

Why We Fear Flying: Part 2

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The previous post discussed what's behind a fear of flying: In order to fly comfortably, we need to be able to develop awareness and process of underlying emotions, soothe emotional and physical symptoms triggered by fear, and resolve the perceived threats that drive the fear.

When not addressed, these components feed off of one another, and can make our flight experience cognitively, physically, and emotionally quite uncomfortable. In essence, this is the fear of flying.

Fear of Flying?... Not Anymore! is a program I designed to directly address these areas of cognitive, emotional, and physiological dysregulation during flying. In addition to my work as a therapist, I have a background in and an ongoing study of aviation, including flying airline and general airplane simulators on a regular basis. This knowledge of aviation enables the combination of tools from both the therapeutic and aviation worlds to resolve people's fear of flying.

The program utilizes a variety of therapy techniques integrated with passenger flying education. Its goal is to build situational control and mastery over the complete passenger flying experience. Some people have even found the program makes flying enjoyable, even after decades of not getting on a plane.

Understanding Flying

One of the components that sets this program apart from a strictly therapy-based approach is the inclusion of passenger flying education. In order to conquer the perceived threats (arguably the most potent contributor to fear of flying), it is necessary that part of the process is to understand our flying environment. Though there are therapy techniques that can work to soothe dysregulated thoughts and emotions if we don't understand our environment, it makes little sense to be defaulted into fear and anxiety and coping with it, when it's possible to prevent the distress in the first place with some information. If you think you're locked in a room with a tiger, wouldn't it be nicer to simply know that you're only in a room with a cat, rather than having to cope with unnecessary fear? So in order to soothe our perceived threats and help prevent unnecessary fear, we need to align our perceptions of our environment with reality. Here's one example of this:

Environmental Myth: Shortly after takeoff, I feel the plane sinking.

People often ask about the "sinking" sensation that happens shortly after takeoff. The truth is that airplanes require more power to take off than they do to climb. So after the plane is in the air for about 30 seconds, the amount of thrust (speed) is reduced. This reduction of thrust is physiologically experienced as a sinking feeling; however, the plane is actually still climbing.

This is an example of how having knowledge becomes a form of emotional control. It's more helpful to know what is actually happening here, rather than needing to cope with the resulting emotions of a distorted reality. If we know what's happening in our environment, then we are soothing our perceived threats with real knowledge — and we'll still have the other techniques in our back pockets to cope with any residual emotions.

Relaxation Myth: Breathing exercises won't help me when I'm scared on a plane.

Understandably, it can be hard for people to believe how much something as simple as breathing can help to settle our nerves. Breathing regulation is very important to cognitive, physical, and emotional relaxation. As part of our "fight or flight" response, anxiety and fear causes our breathing to become shallow and rapid (physiologically preparing ourselves to engage in battle, or run). If we regulate our breathing, we create the physiological atmosphere for overall relaxation. Meditation is based on the principle that it's not possible to feel two conflicting states of emotion simultaneously — we can't feel fear if we feel relaxed. So breathing exercises (there are many different kinds) are a helpful technique to help soothe ourselves during a flight.

Emotional Myth: My anxiety and fear will never go away as long as I'm on a plane.

Believe it or not, this also isn't true. Cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) have proven, through various techniques, that we can overcome our fears with motivation and dedication to the process. There are exposure therapies, desensitization techniques, cognitive restructuring techniques, etc., that are specifically geared to soothe our emotional dysregulation in specific situations. Several of the therapy-based techniques in *Fear of Flying?...Not Anymore!* draw from the bank of CBT approaches.

Normalization Myth: I'm lucky to be alive when I walk off a plane.

This is not true either; however, people who fear flying often feel that their air travel survival was by chance. This highlights another element of overcoming fear of flying that also implements aviation education: "normalization." One of the reasons that people fear flying is because they do it so rarely (if at all). Generally, when people aren't flying, they're completely removed from the atmosphere of flying, which creates the psychological delusion that flying only happens "once in a while." However, flying is as normal and routine as getting up and going to work every day. Part of the process in conquering a fear of flying is internalizing the routine nature of flying. Therefore, as part of the educational component of reducing perceived threats, a portion of *Fear of Flying?...Not Anymore!* is devoted to exercises in normalization.

As seen from the discussion above, it is necessary to use a combination of methods, rather than a singular approach, to resolve the components that cause fear of flying. With this approach, we are able to take control of our cognitions, emotions, and physiology to create comfort and relaxation, and maybe even enjoyment in our flying experience.