

# Ways to Overcome Fear of Flying, Aviophobia

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Aviophobia is a psychological term for a fear of flying. It is estimated that one out of every six people in the United States has a phobia about flying. Those with a fear of flying are estimated to make only a third of the airline trips that those without such fears take (Dean & Whitaker, 1982). People with this phobia may avoid flying because of the anxiety and fear it causes them. To help cope, fearful flyers may drink alcohol or take medication to help them get through the experience. Fortunately, many people can learn to overcome their fear of flying and reduce the amount of distress this activity may cause them.



Phobias involve patterns of anxiety or avoidance associated with events, objects, places, or activities that can interfere with functioning and/or cause personal distress. The individual may experience fearful beliefs and and may experience physiological anxiety reactions (such as body tenseness, increased heart rate, nausea, etc.). These symptoms arise due to the perceived threat or danger of flying. This can in turn cause avoidance which produces short term relief of the uncomfortable thoughts or feelings that then further reinforcing more fear and avoidance.

Many people with aviophobia want to overcome it after experiencing the frustration that arises when they are prevented from necessary air travel to visit family or travel on business trips. In many cases, they seek methods or assistance to get past their fear to enjoy the benefits of flying. Fortunately, there are a variety of resources and approaches to overcome a fear of flying (see: [www.miamihelicopter.com/resources/psychology-fear-flying-heights/](http://www.miamihelicopter.com/resources/psychology-fear-flying-heights/)).

Fear of flying has been described as “a heterogeneous phenomenon which is acquired under the influence of complex psychological, social and physiological factors unique to each affected individual” (Oakes & Bor, 2010). In that context, the authors conclude that effective psychological interventions must be founded on a comprehensive functional assessment of each individual before treatment begins. As part of assessment it is important to distinguish fear of flying as a simple phobia in an individual without other more significant mental health



issues such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Panic Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, etc.

It is helpful to consider the different aspects of flying which may trigger fear or be more relevant to an individual's fear of flying. One might ask if it is the sound of the plane, the liftoff, the landing, or turbulence? Some people don't like being in the confined space of an airplane with others. Individuals may experience extreme anxiety from anticipating what could happen (anticipatory anxiety). For some, this is the worst part of the flying experience and the actual flight may be less dreadful than the anticipatory anxiety they suffer from planning the trip, arriving at the airport, and preparing to board.

Education and knowledge can provide some reassurance. Many individuals fear what they find hard to understand. Research shows that over 70 percent of individuals who have a fear of flying are afraid the plane will have mechanical problems. For many, learning how a plane works may help to lower their anxiety by allowing them to understand what the plane is doing and why. Things happening during a flight will start to make sense and seem less sudden and startling.



Once a person has identified the things that trigger their fear, they can begin to overcome them. In general, as with other phobias, individuals should gradually approach and engage with the feared activity while keeping their anxiety managed in order to learn that their fears are unfounded. While it may not always be comfortable, individuals will benefit from a sense of mastery when they learn methods to control their fears and anxiety. Controlling physiological reactions can

assist in reducing over-reaction to stimuli, fearful thoughts, and the drive to escape, allowing individuals to travel or travel more comfortably.

There are physiological mechanisms underlying the fight or flight response involve the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems work in opposition to each other (see article on the physiology of stress on the Cpancf.com website). Simply put, you cannot be physiologically relaxed and anxious at the same time. Psychologists use relaxation and approaches such as deep breathing, visualization, and muscle relaxation exercises combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy and systematic desensitization to address anxious thoughts and physiological reactions to teach individuals to manage their anxiety reactions. Such treatments and approaches are a core tool in overcoming phobias, psychiatric conditions such as panic disorder, and are even used as techniques to help first responders, police and soldier's function in extraordinary circumstances.

Exposure is an important part of overcoming a fear of flying or any phobia. Systematic desensitization may involve progressively exposing an individual to sound, thoughts and images, to actual places and planes while going slowly enough to ensure relaxation and coping techniques keep the fight-or-flight response under control. Each time a person succeeds in achieving relaxation in the face of thoughts or images (imagery exposure), stimuli, or actually flying (in vivo exposure) it will make their next time less stressful.

Researchers are constantly looking into new ways to treat phobias and other anxiety disorders. One such treatment, known as virtual reality therapy, places participants in computer simulations while monitoring their heart rate and breathing activities. In doing so, the treatment combines the best aspects of imaginary and in-vivo exposure, by allowing one to practice their relaxation techniques in a safe environment that feels life-like.

Overcoming anxiety or even a simple phobia such as aviophobia allows people to engage in more activities and suffer less while doing so. Mastering your phobia and a reaction which previously felt out of control also has another beneficial side effect that may generalize to other areas of life, improved self-confidence.

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