

FEAR OF FLYING: A LETTER TO A FRIEND

Dear Michael,

Spring is here and we've been talking about resolving your fear of flying for many springtimes. One part of you definitely wants to be finished with this incapacitating fear while another part of you procrastinates and can't tolerate the thought of meeting with a psychotherapist to exorcise this demon, this debilitating phobia.

Now that you have retired and have the time, money and desire for enriching travel, your eyes light up. Your wife Lorraine is eager for carefree vacationing and feels helpless and powerless to combat your fear of flying. Lorraine's eyes will light up as you stamp out your fear of flying.

Another aspect that I imagine is confounding for you is your incredible competency in every other part of your life, a hugely successful professional career, a loving family, life-long friends, and impeccable self-discipline. There's only this one impediment. Now is the time to eradicate it.

Self-Treatment

Michael, since you have not been able to bring yourself to seek help from a therapist trained in treating fear of flying, I am going to outline for you a self-treatment program that I am confident you will complete because you are highly motivated and amazingly self-disciplined. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Step one is sitting down and making a conscious decision to eliminate your fear of flying. I say sit down in silence and solitude and connect with your decisional power to make a 100% commitment. For example, "I will do whatever it takes to overcome my fear of flying. I am totally committed to do the work each day to achieve my goal." Without this step, there is no success.

Step Two is the actual self-treatment that has six sub-steps. This requires fifteen minutes each day until the fear is dissolved. Stay tenacious, as 4-6 weeks is the norm.

- Enter into a meditative state. Focus on your breathing. Release tightness and tension as you exhale. Practice being observational of your thoughts, feelings, mental images. Accept what comes into your awareness and then let it go, let it float by like a cloud in the sky.
- Visualize yourself doing those aspects of flying that are both comfortable and uncomfortable for you. Watch the entire movie. Start with your thinking about the flight weeks or months in advance. Go through the entire process from start to finish, i.e. thinking about the flight well in advance until actually disembarking from the plane. Create your own virtual reality. Enlarge and

color the positive parts of the flight with vivid detail while darkening and diminishing or shrinking the unpleasant parts.

- Add positive self-affirmations to your visualization. For example, "I am calm. I am relaxed. I enjoy managing myself, my thoughts and my feelings. I am powerful." Write down any and all negative or anxiety producing thoughts and replace them with positive self-talk. For example, "I can't stand flying. I'll never be able to relax in an airplane," becomes "Each day I'm becoming more and more calm and relaxed as I visualize myself flying."
- Take the time to visualize specific roadblocks, obstacles or fears that cement you in fear of flying. Oftentimes the specific fear will be an irrational cognition or belief. A pivotal challenge is tuning into or noticing the negative thought.
- Visualize yourself overcoming your specific fears. The more you relax the greater will be the number and variety of creative counter-measures that come into your mind. Enjoy the journey!
- See yourself succeeding. This is your reward! All your hard work is paying off! Just as our brains believe whatever we tell ourselves, seeing ourselves succeeding is the same as actually doing the behavior. Ask Jack Nicklaus who created a positive visualization before each swing of his golf club.

Additional Measures

To supplement the self-treatment steps outlined above, here are some additional measures to consider.

- Take time to reflect and identify any Action Steps you may need to initiate that may be unique to you. For example, see yourself on the vacations you yearn to experience.
- Identify rewards for yourself upon accomplishment of the self-treatment steps.
- Set deadlines. Be powerful. Meet your deadlines. For example, "I will write down all negative and positive beliefs and self-talk. I will review and revise them each Saturday morning."
- Enlist the regular support of one or two significant friends who are eager to give you candid feedback.

Face It or Fear It

Regardless of what specific fear you wish to eradicate, the fear must be repeatedly faced until it dissolves. Common fears are public speaking, heights, driving over the Bay Bridge. While this self-treatment approach will be effective for a high percentage of people, another option is intensive psychotherapy to identify the root issue. Michael, I am confident you will be successful using this self-treatment approach. I believe in you.

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