

A LINE ON LIFE

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Fear of Flying ¹

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Recently you have been hearing much about airplane crashes in the media. If you weren't already afraid of flying, this might help to create a fear of flying. Approximately 25 million Americans refuse to get on a plane, while another 30 million have a great deal of anxiety while flying. According to a 1989 Gallup poll, 45% of all Americans have some degree of anxiety about flying. Fear of flying keeps people from visiting distant friends or relatives or accepting jobs that involve frequent flying trips. What can be done about **aerophobia** – the fear of flying?

Even with the recent crashes, only about one-third of aerophobics are afraid of crashing. Some suffer from **claustrophobia** – fear of closed-in places – or **acrophobia** – fear of heights – while others need total control of their environment, which is lacking as an airline passenger.

A relatively new method to combat aerophobia involves seminars led not only by a psychologist – but also by an airline pilot. One of these seminars, a two-day, weekend session started by American Airlines, is called the **AAir Born Program**. At first, clients complete questionnaires on their personal background. After a getting acquainted period, the meetings – usually held at an airport – involve discussion of panic attacks, anxiety and phobias. All clients receive instructions on how to reduce their tension through rhythmic breathing, muscle-relaxation exercises, guided imagery and a new way of thinking about flying.

*"...now that I knew what was going on,
I didn't have to be afraid any more."*

Much of this thinking is changed by the pilot explaining the mechanics of flying, while the clients tour the cockpit of the plane. Many fears are caused or made worse because we do not understand what is happening. If you don't understand the normal operating sounds of an airplane, they can be frightening. The high-pitched whine as wing flaps extend or retract or the thump as the landing gears finish retracting can signal the anxious person that something is wrong – until the normal operating sounds are explained.

The program concludes on an actual commercial flight with the leaders present. Most of the clients are initially anxious when they begin the flight. With the support of others, the use of anxiety-reducing methods and their newfound knowledge of what to expect during the flight, most gradually lose their fear and enjoy the flight. Of the over 3,000 people

who have gone through the AAir Born program, 90% successfully finished their graduation flight.

In their book, *The Fearful Flyers Resource Guide*,² publisher Barry Elkus and psychologist Murray Tieger indicate that over 35 fear-of-flying programs are offered throughout the United States. Most of these programs declare a success rate of at least 80%.

With the crashes cited in the media, some of you won't even want to try such a course. However, some statistics given in the AAir Born program might change your mind. In the United States, an average of 66 people are killed per year in airplane accidents. In contrast, 12,000 Americans die each year from *merely eating food!* (Why do you think they teach the Heimlich maneuver in first aid classes?)

The media report plane crashes from all over the world in headlines, but you rarely or never see an eating death on the front page. Not only are rarer events more newsworthy, but if anyone dies in a crash, there are usually multiple deaths. Another point is that we can avoid flying – if we fear it. It would be difficult or impossible to avoid eating, wouldn't it?

If similar programs do not exist in your town, you can probably find one within easy driving distance. Who knows? You just might be able to fly back.

1 Adapted from Scott Sleet's article, "Psychology takes the fear out of flying," in the [APA Monitor](#), December, 1994, pages 6-7.

2 *The Fearful Flyers Resource Guide* can be obtained by writing Argonaut Entertainment Inc., 455 Delta Avenue, Suite 204, Cincinnati, OH 45226.