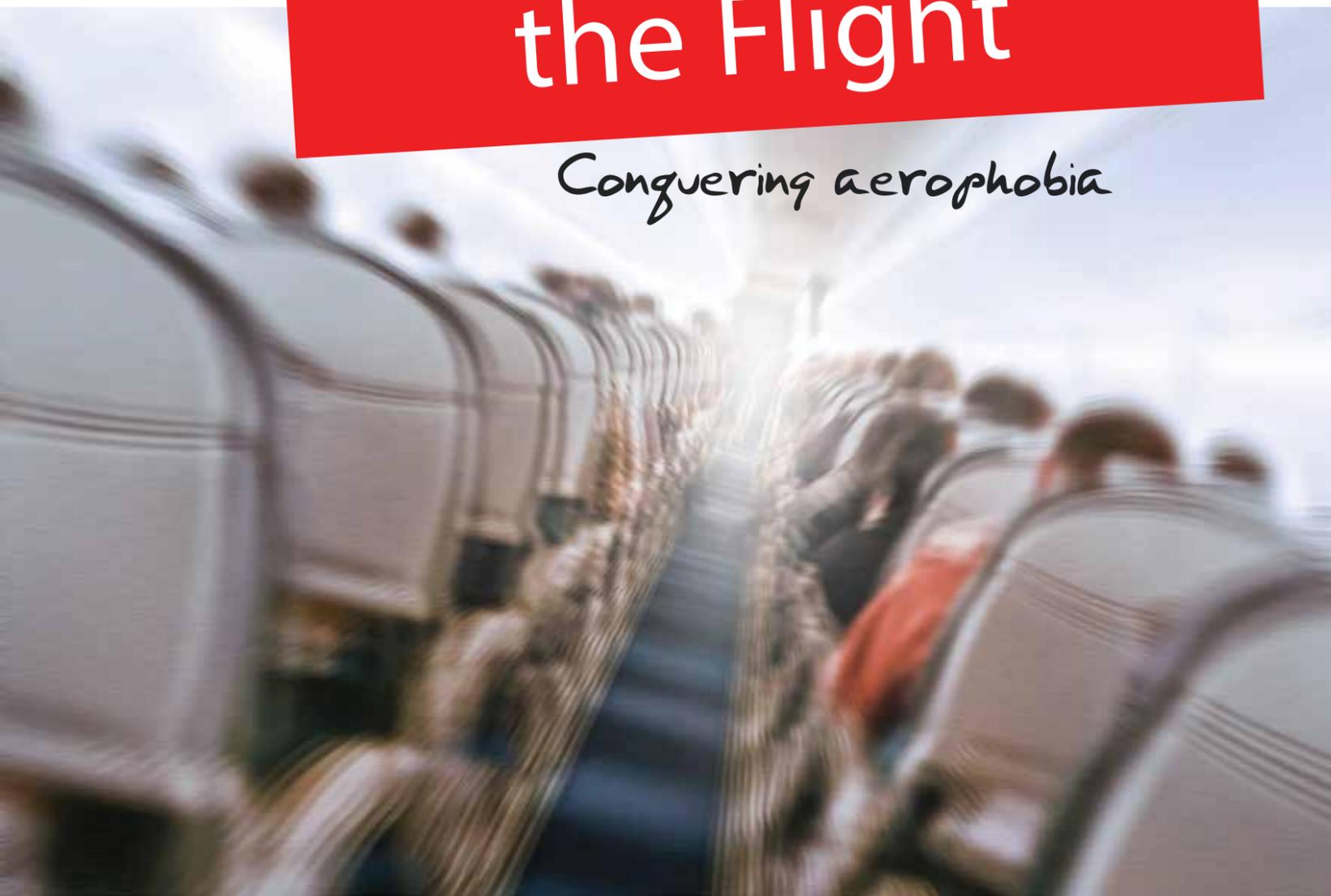


# Don't Fret the Flight

## Conquering aerophobia



Dr. Joaquin Munoz\* of Mexico City is the picture of success. A physician, professor of medicine and world-renowned medical researcher, he travels all over the world delivering academic papers.

But, until a few years ago, he had a huge problem.

Dr. Munoz was terrified of flying, and his fear was as phobic as you could get. And since his profession required that he travel extensively, he resorted to extreme measures.

For years, he hired a private jet complete with an anesthesiologist who traveled with him in order to fully anesthetize him during every flight. Eventually his three children married and moved to the U.S., and his strategy was no longer tenable.

"He was becoming a grandparent," says Dr. Greta Hirsch, clinical director of the Ross Center in Washington and a leading expert in the use of cognitive-behavioral therapy for panic disorders, phobias and other anxiety disorders. "He wasn't

willing to give up seeing his kids and grandkids, so I did cognitive behavioral therapy with exposure — meaning I flew with him as part of his treatment."

Within a couple of weeks, Dr. Munoz was finally able to fly on regular commercial airlines. "He went from a worrier to a warrior," Dr. Hirsch says. "Now I get cards from him from all over the world because he got back his freedom and is no longer a slave to his worries and anxieties."

### Enslaved to Fear

Many people who have suffered from fear of flying describe their fear as exactly that — a form of slavery, along with a complete loss of freedom. The phobia takes over their lives and impacts the people around them.

"Some people will take a train from New York to California to avoid taking a plane," says New York-based psychotherapist Barbra Waldfoegel. "Getting hooked by a fear of flying affects your family, costs you more money and alters your lifestyle."

In her years treating phobia patients, Dr. Hirsch has seen the trail of devastation it leaves. "If someone doesn't get treated, sometimes they'll miss family weddings, it'll restrict where they go on vacation, it'll limit the jobs they take. It can cripple someone's life."

