

Coping with Fear of Flying

Objective

To reduce anxiety associated with flying using an eight-step process.

What to Know

Flying-related anxiety affects as many as 40 percent of the population, and those who have learned to manage their fear share a few common traits, including:

- accepting their fear, no matter if it seems irrational
- understanding that even though they have coping skills, they may continue to experience some anxiety while flying
- having the ability to strongly connect with their motivation for taking a trip
- comforting themselves
- distinguishing between whether something is frightening or truly dangerous
- accepting whatever needs arise from facing their fears

Here are several suggestions to help you overcome your fear of flying.

- 1. Seek individual or group therapy** to desensitize you to triggers and regulate physical sensations. Find a professional who specializes in treating fears and phobias.
- 2. Explore classes and coaching** that use simulations, virtual reality, or actual flights. Check out the [SOAR program](#) (*includes an app you can use while flying*), [Freedom to Fly](#), [Fearless Flight](#), and the [Fear of Flying Clinic](#). Some programs use exposure and response prevention (ERP) with virtual reality (VR), which involves exposing you to feared situations, then training you to cope in a healthy way. ERP and VR allows you to recreate the physical sensations of being anxious.
- 3. Practice mindfulness.** Relaxation, breathing exercises, and meditation can help calm you. Try an app like [Headspace](#) or [Calm](#).
- 4. Actively redirect.** Focus on something else, like reading a book or listening to soothing music.
- 5. Consider medication.** As-needed medication can reduce anxiety and give you the space to use coping skills. Sometimes, just having medication as an option is enough.
- 6. Plan supportive actions.** Meet your needs in whatever ways will help you. For example, exercising before a flight, arriving at the airport three hours early, or watching funny videos. Include soothing items in your carry-on bag.
- 7. Learn about aviation.** Fear of flying can stem from a lack of understanding, so learning about how planes work can be helpful. For example, through aviation education, you can begin to challenge catastrophic thinking by telling yourself the bump you hear is not the plane falling apart—it is the landing gear extending.

This worksheet will help you begin to reduce your fear of flying with several helpful exercises.

What to DO

Use the following 8-step process to begin to reduce your anxiety and fear of flying.

Step 1. Do the following and write about your experience.

- Think about flying.
- Remember a past problem you had related to flying.
- Imagine that same thing happening to you in the future.
- Pay attention to how your body responds.
- Note worries that arise about body sensations or symptoms.

Step 2. Allow yourself to really experience discomfort, and practice the Calming Breath and Calming Counts exercises.

Calming Breath

- Take a long, slow breath in through your nose, filling your lungs.
- Hold your breath to the count of “four.”
- Exhale slowly and relax the muscles in your face, jaw, shoulders, and stomach.

Calming Counts

- Close your eyes and sit comfortably.
- Take in a long, deep breath in through your nose, filling your lungs.
- Exhale it slowly while saying the word “relax” silently.
- Now, take ten natural, easy breaths. Count down with each exhale, starting with “ten.” Notice any tension, perhaps in your jaw or forehead. Imagine those tensions loosening.
- When you reach “one,” open your eyes.

Practice each exercise several times a day whenever you want to release tension and experience calmness.

Step 3. Take control by becoming tense purposefully and voluntarily. Practice the following exercise.

The Ten-Second Grip

- Grab the arm rests in your seat and squeeze them as hard as you can, tensing your lower and upper arms.
- Tense your stomach and leg muscles.
- Hold for ten seconds while you breathe deeply.
- Let go of the tension with a long, gentle Calming Breath.
- Repeat two more times.
- Shift around in your seat and shake your arms, shoulders, and legs.
- Gently roll your head a few times. Continue to breathe deeply.
- Close your eyes and gently breathe for thirty seconds. Let your body feel warm, relaxed, and heavy.

Step 4. Any time you experience anxiety or panic about flying, use the following exercise.

