

Fear of Flying: The Reasons Why and How to Overcome It

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This article is not about Erica Jong's popular novel from the 1970's, but quite literally focuses on travelers who may be fearful of taking an aircraft to their next destination. I have been on several flights where certain circumstances that may have added to the anxiety of white-knuckle flyers during the course of the trip. Back in the 1960s, I took a flight from Honolulu to Los Angeles in which one of the engines caught fire over the Pacific. I've also encountered a few instances where aircraft had to abort landing during the approach due to another aircraft being on the runway. When I was growing up my father traveled frequently for his business. Back in the early 60s, we lived in Pennsylvania. Once, when he was traveling from Cincinnati to Harrisburg, he was so tired, he decided to get off the plane and stay in Pittsburgh. That same plane took off from Pittsburgh and crashed into a mountain during a storm. There were no survivors. The look on my mother's face when he arrived home safely the next day was something that I will never forget. The point being, as with any life activity; there is always some chance of an accident. For many people who are fearful of flying, it is somewhat difficult to put that in perspective. Several studies have found that worldwide up to 40 percent of people have some degree of anxiety about flying, with approximately 6.5% of Americans being so fearful that they simply refuse to fly. There are 25 million people who prefer not to fly.

As is quite often the case when flying, everything is basically out of my control. I feel much more in control when I'm driving my car even though flying is supposedly much safer than driving a car... 29 times more so, according to the Department of Transportation. Some people's anxiety about flying (including my own at times) is usually due to what might happen as opposed to what really is happening. Some basic fears include fear of heights, being enclosed in a large tin can with a lot of people, not understanding the sounds of an airplane, unexpected turbulence, and dependency on the judgment of a pilot. In a car I can always roll down the window for fresh air or even pull over to the side of the road. No such luck at 40,000 feet.

For a clinical psychology perspective, I found some interesting information about this topic on <http://www.guidetopsychology.com> . The site is written and managed by Raymond Lloyd Richmond, Ph.D. in the Bay Area. He identifies three major reasons why people may be fearful of flying:

- A lack of information about basic aviation procedures
- A psychological trauma resulting from aircraft incident or accident
- A transference of interpersonal conflict to the experience of flying

With respect to the first reason, there are schools and workshops that address aviation procedures for those concerned about what a plane actually has to do during flight. Some of the topics would include why an aircraft turns, sounds that you might experience onboard an aircraft (made by a flaps, engines, landing gear), the basics of understanding turbulence (when and when it is not dangerous).

The second reason would be related to an experience in which some sort of trauma occurred, such as an accident or a close call of some kind. Resolution to trauma is usually reached through treatment in the form of one-on-one sessions with a psychologist and/or medication. I am not certain that all of the people who are seen in airport bars drinking before a flight have all been subject to some trauma. However, the alcohol may help “medicate” the anticipation of flying for some people.

The transference of interpersonal conflict refers to a fearful flyer harboring unresolved feelings about another conflict before they get on the plane that manifest as a fear of flying. This is something I never really thought about, but from a psychologist’s perspective, this is another possibility. Feelings associated with being emotionally angry or hurt can apparently be redirected and cause aviophobia (fear of flying). Those reluctant flyers associated with this third reason may benefit from counseling if symptoms continue.

For those interested, here are a wide range of resources and clinics that address this topic:

- The Fear of Flying Clinic <http://www.fearofflyingclinic.org/index.html>. Located in Washington State, the site maps out a course that lasts two weekends for \$400. A flight on a commercial plane is an additional cost. The school is non-profit and is staffed by a behavioral counselor and volunteers from the FAA and airline personnel.
- Fear of Flying Help Course <http://www.fearofflyinghelp.com/>. This free online course appears to be free and conducted by an airline captain (currently employed, but airline not identified). His name is Captain Chance.
- Virgin Atlantic Airways offers their English version at <http://www.flyingwithoutfear.info/>
- Takeoff Today <http://fearofflyingphobia.com/>. Someone who had a fear of flying created this site and offers links to interesting articles on the subject. A free program is also featured on the site.
- Fear of Flying Clinic <http://www.fofc.com/about.htm>. A commuter pilot, NASA aviation safety analyst and a flight instructor deliver this course at San Francisco International Airport.
- MySky <http://www.myskyprogram.com/> is located in Minneapolis and delivered by two psychologists and two commercial airline pilots. Their fees are in the high \$900 range for a two and a half day seminar.

On a final note; based on my research there may be various sources for this anxiety. Some may have nothing to do with flying. The next time that you experience the fear of flying on an aircraft, reflect on what is really happening as opposed to what could happen. It could be helpful to reflect on the events of the day or days prior to getting on the flight. Also, please explore the resource above for a wide variety of helpful advice.