

# Conquering the Fear of Flying

by

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Flying is usually considered one of the safest forms of public transportation, at least in the USA and most of the western world. Statistics released by the Department of Transportation indicate that airline travel is 29 times safer than driving an automobile. That encouraging fact, however, does not apply to general aviation. Private aviators all know that their risk is higher, and much of the accident data is attributed to pilot error. Such mistakes as running out of fuel, flying VFR into instrument meteorologic conditions (IMC), getting blasted by a thunderstorm, or impacting mountainous terrain all contribute to the perceived risk of flying, which engenders fear in many passengers, and even some wannabe pilots.

You probably remember those first few flying lessons. The queasiness in the stomach, when that little Cessna hit the bumpy air of an impending storm, or even the unstable air on a perfectly clear cloudless day. That *Sic-Sac* came in handy, if for nothing else than ‘insurance,’ just in case the breakfast reappeared. Then, you might have experienced some near misses, either on the taxiway or aloft, as I did when a twin engine plane appeared suddenly out of a hazy sky. It was my first cross country flight with an instructor. I won’t repeat his words, as he grabbed the yoke and evaded a mid-air with a sudden skillful nose dive. For some reason, I was not afraid at all, though exceedingly grateful for Divine protection that day.

In spite of our aviation bravado, we all know that man was not originally designed to fly like the birds – neither soaring eagles, fluttering finches, nor hovering hummingbirds. Yet those flying marvels were carefully studied, giving ideas to early aviation pioneers to develop the first airplanes, and even the helicopter. While we are never totally in control of a plane – being subject to the weather, the wind, and numerous aerodynamic laws – we must learn to command our thoughts and feelings, and trust in something greater than ourselves . . . every time we fly.

Without this self-discipline, we may experience an uncomfortable awareness that life is fragile and vulnerable, thus sit in the cockpit or cabin worrying about the dangers of flight. Many people – passengers usually, but occasionally pilots – become disabled by fear, and then experience the anxiety symptoms that make flying a misery instead of a delight.

The fear of flying has many components, not all of which are specific to flight itself. Some of these experiences are anxieties about heights, enclosed spaces, being required to wait passively (which is increasingly evident on the airlines), worrying about the dangers of turbulence, sitting in an uncomfortable seat breathing stale air, not understanding strange sounds or sensations, being dependent on an unknown pilot’s judgment, and even today the possibility of terrorism. That is quite a list, and does not even account for past experiences, whether delay, trauma, or accident.

The physiological reactions to fear and stress include muscle tension, tremor, heart palpitations, abdominal discomfort, sweating, weakness, dizziness, dry mouth, labored breathing, and even chest pain. Psychological symptoms include impaired memory, clouded judgement, negative expectancies, depression, anger, or rarely complete disorientation. Naturally, if any of this happens to the pilot-in-command, the whole plane and its passengers are in jeopardy. Focus on flying the airplane; get out your checklist; make the appropriate radio calls, etc.

We have to conquer this fear, as it were ‘nipping it in the bud.’ There are four anxiety-provoking ways that fliers think, which can be mastered with specific coping strategies. The first form of flight anxiety is **Rumination**, which refers to thinking over and over again about the situation. Determine not to preoccupy yourself with worries about flying. Take a deep breath, let it go and get back to work. Sitting there paralyzed won’t make the plane or the impending trip any safer.

Second is **Self-blame**, thinking about the mistakes you have made in the past. Instead, remind yourself that you are doing the best you can, and that progress takes time. Remembering that practice makes perfect, you know that each experience will teach you better techniques for coping with anxiety. And the performance will also improve. That bumpy landing or ground loop doesn’t have to be repeated in your mind, unless you neglect to conquer your fear.

Third, is the problem of **Resignation**, sometimes called Acceptance. This refers to thinking that you have no other option but to helplessly accept things as they are. One way out of this self-defeating thought is to give yourself credit for your own good sense, your training, and the many experiences that turned out well, when you kept calm and did your best. Finally, the fourth and possibly the worst panic-producing emotion is **Catastrophizing**. This refers to thinking about how awful an emergency or accident could be. It takes strong self-discipline to acknowledge, then challenge this fear. Admit you are afraid, but face reality, the true likelihood of the threatening situation. If you feel nervous, do some things to relax. Breathe deeply; stretch your muscles; and pray.

All of us can imagine the worst if we choose. But it is better to anticipate the best outcome. Don’t yield to fear, called by someone ‘False Evidence Appearing Real.’ Whether child or adult, pilot or passenger, small plane or jumbo jet, one’s fear of flying can be controlled, constructively channeled, and ultimately conquered. Finally, for pilots there is no substitute for thorough training, recent flight experience, and a personal faith. Remember the reasons you learned to fly in the first place. Pass this joy on to others – your family, the younger generation. Then, your fear will vanish, and the thrill and joy of aviation’s true freedoms will prevail.

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