

TRAVEL 101

Afraid of Flying? Here's How to Make It Feel Less Scary.

Fear of flying affects more than 25 million Americans. If you are among them, these tools and expert tips could help make your next plane ride easier.

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More than 25 million Americans have a severe fear of flying, or aerophobia, the Cleveland Clinic estimates. Aerophobia can cause extreme anxiety before and during a flight as the amygdala, the brain's emotional center, goes into overdrive over perceived dangers.

Yet flying is one of the safest forms of transportation. A study published in August in the *Journal of Air Transport Management* showed that travelers worldwide have a one-in-13.7 million chance of being killed in an air crash. By contrast, in the United States, you have a one-in-93 chance of dying in a motor vehicle accident in your lifetime, according to a 2022 report from the National Safety Council.

Despite those reassuring statistics, aerophobia commonly causes people to experience a range of symptoms, from jitters to total panic. If you're among the travelers with this common condition, here are some tips that could help you fly

more comfortably.

Understand your triggers, and breathe

First, recognize what makes you feel scared. For example, images of plane crashes in movies or news about accidents can set off anxiety or even hyperventilation. If this happens, try breathing exercises to bring yourself back to a relaxed state. In one method called box breathing, you inhale deeply for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds and hold again for four seconds. Repeat this cycle three to four times, until you feel calmer.

Hear from a pilot

Loss of control is at the center of many flying fears. As Tom Bunn, a therapist and retired airline captain, explained, “The problem is this: Flying is a no-control, no-escape situation. If we are going to give up escape, we need to know we don’t need to escape, because if anything goes wrong, there is a backup system that can be turned to.” To help with this, it can be useful to understand how pilots do their jobs. Try listening to the podcast Dial a Pilot, specifically geared toward nervous fliers, in which the hosts, pilots themselves, explain the flying process and crew training.

Take advantage of apps

The sounds of an airplane can also provoke anxiety, so try normalizing them. The Flight Buddy app has audio clips of normally functioning airplanes, including the sounds of an A320 engine starting, luggage being loaded, and retracting and extending the landing gear. Listening to what you will hear aboard the plane can help make you feel less surprised by sounds that may be new to you, which can trigger anxiety.

Turbli, a turbulence forecasting app and website, can help keep sudden bumps from catching you off guard. Simply plug in your flight number before takeoff and tap on the flight plan to show you the expected turbulence level. You can

also set up automated notifications to warn you when turbulence is coming.

Either in the terminal or while you're flying, try apps like Calm and Headspace, which offer guided meditations and visualizations with options for shorter and longer durations.

Make yourself more comfortable

A little extra space can go a long way toward quelling anxiety. Consider paying a little more to book a seat with extra legroom, or book a window seat in an exit row. Seeing the horizon can help make you feel more in control.

Try bringing a small weighted pillow, to hold in your lap or hug against your chest. This type of deep pressure stimulation tells your body where it is in space, which can be beneficial for reducing anxiety, according to a 2013 National Taiwan University Hospital study. It may help to repeat grounding phrases like "I'm safe" and "I'm going to be OK" while squeezing your pillow.

Alleviate stress by doing airplane yoga at your seat. There are numerous YouTube videos, including a four-minute clip called "Yoga on an Airplane" that includes neck, head, upper back and shoulder release techniques. You can download these videos to watch offline during your flight.

Consider exposure therapy

A mental health professional may be able to help you fly more confidently through a long-term process called exposure therapy, which typically involves the gradual introduction of photographs and videos of airplanes, along with breathing exercises intended to keep you calm when being exposed to triggers.

Research shows this method has helped many patients address their anxiety over flying. "Well-conducted randomized controlled trials for exposure therapy show about 70 to 90 percent of participants will be able to fly on a plane," said

Jonathan Bricker, a psychologist and affiliate professor at the University of Washington who has studied and treated the fear of flying for 25 years, “while the majority will experience significant decreases in anxiety about flying.”

What about medication or alcohol?

Some nervous fliers rely on anti-anxiety medications to make flying more tolerable, but Mr. Bunn noted that pills like benzodiazepines can be addictive and may become less effective over time. Dr. Bricker suggested using “fast-acting medications like Xanax, specifically prescribed for fear of flying, only as a short-term aid as you learn exposure for the long term.”

Some anxious fliers may be tempted to order an alcoholic beverage in flight to calm their nerves, but a small study published in June concluded that drinking on longer flights can increase your heart rate and decrease blood oxygen level. And a separate study from 2015 showed that drinking can actually worsen your anxiety. So you may be better off sipping water instead of wine on your next flight.

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