

Why We Fear Flying: Part 1

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Fear of flying — also known as aviophobia — is an increasingly common problem in today's world. I have treated people who previously avoided flying at all costs, and others who would fly, but only while enduring significant fear, discomfort, anxiety, and nervousness in order to do so.

But what is it about the thought of airplanes that gets us so riddled with fear? Though accidents do happen, they are exceedingly rare, and when in-flight problems occur, the planes usually end up landing safely with no injuries. Flying is actually known to be the safest mode of transportation, yet it's feared as if surviving a flight is pure luck.

How do you know if you have a fear of flying?

Is a Fear of Flying Impacting Your Life?

There are several ways to figure out if this fear is affecting your life. The most obvious one is a simple refusal to step foot on a plane. As previously mentioned, others with a fear of flying may still do it, but tolerate a significant amount of emotional discomfort in order to do so. People who fear flying will often miss meaningful events — weddings, funerals, graduations, reunions, vacations, visits to friends and family, job interviews, as well as others types of formal or informal gatherings — if air travel is necessary.

Some people structure their lives around the notion that flying will not be a part of it. This means they may avoid significant relocation over the course of their lives — if the opportunity would otherwise be enticing — because moving may require flying as part of the process, whether for job purposes, housing search, or the move itself.

Coming up with excuses to avoid traveling could be masking a fear of flying. If a trip sounds desirable but the flight is holding you back from going, this is an issue to look into.

Psychologically speaking, a fear of flying usually is not a fear of crashing, even if it manifests as one. In fact, many people openly acknowledge that if the plane was flying 50 feet above the ground (without obstructions, of course) instead of 36,000 feet above the ground, they'd feel a lot more comfortable on a plane. Thus, the crash factor seems to be less concerning when we feel more grounded, and therefore, more in control.

So the first component of this phobia is to understand that there are many possible roots to the fear of flying — lack of control, fear of heights or falling, feeling ungrounded, fear of enclosed spaces, trust issues, fear of being trapped, and fear of public panic or illness, among others. And it's often a combination of issues, rather than just one. The concept of crashing is usually our symbolic catastrophizing of the actual issue. For example: Some people feel if they're not in control of something that it will go wrong. So if we're not flying the plane (or don't understand how the plane or flying works), our feeling is that we will crash. (And chances are, our underlying causes of fear of flying manifest in other areas of our lives as well, but are magnified with flying).

This brings us to understanding phobias. Phobias generally are not based in logic. We may logically know something isn't threatening, but still emotionally feel that it is threatening. We call these types of threats "perceived threats." With an actual threat, we are actively in danger, and our "fight or flight" response kicks in so we can attack or find safety. For example: being trapped in a cage with lions and tigers would be an actual threat. With flying, it's true that it is mathematically and humanly possible (even if only slightly) that a plane could crash; however, the likelihood is very remote.

The level of emotional flooding that some people feel when flying on a plane would make it seem as if they are lucky to be alive when the plane lands safely — as if they were locked in the cage with the lions and tigers (and bears, if you want to go there), and lived to tell. With a perceived threat, our "fight or flight" response kicks in even when we're not actively in danger, leading to various physiological symptoms.

Another layer to uncover in the nervous flyer is the overactive imagination. Many people who fear flying suffer from the effects of an overactive imagination. People begin to fantasize based on images they saw on TV or in movies, or make up their own creative images. It's amazing the kinds of thoughts that go through people's minds when feeling out of control of a situation. Learning how to tame an overactive imagination is one of the keys to conquering a fear of flying.

In addition, the media also can exacerbate fears that already exist, and create fears that didn't previously exist. Airplanes are a golden topic for the media. Journalists know — the more we fear, the more we pay attention to the stories, and then the more we fear because we paid attention. The result is that we end up exposed to far more dramatic (and often un-newsworthy) airplane stories, as opposed to soothing stories that reinforce safety. The more we hear these stories, as well as the perceived threats that accompany them, the more our fear of flying is reinforced.

In summary, fear of flying is a common phobia, and there are many psychological factors that help create and strengthen this environment of fear. Part 2 will discuss some myths about flying, as well as some strategies to help us manage our emotions before and during flight.