



Real Possibilities

# How to Conquer Your Fear of Flying

With a return to air travel, anxious passengers are again contending with this common phobia

by Kim Painter, [AARP](#), July 19, 2021 |



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In February, right after she became fully vaccinated for [COVID-19](#), writer Molly Jong-Fast took her first flight since March 2020. She brought along her therapist, just in case.

Jong-Fast, 42, of New York City, is a lifelong fearful flyer who learned to cope years ago, she says, by facing her anxieties and flying frequently. But that 11-month gap had her worried that her anxieties might once again spiral out of control.

Many flyers are feeling the same way, therapists say, as COVID-19 restrictions ease and planes fill up once more. It doesn't help, they say, that returning travelers are taking their seats at a time when unruly passengers are much in the news, sometimes due to conflict over mask wearing onboard (required by law).

A return to the skies is especially fraught for those who were already afraid to fly.

Because they are likely to have gone many months without flying due to the pandemic, "people who were fearful of flying before are finding their fears are more intense," says Martin Seif, a psychologist specializing in anxiety disorders who practices in New York City and Greenwich, Connecticut. "They haven't done it in a while, and when you haven't done something in a while, your imagination takes over."

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Seif and other [therapists](#) say they tell fearful flyers that every flight they take can make the next flight easier. "The single most important criteria for determining how comfortable we are doing something is how often we do it," he notes.

Just what people are nervous about varies quite a bit, therapists say. "We commonly think of the fear of flying being about fear of dying in a plane crash," but that's just one variation, says psychologist Reid Wilson, director of the [Anxiety Disorders Treatment Center](#) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. People who dread air travel may fear heights, crowds, closed-in spaces or being away from home. Or they may dread the specific sensations of taking off, landing or turbulence, or the idea of flying over water, he says.

Many fearful flyers, therapists say, have a broader [panic disorder](#) and are most afraid of having a panic attack on a plane. They fear symptoms, such as a pounding heart, a churning stomach and an overwhelming sense of doom. And they fear embarrassing themselves by losing control in public.



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There's no solid research on how many people fear flying, but the most common estimate is that it's about 20 percent of passengers, Seif says. Not all of them need to see a therapist, but it can be useful for many who experience extreme anxiety about air travel.

## How therapy can help

Dominika, a 31-year-old North Carolina woman who prefers not to use her last name, says that she tried handling her flying fears with antianxiety pills. But she decided to see a therapist after a recent flight — her first in more than a year — left her so shaken that she vomited on the tarmac after landing. “I almost convinced my husband that we should clearly take a ferry from the Bahamas to Florida,” to get home, she says.

After a couple of sessions with Wilson, she has practiced managing her fears of impending disaster in other situations, such as walking along an ocean pier and climbing up to a roof. Exercises like these are common in cognitive behavioral therapy, the standard approach for people with flying fears, Wilson says. CBT focuses on identifying, understanding and changing thinking and behavior patterns. People who fear flying, Wilson says, learn through exposure that their discomfort can be fleeting and manageable.

It's time to consider therapy, experts say, if you suffer greatly through every flight or miss out on much-desired travel. “This is highly treatable, so don't despair,” says Cornelia Tietke, a licensed clinical social worker at The Center for Travel Anxiety in Washington, D.C. “You don't have to white-knuckle it.”

You can find therapists who work with fearful flyers at the website of the Anxiety & Depression Association of America ([adaa.org](http://adaa.org)).

Some therapists offer group classes and may even take participants on flights. But classes held at U.S. airports, once commonly sponsored by airlines, are largely a thing of the past, Seif and Wilson say. One exception is the Fearless Flight program ([fearlessflight.com](http://fearlessflight.com)), based at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix, where in-person classes taught by Ron Nielsen, a former commercial pilot with a master's degree in counseling, have just resumed after a 14-month pause. The free classes are held aboard a stationary Boeing 737. Nielsen also offers online classes and coaching, as does Tom Bunn, another pilot turned therapist, who runs a program called SOAR ([fearofflying.com](http://fearofflying.com)).

The best therapy is flying itself, insists Jong-Fast, who happens to be the daughter of Erica Jong, author of the 1973 novel *Fear of Flying*. She says she got through her first

flight since the pandemic hit just fine and is back to flying as often as she can — without her therapist.

"I don't ever want to be unable to travel again," she says.

## How to handle anxiety during flight

Even if you don't opt for therapy, you can consider these therapist-recommended strategies for easing your anxiety about air travel.

- **Know your triggers.** Do you start getting anxious as soon as you buy a ticket, when you get to the gate or not until you latch your seat belt? Is your fear about being cooped up with strangers or about enduring takeoffs and landings? Just learning to notice the anxiety when it starts can help you cope, Tietke says: "It's easier to blow out a match than to put out a forest fire."
- **Know some facts.** If you are afraid of crashes, it's helpful to educate yourself on how planes work and how safe they are, Wilson says. Flying is not only much safer than driving, it's also less likely to kill you than dogs, lightning or choking on food, he notes. Seif says it's also helpful for people to know that most fears about a dreaded activity, such as flying, happen before the event — meaning the worst symptoms may be over before the plane takes off.
- **Expect to feel anxious.** "When you notice your symptoms, tell yourself, 'It's OK I'm feeling this way. I expect to be nervous right now. I can handle this,'" Wilson suggests. He and other therapists say it's better to expect and accept your anxiety than to fight and deny it.
- **Breathe.** When anxiety starts, Wilson suggests taking a "calming breath." Here's how: Completely exhale, then take a long, deep breath and hold it to the count of three. Then exhale slowly, saying the word "relax," under your breath. Rest 15 seconds, while letting your muscles go limp. Repeat two more times.
- **Distract yourself.** Once you acknowledge your anxiety, try shifting your attention to a low-effort diversion, such as a "trashy magazine," an adult coloring book or a funny podcast, Tietke suggests. Be sure to pack some options in your carry-on bag.
- **Be careful with alcohol and medication.** While one or two drinks might help some people, too many flyers drink too much, Seif says. (Take note: Several U.S. airlines are banning or curtailing alcohol service right now, partly because of unruly flyers.) Some doctors will prescribe a small number of pills, usually benzodiazepines such as Valium or Xanax, to help anxious flyers through a trip. But those come with side effects, such as drowsiness and unsteadiness, that may linger after you get off the plane.

*Kim Painter is a contributing writer who specializes in health and psychology. She frequently writes for AARP's Staying Sharp and previously worked as a health reporter and columnist at USA Today.*