- Take a Calming Breath. Feel the physical sensations.
- Observe one physical sensation. Say to yourself, "I'm going to take control of this sensation. I will now increase [*name it*]."
- Consciously increase that sensation.
- Now try to increase all the other sensations you notice. For example, you might say, "I would like to perspire more than this. Let me see if I can become very dizzy and make my legs turn into jelly, right now."
- Continue breathing naturally while you consciously try to increase all your physical sensations.

Step 5. In addition to the exercises described above, choose at least three of the following actions to increase your comfort when you plan to fly.

____ Reduce caffeine and sugar intake the day before and the day of your flight.

____ Drink lots of water to avoid dehydration from the dry plane air.

____ Avoid drinking alcohol before or during the flight.

____ Pack your carry-on with comforting items, such as a good book, crossword puzzles, your favorite music, snacks, and so forth.

_____ Get to the airport early.

When you are onboard:

- Get comfortable in your seat and do some calming exercises or talk to the person seated next to you.
- During takeoff, wiggle your toes for one minute and take Calming Breaths.
- During the flight, ask the flight attendants about any sensations on the plane that bother you.
- Pull out items from your carry-on bag and distract yourself.
- When the seat belt sign goes off, stand, stretch, or take a walk.

Step 6. If you begin to worry or start to experience physical sensations, use affirmative statements that start with “It’s okay . . .” and “I can . . .” For example, “It’s okay to be nervous,” and, “I can handle these feelings.” You might say, “These feelings I’m having are uncomfortable, but they’re not dangerous,” or, “I can stop these worried thoughts now.” Respond to negative thoughts about the flight with positive ones. Here are some examples.

- “The pilots are well-trained professionals whom I can trust.”
- “This plane is safe.”
- “Turbulence may feel uncomfortable, but it’s not dangerous.”
- “This is not an emergency.”

What else can you tell yourself?

Other: _____

Other: _____

Step 7. You can stop or delay your worries or create “worry time.” If you worry for days or weeks before a flight, use thought-stopping or delaying your worries. In many situations this will work. But sometimes you may find that your worries are intrusive and persistent, and thought-stopping and delaying fail. In that case, use Worry Time. Try it for the two weeks before the flight. Avoid using it on the day of the flight.

Thought-Stopping

- Notice that you are worrying (“I’m starting to feel really uncomfortable.”).
- Decide you want to stop (“The turbulence can’t hurt this plane, even if it might spill my drink.”).
- Yell “STOP!” in your mind and replace your thoughts with affirmative statements.
- Start Calming Counts or another relaxation technique.

Delay Your Worries

- Agree to pay attention to your worries instead of resisting them.

- Choose a specific time in the future to worry.
- When that time arrives, start worrying. Write them down. Or choose to postpone them.

Create a “Worry Time”

- Schedule two daily “Worry Times” of 10 minutes each.
- Spend this time thinking only about your worries about flying.
- Avoid convincing yourself that your worries are irrational.
- Become as anxious as possible while worrying.
- Continue to the end of each worry period, even if you run out of ideas and repeat the same worries again.
- At the end of ten minutes, let go of the worries with Calming Breaths.

Step 8. Imagine yourself in a past flight in which you had distress or anxiety. Pay attention to body sensations as you mentally review the scene. Visualize stepping into that scene and notice what happens. Rate how you are feeling from 1 to 10, where 1 = completely calm, to 10 = extreme anxiety or distress: _____

Imagine which skills will be most helpful to you. Visualize yourself on an actual flight, during takeoff or at cruising altitude in turbulent air. How would you typically respond? Try one or more of your coping skills. Write down all the skills you think might help you on the flight. If you need ideas, refer to the previous steps.

Practice Step #8 several times, until you notice how your body and mind easily shifts from tension or anxiety to calmness.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you while completing this activity? Explain.

What was the biggest obstacle you encountered when completing this exercise? Describe.

Were you successful at reducing your anxiety about flying? Yes / No

Why or why not? _____

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
