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Fear of Flying.... What Is It? Who Has It? What Can Be Done About It?

Millions of people are afraid to fly. The author takes a close look at the causes behind their fears and offers proven suggestions to reduce the fear of flying.

by

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For some, the phrase “fear of flying” makes them ask, “Wasn’t that the title of Erica Jong’s book?”

For millions of people, however, fear of flying is a very real and significant problem. Both men and women have this fear and it strikes people of all ages. The victims come from a variety of educational and work backgrounds. Among the most notable individuals, who have confessed to having a fear of flying, are the Queen of England, pop star David Bowie, former World Heavyweight Champion Mohammed Ali, actress Glenda Jackson and sports announcer John Madden (1).

In this article, we will take a close look at the magnitude of the fear of flying problem. We will examine why people are afraid to fly and explore their specific fears. Finally, we will learn how the airlines and private industry have dealt with this problem and what crewmembers can do to help.

The Wonder of Flight

Have you ever tried to explain to a nonflyer what it’s like to fly . . . and found yourself at a loss for words? Flying is truly a unique experience.

We’ve all experienced a certain degree of apprehension about flying at one time or another. Perhaps you’ve felt uneasy on a flight for no apparent reason. Maybe you’ve even been frightened by an inflight sound or sensation that was unexpected or new to you.

It is hard, however, to imagine a fear of flying so intense that a person would do practically anything to avoid flying. This phobia of flying is called aerophobia and it’s responsible for people turning down free vacations to exotic places; sacrificing job promotions that involve air travel; and spending days or weeks in buses, trains and boats at great personal expense and inconvenience.

Historical Perspective

Fear of flying gained official recognition in 1936 when the chief executive of American Airlines, C.R. Smith, endorsed a national advertising campaign with the heading, “Why Dodge This Question: Afraid to Fly? (2)”

The fear of flying issue, nevertheless, was dodged until 1967 when Pacific Air Lines (PAL) decided to try a different approach. PAL wanted an attention-grabbing ad campaign that would send profits soaring - instead, PAL ran a promotion so ill-conceived that it sent the company into a tailspin.

The following excerpt from *The Misfortune 500* describes Pacific Air Lines’ ill-fated attempt to handle fearful flyers (3).

“The West Coast commuter airline sought the help of comedian Stan Freberg, who moonlighted as an ad consultant. Freberg suggested that PAL poke fun at the one thing airlines never mention — fear of flying.

“Many of the carrier’s executives were aghast and warned that the campaign would go down in flames. But PAL’s president told Freberg to fly with the idea. Under the comedian’s direction, PAL placed full-page ads in the New York and Los Angeles newspapers that read:

‘Hey there! You with the sweat in your palms. It’s about time an airline faced up to something: Most people are scared witless of flying. Deep down inside, every time that big plane lifts off that runway, you wonder if this is it, right? You want to know something, fella? So does the pilot deep down inside.’

“Flight attendants gave passengers survival kits that contained a pink rabbit’s foot, Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and an unappetizing fortune cookie that

held the message, 'It could be worse. The pilot could be whistling *The High and the Mighty*.'

"Also, whenever the plane touched down, flight attendants were told to say in loud voices, 'We made it! How about that?'"

"To give shaky airborne passengers a feeling that they were still on the ground, PAL planned to draw the cabin shades and project pictures of telephone poles going by. PAL also had plans to paint the outside of one of its B-727's to look like an old steam locomotive complete with wheels and cowcatcher. The sound of a locomotive would play through the passenger cabin.

"Not surprisingly, the airline industry was in an uproar. Executives from other carriers feared the promotion was scaring potential customers away from all airlines. But PAL's president scoffed at the critics, saying, 'Lots of people are terrified of flying and we thought it was time somebody cleared the air.'"

The bizarre promotion did clear the air — of PAL planes. Within two months, the airline was no more.

How Common Is Fear Of Flying?

A study conducted by the Boeing Company in 1980 entitled *Fear of Flying — Impact on the U.S. Air Travel Industry*, revealed some startling facts concerning the phenomenon. The Boeing study concluded that one of every six adult U.S. citizens, 25 million, is afraid to fly. Another 19.6 million citizens experience anxiety when they fly. People who are afraid to fly make two-thirds fewer trips on commercial aircraft than those who are not afraid to fly. The impact on the U.S. air travel industry for 1978 was estimated to be \$1.6 billion of lost revenue and a 9 percent reduction in air travel (4).

A recent Gallup poll revealed similar and equally impressive statistics. One out of ten airline passengers were frightened the entire time they spent in the air. One out of four were frightened some of the time.

Fear of Flying — Its Many Facets

Fear of flying does not usually involve a single, clearly defined, fear but encompasses one or more of the following fears:

Claustrophobia: The fear of being closed-in is one of the most commonly expressed fears of the aerophobe. Once the airplane door is closed, there is no getting out. Large numbers of people crammed into the confined area of an aircraft cabin only add to the feeling of being trapped.

