

Fear of Flying



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It's true: I have a fear of flying, and until a few years ago, I was a mess on aeroplanes. My anxiety would begin from the moment I booked a flight, even if it was months in advance, and would escalate in the terminal waiting to board, before peaking once on the flight. The finality of the doors closing rendering escape impossible, and the sound of the engines revving pushed me to the edges of panic.

I wanted to learn skills to manage this in order to practice what I preached, so with this along with the desire to make flights more bearable in mind, I set about implementing what I had learnt in my training over a period of the next year or two. Now, I can take a flight with only a small amount of anxiety and there are certainly no tears or weeks of worry in advance of the flight anymore. Here's a summary of some key tips based on what helped me, but if you do have a true phobia of flying (see your GP as a starting point if you're not sure), I highly recommend you seek professional support to expand on this and implement these safely.

- Expose yourself to flying frequently. Whilst it is natural to desperately want to avoid something you fear, avoidance keeps our anxiety going for two reasons. One is because we don't get to disprove to ourselves that the thing we fear (such as the plane crashing) would never eventuate. The second reason is that your body doesn't get a chance to *habituate* (get used to) the anxiety-provoking situation. Your body cannot physically sustain a very high level of anxiety for long periods of time, so if you expose yourself to flying often enough, and for long enough flights, without doing things that artificially escalate your anxiety (such as going over catastrophic thoughts repeatedly in your mind), your anxiety will naturally start to come down on its own, without you doing anything!
- Work your way up to this slowly. This is known as *graded exposure*. You might like to start with something that causes you some anxiety but at a much more manageable level. I drove to the airport on numerous occasions with my husband for example, and watched planes take off and land safely. This helped me see how often planes were flying, and how routine and safe it was. Even now, when I'm in a plane and it's coming in to land, I remember how safe it looked watching them come in whilst standing on the ground. Following these visits to the runway, I began imagining myself being on those planes, and then spent some time in waiting rooms. Another step could be to take a trip in a flight simulator. As you can see, each step gets you closer and closer to being on an actual plane.
- Each time you expose yourself to an anxiety-provoking situation, stay in that situation until your anxiety comes down substantially. If you leave at the peak of your anxiety, it will just

serve to reinforce your fears. You need to leave on a 'good note', so that your anxiety is the same or lower next time you enter the situation. To do this, you will need to make sure each scenario you expose yourself to is one that provokes some anxiety but is not overwhelming. This can be tricky with flying. It took me some time to discover that I was making my fear worse by taking repeated domestic flights, which just weren't long enough for my anxiety to increase, peak, and then decrease. We would land while my anxiety was still sky high and I'd experience a huge sense of relief, which just served to increase my desire to avoid flying! I made massive progress in my fear of flying when I took a trip to Australia, which was long enough for my anxiety to come down before landing. You also need to try and fly often enough that you maintain this progress.

- For this to be effective, you'll need to properly expose yourself to the situation and to the feeling of anxiety itself. This means not engaging in deliberate attempts to distract yourself, for example by reading a book, talking to others just to take your mind off things, or drinking alcohol.
- Pair flying with something positive, that you really enjoy. For me, this was the in-flight food and movies on my trip to Australia. I kind of looked forward to part of the flight even though I was anxious.
- Stop trying to reassure yourself by doing things like researching. I used to research incessantly about how planes stayed in the air. Finding out that it's actually very cold up there just led to more fears about the plane freezing over (for example). And, a little knowledge is dangerous. I read about things I hadn't thought of that could go wrong without properly understanding the mechanics of how a plane stays in the air. It does nothing to help your anxiety. Plus, you'll know from experience that people telling you about how safe planes are and how they operate doesn't make you feel any less worried anyway.
- Don't look around the plane to 'check' things – for example, whether everything is in tact, and whether everyone else is suitably calm. This will invariably lead to you noticing things like a piece of plane flapping about, some duct tape that seems very inappropriate for a commercial airliner, or in my case, a passenger across the aisle from you crossing his chest and saying his last rites before take off. Obviously, these things don't help your anxiety. Please don't worry either that *not* looking for these things will mean you miss something important – I can assure you that the airlines operated just fine without my routine 'flapping object' / duct tape checks.
- Stop stressing and thinking about flying in the lead up. The way I did this was realising that I was trying to get rid of any nervousness in preparation for the flight, and in doing so I was spending a lot of time fighting it and battling it; essentially giving it a whole lot of attention and escalating it! I adopted an approach of complete and utter acceptance that I would feel some anxiety and once I did this and let it be there I stopped struggling. It made me question why I felt I had to get rid of it in the first place! There was nothing wrong with feeling a bit anxious, and it's not like I felt any LESS anxious by trying to control it. Once I changed this I didn't spend nearly as much time getting worked up in advance, even though the nerves were there when the thought of the flight popped into my mind. It is okay to feel anxious; it won't harm you. Note that if you experience or are afraid of panic attacks, they are also not harmful, but I suggest you do seek professional help to rule out medical conditions and to treat these properly. They are extremely responsive to psychological interventions.

- You could also try adopting an approach of complete and utter acceptance that the flying of the plane is totally out of your control. I told myself there was absolutely nothing I could do about it once on the plane, and in fact I should enjoy being completely looked after by expert pilots, and a team of air stewards and stewardesses whose job it was to make sure we were safe and happy. This was sometimes successful though it was one of the harder mindsets to adopt. Relinquishing control is challenging.
- Try some mindfulness techniques. I didn't try and get rid of my anxiety, but sometimes I found it nice to use some relaxation techniques to temporarily take the edge off it at the peak moments and give myself a bit of distance from it. It's important this doesn't turn into another battle trying to get rid of it though. One I liked best was trying to imagine my anxiety as a colour. I'd spend a long time working out which colour it best suited. This already moved my anxiety to a more external form and helped me focus and play with my anxiety rather than trying to battle it. I would then imagine it morphing into a shape, such as a cloud, and drifting around in the sky. See below for some more brief ideas for what is effectively "mindfulness" of anxiety.
- Finally, it may help to look at what else is going on in your life, especially if you used to be okay with flying (like me) but you then developed a fear over time. If you've experienced numerous changes in your life, or heightened levels of stress, addressing these may help increase your ability to tolerate these anxiety provoking situations.

Summary / Key strategies:

- * Stop avoiding flying. Regular graded exposure is important.
- * Take longer, more frequent trips so your anxiety has enough time to come down.
- * Work your way up in manageable steps – you need some anxiety but not to be overwhelmed.
- * Find positive associations with flying
- * Don't seek reassurance – don't research – don't 'check' the plane for faults
- * Accept that you will feel some anxiety and that's okay
- * Don't try to get rid of your anxiety, there's no need, and you will just make it worse
- * Use mindfulness techniques to create some distance from your anxiety
- * Review and attend to any other stressors in your life that may be depleting your ability to tolerate anxiety