make us cautious in situations where danger is present. A phobia is an irrational fear of a specific thing or situation. This fear is far greater than the actual threat the feared object poses, and people with phobias usually realize that their fear is excessive. Still, they avoid their phobic objects whenever they can. If they have to face their phobias, they do so with great distress.

Fear of flying is fairly common:

- About 30 percent of people have anxiety about flying, one study found.
- More women than men report a fear of flying, but this may be because men are more reluctant to admit to being afraid of something.

It's far less common for people to develop a full-blown flying phobia. We do know that:

- The likelihood of developing a phobia peaks during childhood, and then again at about age 25
- Phobias tend to run in families, although it's unclear whether there's some genetic component to phobias or whether children learn fearful behavior from phobic parents

In order for a fear to be considered and diagnosed as a phobia, it has to have a serious impact on a person's life. Television football announcer John Madden is a good example. To avoid flying, he got his own bus to take him from game to game. But most of us can't afford to buy a bus or hire a professional driver and a limo. Instead, we visit the airport restroom several times, maybe have a belt or two at the bar, grit our teeth and get on the plane.

Flying and airplanes are ideal catalysts for phobic reactions. This is because the ordeal has a lot of clear-cut elements that are easily noticeable. And the more there is to notice, the more triggers there are to remind us how afraid we feel. For example:

- Airplanes are crowded: seatmates, cramped aisles, the ever-present serving cart – all of them contribute to your feeling of being trapped.
- The door is locked and sealed so you can't ask the driver to pull over and let you out.
- When the jets start, you know it. You hear them winding up and getting louder.
- The feeling of acceleration and lift-off, the awareness of unnatural speed and of being aloft, the pressurizing of the cabin – all are unique sensations.
- And, if you can endure all of this, you still have to deal with landing.

Fortunately, these very triggers can serve as focused targets for treatment.

There are several theories about how a fear of flying develops. One theory suggests that a bad experience, somehow related to flying, might be the origin of the fear: Maybe you were on a plane that experienced severe turbulence, or had a haunting nightmare about a plane crash. The bad feelings generated by that experience become associated with things like the sound of the engines or the feeling of taking off. These associations turn into triggers that spark the same bad feelings over and over.

Another theory says that we learn fear from others. Because a parent or a sibling seems afraid or upset, we naturally pick up on their feelings. Pretty soon, we no longer need anyone else. Just by being in the situation, we become upset.

A third theory speculates that some people develop a fear of flying simply because they have the wrong information about how safe it is. Eventually, they genuinely begin to believe that something bad is bound to happen to them while they're in the air.

That fear will be more difficult to overcome in light of the September 11 hijackings, but flying remains statistically safer than traveling by car. Also, consider the heightened security measures that are now in place at airports across the globe. As further evidence, consider the millions of flights that safely reach their destinations.

Symptoms:

The most important indication that a phobia is present is an avoidance of the feared object or situation. If it can't be totally avoided, it's tolerated poorly, with extreme anxiety, discomfort and distress.

Specifically, symptoms of flying phobias include:

- An intense, ongoing fear that is out of proportion to the actual dangers of flying
- A rapid onset of this fear every time the person flies or, for some, when they simply think about flying
- Recognition by the sufferer that the fear is excessive
- Serious anxiety while flying or use of drugs to endure flying
- In some cases, the fear causes a panic attack immediately before, during or after a flight
- Avoiding flying even if there are significant consequences (missing a loved one's graduation or wedding)

Treatment:

Since the terrorist attacks on America, experts say air travelers can expect to be anxious and worried about flying. The key to coping with these feelings is to accept them and try and prevent worries from escalating into obsessions about the worst-case scenario.

- Remind yourself that hijackings are extremely rare (that's why it's such big news)
- Reassure yourself, and talk to people about why the probability of something catastrophic happening while you are flying is low

Fears of specific things or situations are among the most successfully treated problems in psychology. Although you'll probably always be a little tense when you board an aircraft, treatment can turn a debilitating fear into a tolerable nuisance.

The core element that therapists use when they treat fear of flying is – as counterproductive as it may seem – exposure to flying. Exposure can take several forms:

Graded Exposure

Also called graded in-vivo exposure, this therapy has two stages that are completed under a therapist's care:

1. Rank all the aspects of flying that bother you, from the least to the most scary
2. Try to get yourself to do each of these things, starting with the least scary and progressing to the most scary. For example:
 - Call the airline for flight information, every day for a week
 - Drive to the airport, and then go home
 - Drive to the airport, park and watch planes lift off and land, over and over and over again
 - Sit at the gate, along with other passengers waiting to board, as long as you can (at least 30 minutes), then go home
 - Take a short flight

Intense Exposure

Also called intense in-vivo exposure, this treatment calls for you to rank your fears, but to then skip the easy stuff (gradually confronting each level) and go directly to the thing that scares you the most. You repeatedly expose yourself to this scariest level until the fear is tolerable or disappears.

