

8 Steps to Overcoming Your Fear of Flying*

Martin N. Seif, Ph.D.

Ron Doctor, Ph.D.

1. Latch on to triggers that set you off.

Fear of flying is not a single phobia. People who are afraid are often afraid of different things. Some are claustrophobic, some fear turbulence. Others fear terrorism, social humiliation, mechanical failure, or crashing. Some distrust the pilots. Figure out what frightens you (it doesn't have to be just one) and examine how your anxiety reaction is triggered. Triggers initiate fear, which quickly become intense because of a rapid interplay between scary images and thoughts and the presence of the trigger. You may not be aware of this because you do not become conscious of the process until you are terrified...it is that rapid. Your first goal is to identify your particular triggers, so you can eventually manage your fear when your anxiety levels are low. Learning what sets you off makes it easier to turn it off.

2. Step into the airplane with knowledge.

When you are dealing with anxiety, ignorance is not bliss. In fact, the opposite is true- anxiety thrives on lack of understanding. To combat this, learn about the airline industry, how pilots are trained, turbulence, and anything else that frightens you. Our anxieties are fed by "what if?" catastrophic thoughts. When you don't know about a subject, you make up scenarios based on your imagination, and these horrific thoughts are limited only by your creativity. Once you become knowledgeable, the "what if?" thoughts you have will be limited by the facts. Become familiar with the facts. They will not eliminate your anxiety but will help to keep it more manageable.

3. Anticipate your anticipatory anxiety.

Be prepared to be anxious. Anticipatory anxiety is the anxiety we experience in preparation or before we do something we fear. It is often the most intense anxiety you will experience prior to your flight. Anticipatory anxiety increases with your indecision (e.g., should I take the flight or not?) and starts to level off when you commit yourself to an action. Here are two facts you should keep in mind: first, anticipatory anxiety is not an accurate predictor of how you will feel on the flight. Ninety-five percent of the time, anticipatory anxiety is far greater than the anxiety you actually experience. Second,

anticipatory anxiety can be calmed with rhythmic diaphragmatic breathing. But it is persistent and it is unrealistic to expect it not to be there.

4. Separate fear from danger.

Your task is to break your connection between anxiety and danger. Anxiety has all the sensations of being in danger, but the trigger for anxiety is not an extreme threat. It is a series of threatening images in your mind. It is often difficult to separate anxiety from danger because your body reacts in exactly the same way to both. It is your anxiety that makes you feel like you are unsafe, even though you are actually safe. You must label your fear as anxiety. Tell yourself that anxiety makes your frightening thoughts feel like they have a high probability of occurring. Remind yourself that feeling anxious doesn't mean you are in danger. You can actually be safe even when feeling intense anxiety.

5. Recognize that common sense makes no sense.

Part A: Anxiety tricks common sense.

Common sense tells us that the best course is to use our gut feelings to guide our actions. But this is not always true, and it is never true when dealing with the fear of flying. Anxiety is an excellent trickster and bluffer, and it will tell you that you are in danger when you are perfectly safe. Anxiety is reinforced by avoidance. Your gut feelings from anxiety will always tell you to avoid, and- if you follow your gut feelings- you will always be strengthening your anxiety.

Part B: You can outsmart anxiety.

You need to learn not to follow what anxiety tells you to do. As a rule, aim to do the opposite of what your anxious feelings are telling you to do. Be paradoxical. Do the opposite of what anxiety wants you to do. Fight what anxiety is telling you to do, but embrace the feelings (and that means discomfort) that anxiety engenders. If your anxiety is telling you to stay in your seat and grip the armrests, then open your hands, get up, and certainly move around (even if just in your seat). If you feel so anxious you need to walk around, try to stay in your seat. Outsmart anxiety by taking a paradoxical approach.

6. Smooth over things that go bump in the flight.

Airplanes do not always fly smoothly. Learn about “chop,” turbulence, noise abatement maneuvers, and the movements, sounds, and sensations they produce. Understand how the aircraft is designed to cope with turbulent stresses. Seek out your central fears about bumpy flights. These can include crashing, sensations in your body, vomiting, others observing you, or a fear of the fear itself. Focus on managing your anxiety rather than keeping your attention only on when the turbulence will end, or how severe it might get. Wiggling in your seat during turbulence can help override some of the sensations so you can feel more in control. Try it. Stay as close to the present as you can. Remind yourself that you are safe.

7. Educate fellow fliers how to help you.

Other fliers need to know what frightens you, along with what helps you most to cope with anxiety during flight. If you ask, pilots can speak with you as you board. Flight attendants will give you additional attention if you let them know what you need. Family, friends, and other passengers can help you monitor your anxiety, keep you focused on the present, and help you steer clear of catastrophic mental imagery. Steer clear of “frenemies” who relate their own frightening flights. They may think they’re funny, but they will more likely trigger your own anxiety than help you stay calm. Your task is to be clear about your triggers and specifically ask for what you find most helpful.

8. Value each flight.

Exposure is the active ingredient in overcoming phobia. Every flight provides you with the opportunity to make the next one easier. Maximize the benefits of exposure in two ways. First, record your anxiety levels during the flight. You will be surprised at how short a time you are highly anxious during the flight. Next, search out and eliminate the many “mini-avoidances” you go through to make your discomfort seem more manageable. Do you insist on a certain seat? Avoid specific airports? Grip your seat in terror until the “fasten seat belt” light goes off? Focus on the flight attendants to reassure yourself that all is going well? Avoidances like these prolong your anxiety and work against the therapeutic effects of exposure. Remember that your goal is to retrain your brain to become less sensitized to triggers that set you off.

“And, I kind of said to myself, if I get my voice back I’m **not** going to take back the old anxiety about it and just focus on the limitations. I’m really going to enjoy it.”
Rosanne Cash

*Dr. Seif and Dr. Doctor can be reached at:

www..DrMartinSeif.com and/or www.rondoctor.com