

'stop the PLANE!'

Use these five strategies to help you overcome not just a fear of flying, but any phobia. By Karen J. Bannan



"Stop the plane!" Did I just scream that? I must have, because every passenger is staring at me – the terrified 20-something in the black business suit. Back the plane went to the gate, making me the least popular passenger of the several hundred on board. I disembarked, and after a couple of difficult days, returned to the airport to complete a white-knuckled flight.

I'd had a flying phobia since my teens, but in my 20s it became acute after I took a great job that *required* travel. Afraid to tell my new boss, I dealt with my fear as best I could until my outburst. Six months later, I left the job.

About 6.3 million Americans aged 18-54 suffer from some kind of phobia, says the National Institute of Mental Health. The NIMH defines a phobia as an intense, illogical fear of a particular object or situation. Common sources of phobia include dogs, closed-in places, heights, escalators, tunnels, highway driving and flying. I finally signed up for behavioral therapy, which helped me manage my fear and start to fly again without panic. The strategies I learned can help anyone. Alice Domar, Ph.D., director of the women's health programs at Harvard Medical School's Division of Behavioral Medicine, suggests these five to try:

- 1. Admit there's a problem.** People underplay their fears or avoid discussing them because they're ashamed. "It's embarrassing to be afraid of something that most people don't think is frightening," Domar says. Once you admit your fear – to yourself and to others – you can start working toward getting over it.
- 2. Phobias are rooted in the unknown. Educate yourself.** Often, people who are afraid to fly do not know how a plane stays in the air, or they think that planes crash more than they do. I became less anxious after I did some

research that showed accidents and fatalities are quite rare: In fact, in 15 years of operation, Boeing's widely used 757 has never been involved in a fatal crash in the United States.

3. Reflect on what you're really afraid of. Write down any feelings or memories you have that relate to your phobia. Once you know what triggers your fear, you can start dealing with it. For me, it was the plane's noises that started my panic: I thought the plane was falling apart. I learned in therapy that what I really feared was not being in control. When I learned what each noise represented – wing flaps, wheels, a flight attendant's signal – I felt more in control. Once you discover what's behind your panic – most people do so in some type of therapy – you can begin to deconstruct your phobia.

4. Be aware of your body. Fear causes physiological changes: Your heart races; your breathing becomes shallow and rapid. Most people don't notice these physical symptoms when they're in panic mode. If you pay attention, you'll be able to keep them from taking control. By breathing slowly and deeply (inhaling from your belly, not your chest), your heart rate will slow and you'll think more clearly, helping to stem the panic.

5. Designate your own word or phrase to stimulate relaxation. A common phobia treatment called systematic desensitization teaches you to gradually

I was not too popular when the plane began to taxi back to the boarding gate.

connect relaxation with the dreaded object or situation. It can take weeks or months of practice before you succeed in linking a word or phrase to a reduction of panicky symptoms. For me, it was repeating the word "calm" over and over whenever I'd get anxious before or during my flight. "You can do minirelaxation sessions by repeating your phrase anywhere you go," Domar says. "Listening to a relaxation tape on a Walkman and deep breathing also help."

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