

Fear of Flying: Learning to Fly Comfortably

If you are afraid of flying, you've got lots of company. Various surveys suggest that 1 in 5 or 1 in 6 Americans identify themselves as "fearful flyers." Some experience only moderate apprehension before a flight and more acute distress during take-off. Others fly but live in fear of even the slightest turbulence. For others, the fear of flying may keep them from visiting relatives, taking a job promotion that would require occasional travel or taking a trip they've dreamed about much of their life. Such avoidance can contribute to marital friction when one partner very much wants to travel. It can lead to marked shame and self-denigration among those who feel that they cannot face flying. For some, the fear of flying is an isolated concern; for others, it is just one dimension of a broader anxiety disorder.

Fear of flying can take many forms, most commonly including:

- Fears about the safety of flying. Most people assume that the fear of crashing is paramount, but this is only true for 1/3-1/2 of fearful flyers. Such fears are more pervasive after a well-publicized crash.
- Fear of frightening feelings, including "feeling out of control" and the symptoms of a panic attack.

and/or

- Associated fears:
 - a) claustrophobic concerns
 - b) fear of the unknown or misunderstood
 - c) fear of giving up control
 - d) fear of the possibility of turbulence or bad weather
 - e) fear of losing composure or "making a scene"
 - f) fear of heights

Coping With Fears About the Safety of Flying:

Fear: "The plane is likely to crash. No matter how safe they say it is, it feels like my plane is the one that will go down."

Rational response:

- Various studies report that the computed death risk per flight on a scheduled domestic airline is between 1/5 million and 1/10 million.
- A study of airline fatalities between 1989-1999 suggested that someone who takes a

daily airline flight could, statistically speaking, fly every day for 31,000 years before facing a fatal crash. (Barnett, MIT)

- When corrected for the number of travelers involved, it is estimated that you are from 19 to 89 times safer each time you travel by airline than you are each time you travel by car. Because of frequent exposure and familiarity, when we travel by car, we can retain our illusions of control and safety. (Imagine if you traveled by car as rarely as you fly and that each automobile fatality was given media attention comparable to airline crashes!)

- Average annual fatalities in the United States:

Automobile occupants = 40,000

Pedestrians = 8,000

Airline passengers = 100

- Most of our everyday activities involve some measure of risk that we construe as an “acceptable risk” in the service of convenience or pleasure. It is estimated that flying on a major airline is safer than using electrical power, bicycling, swimming, hunting, x-rays, and anesthesia. Statistically, the risk of fatality by airline flight is comparable to the risk of fatality by taking a bath.

- The compelling news headlines, videotaped images and computer recreations after each major crash sensitize all of us to the potential dangers of flying. In contrast, this tiny newspaper article appeared on p. 22:

- In any given three month period, there are more people killed on American roads than have been killed by all the airliner crashes in the history of American aviation.