Loss of Control: It is interesting to note that almost everyone who travels by air has some sense of giving up control when they board an airplane. A questionnaire distributed to 156 flight attendants revealed that "flight attendants, as a group, note that passengers behave in a very dependent manner, giving up personal autonomy and control to the crew (5)."

The flying experience can become traumatic, however, when

the passenger has a need for control in a situation. Fearful flyers describe it as "a loss of control, helplessness, dependency on the pilot and his and her capability, putting themselves in the hands of luck or fate or just another person's control (6)."

In addition to worrying about giving up control onboard an airplane, a fearful flyer may become preoccupied with the thought of losing control of himself in an embarrassing emotional outburst. Ironically, this very rarely happens, but the prospect is enough to further trigger his anxiety.

Acrophobia: Fear of heights is often at the top of the list for people who are afraid of flying and have never flown. From their perspective, sitting in a metal tube at 41,000 feet is their worst nightmare come true! Aerophobes who muster up enough courage to fly, however, are often pleasantly surprised how "secure" they feel inside the aircraft cabin.

Fear of Turbulence: Turbulence is especially frightening to a passenger who has little or no knowledge about why turbulence occurs or how much the airplane is capable of enduring. Because flying is a new and unique experience for many people, they tend to be more vigilant than usual, listening and waiting for new sensations and sounds. A vivid imagination, combined with the capacity to imagine horrible and frightening events, has all the ingredients of a formula for terror.

Fear of the Unknown: It is human nature to be frightened of what we don't know or understand. How can a B-747 weighing up to 750,000 pounds become airborne, and more amazingly, stay there? Our feelings about the unknown can best be summed up in the words of Marie Curie: "Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood."

Fear of Crashing: The fearful flyer need only turn on the television or open up the newspaper to be inundated with media coverage of aircraft accidents, incidents, mishaps, alleged safety violations, etc. All of this media attention tends to give a distorted view of the dangers of flying which, in turn, fuel the fearful flyers' imagination, stirring up visions of injury, mutilation, burning, drowning, etc.

Fear of Death: The single underlying fear, of all of the fears described above, is that of dying.

How Does Fear Of Flying Manifest Itself?

We've all heard of the "white knuckle flyer" grabbing onto the arm rests of his seat somehow thinking that he is holding up the airplane by sheer will power! Imagine the physical and emotional toll that this kind of behavior can take on a passenger, especially on a long flight.

When faced with the (perceived) frightening and dreaded situation of flying, passengers will often exhibit "fight or flight" responses. Adrenaline, pumping into the blood stream, can produce a wide variety of physical symptoms, most notably heart palpitations, difficulty in breathing, trembling, dizziness, nausea and excessive perspiration.

To the causal observer, a fearful flyer may appear relatively calm, however, internally he may be experiencing panic, dread, and terror. If you haven't noticed many anxious or fearful passengers, it's probably because you're not looking for them and they are quite good at disguising their fear.

Many fearful flyers try to medicate themselves with sedatives or alcohol in an attempt to mask their fears and anxieties. "Sedatives induce passivity while alcohol distorts reality, enabling the fearful flyer to withdraw further from the flight experience (7)." Alcohol also diminishes the level of oxygen in the blood stream, forcing muscles to work overtime to replace it. At 5,000 feet above sea level, the extra effort can cause hyperventilation which in turn triggers more fear and stress. In addition, passengers must contend with the side effects of the drugs and alcohol at their destination.

Heavily sedated or intoxicated passengers can also present a serious safety hazard in the event of an emergency. The author is reminded of one client who took so much Valium before her trans-Atlantic flight, she referred to herself as a zombie and her husband as the zombie keeper.

A Fearful Flyer's Perspective

To fully understand and empathize with a fearful flyer one must listen to their story directly. Polly Mills, a formerly phobic flyer, put it this way: "To the fearful flyer, a trip in a plane generally means days, or even weeks, of intense anxiety, often accompanied by loss of sleep, loss of appetite, and a craving for and subsequent consumption of large quantities of liquor and/or tranquilizers.

"I've heard pilots describe flying as 'endless hours of boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror.' Well, the fearful flyer regards it somewhat differently. More like endless hours of stark terror punctuated by ominous sounds, horrifying motions, and the threat of impending disaster. For those who are fearful, flying is agony, pure and simple."

Mills goes on to explain that "Fearful flyers deal with their flying anxieties in different ways. Many of us become non-flyers and memorize train/bus/boat schedules or drive long distances simply to avoid flying. Others make plane reservations, actually arrive at the airport, or even the gate, but turn around and leave, too afraid to get on the plane. Some fly, but miserably. We tell ourselves we don't care about visiting friends, families, or interesting places. We'd rather stay close to home, drive to vacation spots, take a cruise, or be alone rather than go through the agony of a plane trip. Rationalization is our strong suit. And so is guilt, because we are ashamed of being paralyzed by fear.

