

Flying Safely

By

Dr Robert Gobac (MD) and
Roleen Kaplan (MA Psychology)
www.flightcheck.co.za

My heart is pounding.... I can't breath... I think I'm dying...
Everything is spinning around me
Maybe if I shut my eyes it will all stop...
The pounding gets bigger
My body stiffens
"Help me" I hear myself scream, "I have to get out, now!"

Yes, your fear is very real and no, it's not a bad thing and you are not a weak, useless human being because you feel afraid. You are scared and that is the end of the story. Or is it? It feels impossible for you to ever be anything but scared. You swear to yourself that you will avoid airplanes at all costs

Air travel is probably the safest and most proficient way to travel on the planet. Yet many find that their fear of flying and the panic that accompanies them in each journey leaves them stuck and trapped in a world of anxiety. Physically immobilised and emotionally and mentally overwrought, panic attack sufferers' feelings are very real, overwhelming to a point of distraction. Heart palpitations, sweaty palms, difficulty breathing, shaking, weakness, feeling as if one is going to die are to name but a few symptoms experienced in these traumatic moments. The discomfort is intense.

Learning the basics about aviation and specific techniques on how to deal more effectively with fear, can help you replace fear with a greater level of confidence; and, make flying that much more enjoyable.

The Physiology of fear

Despite the unpleasant effects of fear, panic and helplessness that most of us have experienced in some point in our lives and perhaps still do, these have been feelings that through the centuries have helped us to evolve and survive.

The spontaneity of these feelings are induced and empowered by the most complex parts of our brain, so that the thinking and feeling of being out of control elicits a pure neuro-chemical event.

The evolution of human being brought with it a progression from a primitive nervous structure to one more complex where smells allowed animals to distinguish what could be eaten and

what was poisonous, what was sexually attractive and what was dangerous. It was then that the limbic system and its functioning formed to give expression to recall, learning, eating, spitting, fight, flight and fright. The word limbic comes from the Latin word limbus meaning ring. Hundreds of millions of years later the brain evolved into what we know it to be today. For purposes of this article let's refer to the more primitive brain, the limbic system / brain as the "old brain" and the more evolved brain as the "new brain" which in its sophistication develops complex reasoning, long term memory and intellect.

There is a close connection between the old and new brain. Any stimuli that we receive, first gets processed by our old brain, our limbic system which then activates higher centres from the new brain, which then directly activate parts of the body necessary for immediate and effective response.

Often though when stimuli are strong our "old brain" jumps the queue and activates our periphery: muscles, blood flow, heart rate, eyes etc., not giving our "new brain" a chance to reason and plan. In essence, our "old brain" hijacks the body and our intellect; and it is at this point where a person suffering with panic feels it impossible to override this feeling nor have control over it. The power of the resultant panic and fear makes the person want to do only one thing, namely, to flee and get to a safe place.

However, despite the intensity to try and "get to a safe place" away from these feelings fleeing is not always the best nor most logical response, Today's complex life style and environment often require from us to stay calm and collected in moments that are uncomfortable and perceived as unsafe (most often due to lack of understanding and knowledge).

To re-gain control over this emotional and brain hijacking, it is of utmost importance to attempt to prevent its occurrence in the first place and if not possible, then to recognise what is happening and use the strength of our "new brain" to over power it as soon as possible. By doing so outputs from the "old brain" will get redirected and channelled to the "new brain" which will in return reason and harmonise the panic.

This is the basic principle around the physiology of fear. Let's take a closer look at the psychology of fear and see how the two systems, physiological and psychological, operate to create distress around the fear of flying.

The Psychology of fear

During a panic attack, and whilst the "old brain" is in hijack mode, many suffer intense emotional trauma, very real to their minds and justified to them by their bodies' symptoms and responses. What are these emotional states we go into at this moment and what do they mean?

The difference between fear, anxiety, phobia and panic attacks

The feeling that "I'm not in control" is related to fear, anxiety, courage, and self-direction (Rachman, 1978). Studies of wartime pilots, for instance, show that fear and courage are

related to (a) feeling competent, (b) feeling in control, and (c) not wanting to "let down my buddies." Feeling out of control is scary. And it's unchallenging ("What can I do?"). Several leading test pilots refused to become early astronauts because they had little control in Project Mercury--they felt like "spam in a can" (Wolfe, 1980).

Fear: fear involves specific objects or events and is a reaction to a present danger

Anxiety: anxiety is regarded as a more general emotional state, anxiety is a reaction to an anticipated or imagined event.

Phobia: a specific but persistent irrational fear.

Panic attacks: The person who has panic attacks **interprets (thinks that)** certain bodily sensations as being a sure sign of an impending disaster: getting breathless means he/she is about to stop breathing and die.

Where do all these negative emotions come from?

For each person, the experience of fear of flying is unique and can be attributed to one if not many reasons. Some of these reasons include

- ❖ Early object loss or separation anxiety in childhood.
- ❖ Psychological and cognitive vulnerability
- ❖ Interaction between psychological and biological factors
- ❖ Displacement: because of a previous 'bad' experience, the belief and anxiety over something terrible happening again is assumed in any situation that reminds the person in whatever way of that previous moment where they felt so 'bad'.

Steps To Dealing With Fear of Flying

Assuming that medication is or is not involved, the following steps can be utilised to resume what I refer to as your command ability. The aim is to change your thoughts. We **think** in many ways that handicap and disturb ourselves. The **thoughts** occur so quickly and automatically that if we remain emotionally unaware and leave the thoughts or push them aside, they don't disappear but rather accumulate until they get to a point where your reaction in a given situation doesn't make sense to you.

- ❖ **Step 1:** acknowledge you have a problem.
- ❖ **Step 2:** want to change the problem. (if the will to change **sincerely** is not there, then the problem will not go away)
- ❖ **Step 3:** identify at what point the panic about the flight begins to stir.
- ❖ **Step 4:** identify your **thoughts**. What are you thinking about that is making you anxious.
- ❖ **Step 5:** write them down
- ❖ **Step 6:** follow a relaxation technique to get into a space where you are able to think more clearly and rationalize your thoughts to your own mind. (please see www.flightcheck.co.za to purchase the relaxation CD)
- ❖ **Step 7:** replace negative thoughts with positive affirmations.
- ❖ **Step 8:** repeat daily

Don't be afraid to take some time to look at your fears and your thoughts about what is making you fearful. Sometimes people don't want to do that because it means that they will need to get out of the panicked comfort they have got used to; they have become accustomed to that panic and chaos and in a strange way find it a safe place to be for various reasons, sometimes self-serving. Panic is not the way the body is made to function in the world. Change is hard for most people because what was once a predictable situation now becomes unpredictable and so on. However, what we all want to create is positive predictability rather than predictability that is perpetuated through negativity. It is when we want sincerely to change feeling bad that we stop making the excuses that keep us stuck in destructive comfort zones. This is where you are in complete control. That is, in recognizing that the choice to change from perpetual negative spirals to positive outcomes lies solely in your will to do so...and then doing it.