

How to conquer a fear of flying

Most people know that flying is one of the safest forms of transportation, and you're far more likely to end up in a car accident than a plane crash. Yet fears aren't rational, and don't follow statistics. Fears are characterized by an anxious response in the absence of real danger.

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to alter your response and control your fear. This article will help you understand and manage your anxiety, so you can start conquering your fear of flying.

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What causes a fear of flying?

A fear of flying doesn't have a single cause and can be related to several factors. Some people are afraid of heights or being in an enclosed space, while others fear crashing or terrorist attacks. For some, takeoff and landing invokes anxiety, while for others long flights are the worst. But in general, a fear of flying is related to feeling out of control. Humans were not built to fly like a bird, yet here you are, stuck in this flying machine that you can't get out of. And when anxiety strikes, there's nothing you can do. Or is there?

The importance of facing your fear

Anxiety is an uncomfortable feeling, and people are inclined to avoid situations that make them feel uncomfortable. But by avoiding, you deny yourself the opportunity of having a positive experience, that proves your unrealistic thoughts wrong. And so, it can cause your fears to get worse over time. This is why professional therapy for fear of flying typically involves gradual exposure. If you want to overcome your fear, there really is no other way than to face it.

Preparing for your flight

When you have decided to face your fears, a first step towards flying without fear is to set yourself up for success, by thoroughly preparing yourself for your flight.

Informing yourself Reassure yourself that you're safe, by seeking out information on issues such as the basic principles of aviation, pilot training, safety procedures, and weather conditions like turbulence.

Visualizing a successful flight Instead of repeating the worst-case scenario in your head over and over again, rewire your brain for a positive experience, by imagining what your ideal flight would look like in detail.

Taking your time Stress doesn't improve your ability to cope with fear. Make sure you feel good by being rested, having your regular meals, and arriving at the airport on time.

Recognizing symptoms of anxiety

You're in the plane, it's taking off – and you feel the panic rising. What to do now? The most important thing is to know that the symptoms you're experiencing are perfectly normal.

Physical symptoms Physical symptoms include muscle tension, heavy breathing, heart palpitations, sweating, and dizziness. This is just your body's natural response to danger – even though there's no real danger here.

Psychological symptoms Psychological symptoms include negative and repetitive thinking. These are simply your irrational thoughts popping up, and your mind tricking you into believing them.

Accepting your symptoms The key is to recognize these symptoms when they come up and to accept them, instead of getting upset by them. Remember these symptoms don't last forever, and they will fade after a while.

Strategies for dealing with anxiety

Of course, what you really want to know is how to calm your nerves. There are several techniques you can use to keep your anxiety under control.

Breathing and relaxation techniques Breathing techniques involve taking deep slow breaths into the lower lungs, while relaxation techniques center around purposefully tensing and relaxing your muscles. This calms your body and clears your mind.

Positive self-talk Avoid getting carried away by negative thoughts by replacing them with positive ones. Find some statements that makes you feel calm (for example 'this plane is safe') and repeat them to yourself.

Distracting your mind If you keep your mind busy, there is a lesser chance of anxious thoughts taking over. Talk to your neighbor, take a headset and listen to music, bring a book or magazine, or engage yourself in puzzles.

Medication and professional help

The use of alcohol, sleeping pills or anti-anxiety medication can serve as a short-term solution, and help you get through a dreaded flight. At the same time, it's important to remember that there's no quick fix, and finding other ways to deal with your anxiety should be a priority. If your

fear of flying is severe and self-help is not sufficient, consider consulting a professional. Fear of flying can be treated effectively by mental health care professionals.

Fear of flying can be debilitating, turning the departure for your much-anticipated holiday into a real drama, or even keeping you from going on that holiday. The good news is this doesn't have to be the case. A thorough preparation, an understanding and acceptance of the symptoms, and techniques for reducing anxiety, can all help you get over your fear of flying. Pick the techniques that work for you, and remember that overcoming your fear is a process that takes time. Step by step, you can conquer your fear.