Either kind of in-vivo exposure is probably the quickest way to treat most phobias, but it can be a little impractical for flying fears – unless you happen to have a plane at your disposal to practice on.

Imagination Exposure

In imagination exposure, you still expose yourself to all the scary parts of flying – but you do it in your mind. Since most of us can't imagine an experience with all the detail and clarity of actually being there, this treatment takes a little longer. But it still works.

As with in-vivo exposure, you begin imagination exposure by making a list of all the steps involved in flying, and then imagine yourself doing each step. All the sights (baggage handlers loading luggage into the plane), smells (dry-roasted peanuts in a foil bag) and sounds ("Excuse me, you're in my seat") should be imagined in order to make the experience feel as real as possible. This is done numerous times over several days, so that gradually the elements that trigger your fear no longer bother you as much.

Auxiliary treatments used in conjunction with exposure can make the experience more bearable. They include relaxation and drug therapy.

Exposure Plus Relaxation

All of the treatments mentioned above can be supplemented with deep muscle relaxation to relieve some of the stress and anxiety of exposure, whether real or imagined. Relaxation training isn't so simple; it requires quite a bit of practice. After you've mastered relaxation, you combine this technique with one of the exposure methods, and finally, there you are: in a plane, relaxing to some extent and ready to face flying.

Flight School

Some airlines are so interested in gaining your business that they offer classes for people who are afraid to fly. Some use mechanized flight simulators to expose you to the sensations of flying. Call the major airlines to see which ones offer classes near you.

Medication

For those people who don't fly often enough to consider a multi-week behavioral treatment a reasonable solution, anti-anxiety drugs might do the trick. Used properly, some people find them very effective.

Frequently Asked Questions:

I've never been afraid to fly, but ever since the attack on the World Trade Center, even the sight and sound of a plane flying overhead makes me jittery. I'm supposed to fly next month. For the first time in my life, I'm scared of flying.

Your feelings are normal, especially because the terrorists' attack has been the subject of so much news coverage. It's a constant reminder of the tragedy that befell passengers aboard those four airplanes.

But take heart in knowing that people who worry about flying usually do well after they're airborne. When worries escalate into debilitating fear, it's usually because people have made two mistakes: They overestimate the probability of something bad happening and begin to "catastrophize" it. This is true if the person is preoccupied with being hijacked, crashing or having a panic attack on the plane. Talking to people who are unafraid to fly is one way to put your fears into perspective.

I've been a comfortable flyer for a long time. But not long ago, I was on a horrible flight – tremendous turbulence and objects flying all over the place. Since then, I've been too afraid to fly. How did 30 years' experience get wiped out in 30 minutes of turbulence?

People's behavior seems to be determined by what they most recently learned. Your most recent flying experience taught you that flying is scary. But you can unlearn this new fear by flying again. Once you experience a few uneventful flights, you'll probably get over your fear.

My daughter has a lot of fears: dogs, the ocean, and loud noises. Recently she decided that she's afraid of flying. Are some people just fear-prone?

We know that some people have a low fear tolerance. It's a lot like a low pain tolerance. For these people, a little bit of anxiety is pretty unbearable. Your daughter may have a low fear tolerance, which might make her seem fear-prone.

If I have an urge to stay away from planes, why should I be forced to fly? Why shouldn't I just obey my instincts?

Avoiding the situation is a perfectly valid thing to do – if you don't mind continuing to be afraid, and you never need to fly.

But confronting fearful situations like flying by imagining or actually exposing yourself to the experience of taking a flight is the only way you'll be able to **get over** your fear. If you were afraid last time you flew, you'll continue to be afraid until and unless you decide to do something about it. When you expose yourself over and over again to each step of flying, your fears become more manageable. Exposure is like practicing: The more you do it, the better you get at it. In this case, you gradually get better at not being afraid.

I hate to fly, but I swear I'm not afraid of crashing. I'm just afraid that I'll feel so cooped up that I'll lose control, faint, scream or make a scene and humiliate myself. Is this really a flying phobia, or is it claustrophobia?

If you really don't fear crashing, then the symptoms you describe sound like panic disorder. Some people get panic attacks when they feel cooped up and they fear embarrassing themselves by losing control. And yet, if you ask them if they ever actually lost control and made a scene, almost all will tell you that they never did, even those who felt claustrophobic.