"Fearful flyers also tend to be extraordinarily sensitive to their surroundings, to sound, to motion. The sound of a power cutback after takeoff is, to the fearful flyer, an indication that the engines have quit entirely. The landing gear coming down signals the disintegration of the aircraft. Turbulence means the plane is totally out of control; death is imminent. Fearful flyers wait — often frozen in their seats not daring to look out the window, use the lavatory, or eat — for disaster to arrive.

When it doesn't, we breathe a sigh of relief and, having successfully cheated death, vow never to fly again. We bargain with God for safe trips. (If I get back in one piece, I'll never be mean to my mother-in-law, kids, boss, or subordinates again.) (8)"

Treatment of Aerophobia

Traditionally, the airline industry has been reluctant to focus on the fear of flying phenomenon, preferring not to draw attention to the fact that millions of people have a fear of flying.

In the last few years, however, the public relations value and overall passenger goodwill have resulted in no less than six major air carriers becoming involved in programs designed to help the fearful flyer.

Most treatment programs for fearful flyers operate from the premise that fears are learned. An individual may have had a frightening in-flight experience, or maybe he heard negative stories about flying, or perhaps his fear of flying is the result of his own thoughts, weighing the "evidence" regarding safety and concluding that it is better to stay on the ground.

Fears surrounding flying can also be learned through "negative association" with another event. For example, flying to the funeral of a loved one; traveling to a stressful business meeting; or being separated from family and friends. Flight attendants who return from maternity leave sometimes experience a fear of flying. This may be the result of parental "separation anxieties" being paired with flying.

Since fears are learned, aerophobes can learn to overcome their fear of flying. The most successful programs contain the following four elements:

Aviation Education: Information regarding turbulence; basic flight dynamics; aircraft maintenance; FAA inspections; the ATC system; flight attendant and pilot training; and etc. help to replace fear with knowledge.

Relaxation Training: Based on the simple theory that you can't be anxious and relaxed at the same time, relaxation training has been very effective in controlling the physical reactions associated with fear. Through the use of breathing techniques and muscle relaxation exercises, a state of relaxation can be achieved in an otherwise anxiety-provoking situation.

In-Vivo Desensitization: This therapeutic technique involves gradually confronting one's fears in real-life situations. For example, the fearful flyer may first become familiar with the sights and sounds of an airport terminal; then, spend time onboard an airplane parked at the gate; and finally take a trial flight of short duration. Continued exposure to flying will further serve to desensitize the individual to the flying experience.

Group Support: There is comfort and reassurance in knowing that one is not alone in his fear. The group provides a supportive environment in which individuals can freely express their feeling and experiences.

Program Success Rates

Success, as in most endeavors, depends largely on motivation. Fortunately, being able to overcome one's fear of flying has many built-in motivating factors such as visiting family and friends, traveling to new and exciting vacation spots, and new career opportunities.

Success for a fearful flyer may have many different meanings. For the person who has stopped flying, out of fear, success is being able to board an airplane and fly again. A recent graduate of the author's "Free To Fly" program expressed her accomplishments this way: "Thank you! Without the class I would have *never gotten on another plane.*"

For individuals who previously flew under heavy sedation or under the influence of alcohol, success is being able to fly without medication and to arrive at their destination feeling rested and alert.

And then, there are those participants (many of whom had never flown and had expected something quite different) who develop a love for flying! This dramatic transformation is evident in the following remarks. In response to the question, "Why did you take this class?," one of the author's clients wrote: "Terror when thinking about flying." At the end of the course, which included a graduation flight, she wrote: "I'm thankful I took the course and I cannot wait to fly again."

If we measure success in general terms of reducing participants' fears to the point where they will fly, the success rates of the fear of flying programs described above are between 80 and 90 percent (9). These are very impressive statistics when dealing in the area of psychological treatment.

What Can Crewmembers Do To Help?

1. First, and foremost be aware that some of your passengers are afraid to fly. A passenger's outward behavior may appear relatively calm to the casual observer, however, internally he may be experiencing panic, dread and terror. Fearful flyers are often self-conscious about their fears and are quite successful at hiding them.
2. Try to engage the fearful flyer in light conversation regarding upcoming vacation plans, sights of interest, family, etc. That personal contact will help to reassure them of your concern. Encourage the fearful flyer to keep busy with in-flight entertainment, magazines, crossword puzzles, etc. These activities will help serve as effective distractions.

3. Remain as visible as possible. Seeing crewmembers in the cabin can have a calming effect on white-knucklers. Fearful flyers have a tendency to imagine the worst. If you are nowhere to be seen, then there must be something wrong. Worst yet, you've probably been "summoned" to the cockpit to "plot" the upcoming evacuation!
4. Show patience and tolerance to the fearful flyer, even if questions sound silly. By learning more about airplanes and flying, the fearful flyer can begin to replace fear with knowledge.
5. Use the public address system to keep the passengers advised of changing conditions such as turbulence or bad weather. It is equally important to let them know how long these conditions are likely to last.
6. Suggest that a fearful flyer consider one of several ongoing programs designed to help conquer the fear of flying. Airlines and travel agencies can be helpful in providing referrals.

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