

Fear of flying

Fear of flying is quite common. About one in six people have a significant fear that prevents them from flying, and about one in five regular flyers use alcohol or prescription drugs to 'help' them through a flight.

Types of fears

People have different concerns about flying. Many people report an excessive fear of heights or enclosed places, both of which are part of the flying experience. Others had no problems with flying until they experienced severe turbulence, a mechanical incident or an in-flight event that made them apprehensive when they next flew.

People who have developed a fear of flying following a bad experience on a plane can get worse the more they fly, and find that they become anxious more quickly in response to smaller events - such as noises, movements or even the expressions on the faces of cabin crew. This group of flyers often becomes fearful of being fearful, something psychologists call 'discomfort anxiety'.

Some frequent flyers report becoming fearful after they become parents, while others (especially those in positions of authority or autonomy) dislike the feeling of 'giving up' their control to unknown persons flying, maintaining and directing aircraft.

Ways to allay fears

The best help for fearful flyers usually combines three elements:

- **Information from trusted and authoritative sources** on commercial aviation, including safety, aerodynamics, engineering and maintenance, the sources of those in-flight noises and movements, weather and controlled airspace.
- **Information about the physiology of anxiety and panic**, including reassurance that the uncomfortable sensations experienced before and during flights are normal responses that will not harm them. These normal reactions are exaggerated by thoughts of impending calamity. Such 'scary' events can be explained using accurate information about aviation and human physiology.
- **Gradual 'real life' exposure to airports and aircraft**, culminating in a flight. Psychologists often help their clients by teaching them relaxation skills and thought-changing strategies, then guiding them in their use of these techniques on a stationary aircraft until the anxiety lowers and becomes bearable. Some people might need to do this at the airport first, then in the waiting lounge, then the jet way, and then at the aircraft entrance. This form of gradual exposure and anxiety reduction is preferred to the use of alcohol or other mood-altering substances.

A complete program for even the most fearful flyer can be completed in about five to ten sessions.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The Australian Psychological Society Tel. 1800 333 497, (03) 8662 3300

Things to remember

- Fear of flying is quite common.
- A person's fears may be based on many concerns.
- People can learn to cope with fear of flying.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Monash University - Centre for Developmental Psychiatry and Psychology

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.