Most people recognize that their phobias aren't rational. After all, flying is statistically one of the safest forms of travel. There's a 1 in 114 chance of Americans perishing in a car crash, according to data from the U.S. National Safety Council. But the chance of dying in an air transport accident is infinitesimal in comparison at only 1 in 9,821.

The fear of flying can include a dread of crashing, terrorism, being trapped in confined spaces, or a fear of having a panic attack — even if the person is aware that these are irrational responses. "A lot of people are not in the moment," Dr. Hirsch says. "They're thinking future catastrophic thoughts."

Suri Epstein

### Conquering Fear With Knowledge

Sometimes the phobia can strike unexpectedly.

Shlomo Nir of Ramat Gan always loved flying. "When I lived in New York, I used to hang out at a small non-commercial airport and would offer to barter my photography for rides in small planes," he says. "For me, flying was a lot of fun."

He enjoyed flying so much that if he had to fly long distances, he'd choose flights with stopovers so he could experience the thrill of landing and takeoff multiple times.

But all of that changed the year that his business started to unravel. "I felt like I was losing control of my life," he says. "I wanted to have some control, but when you fly, you give up control to the pilot."

His work required extensive travel, which became more and more problematic. On one occasion, he had to fly to a remote location in Maine. "I called the airport to find out what kind of aircraft I'd be taking," he says. "They told me it was a small plane, so I canceled the flight."

When he flew, he would obsessively imagine everything that could go wrong, his anxiety starting well before he left his house for the airport. "On the plane, I'd look at various passengers and think that maybe they're a bomber or a hijacker. I'd worry that maybe they missed the metal detector so I'd be second-guessing security. If there was a strange sound and the flight attendant didn't look concerned, I'd be convinced that she was putting on an act so the passengers wouldn't be scared. If turbulence hit, it was awful. I was terrified."

He endured one particular flight from Calcutta to Uzbekistan that was a nightmare. "The plane dropped and rocked from side to side. The woman next to me was screaming. In my mind, I said goodbye to my wife and daughter," he says.

Shlomo began to read everything he could about flight technology, learned about the statistics, and began to trust the expertise of

pilots. "I got to the point that if I felt something, I wouldn't attribute it to danger, but to how the plane works, when they lower the wings or wheels. I knew which airplanes would glide. I did research and it made me calmer. When you know how the plane works, it's not as frightening."

He also prepared himself for flying by riding as a passenger in a car. He'd close his eyes, feel the bumps in the road and pretend that he was in an airplane. All of his efforts paid off, because he currently is able to fly and only needs to listen to music to stay calm.

### Disempowering Anxiety

Dr. Hirsch has found that the worst thing a person can do when phobic is avoid the activity. "Every time you avoid something, even at the back of your brain, you reinforce the anxiety," she says. "Giving into the anxiety is akin to rooting for it and empowering it, because you haven't faced your fear. In the back of your mind, it's *good* you didn't do it because you wouldn't be able to tolerate it."

Rivky Shisgal of Yerushalayim never had problems flying until her engagement. She was traveling from New York to Chicago and the plane experienced what she perceived as an irregular takeoff. She's not quite sure if it lasted for a few seconds, a minute, or even if it happened at all. But she became convinced that the plane was going down. The situation got worse after she got married, and she and her husband flew on a small eight-passenger propeller plane. That solidified the fear, and she developed a full-fledged phobia.

"We do so many things in our lives and don't even think about the dangers," Rivky says. "But once you experience something unusual, you start becoming aware of potential danger."

The panic would start when she left her home and only grew as she traveled along the highway and got closer to Ben Gurion airport. She knew that her fear was irrational, but she still couldn't control her terror. "I was trying to keep the plane up. It was crazy. As soon as there was any turbulence, I went into panic. I'd have tremendous out-of-control anxiety and grip the armrest as if that was going to save me. I was afraid of crashing but I was also terrified of the panic. It was tremendous suffering."

Rivky finally sought help. She started with a hypnotist and ended up with a psychologist who

made recordings for her and taught her to calm herself by visualizing all of the steps that she took from the time she left her house, arrived at the airport, went through security, until she sat on the plane. She learned how to breathe deeply and constantly calm herself as soon as the first signs of panic flared up.

This method was successful and Rivky now flies on a regular basis. "Still, I'm not cured," she says. "I'm all right and I can do it. I listen to music on my earphones and I can stay calm."

According to Barbra Waldfogel, "You're not necessarily ever going to *like* flying, but you'll do it. The goal is not getting rid of anxiety. The goal is to be willing to experience anxiety and have effective strategies to allow yourself to be who you want to be. Imaginal exposure and 'dropping anchor' (grounding yourself in the present when emotionally stressed, like pushing your feet on the floor to feel the ground beneath you) are examples of strategies that allow you to have the courage to go on the plane and enjoy your life without letting your fear of flying be an obstacle."

Or, as Dr. Hirsch tells her patients, "Our goal is to be able to do anything and everything that someone without anxiety can do."

### A Surprising Case

The oldest patient Dr. Hirsch ever treated for fear of flying was a man in his 80s. What was even more unusual was his profession.

He was a pilot.

He'd been a fighter pilot in World War II and flew as a commercial airline pilot throughout his career. His phobia was triggered when he started to wear a medical bracelet. Donning that device brought back a traumatic childhood memory of being confined in a small space. He then started feeling trapped when he was on a plane and also when he had to undergo medical treatments like getting an MRI.

"We did a lot of exposures on the claustrophobia fear," Dr. Hirsch says. Exposure therapy can be imaginal and use visualization, or it can be "in vivo" and involve going to an airport, flying, or entering some sort of a physical re-creation. "We replicated what it would be like to be in a hospital bed with the rails up, which of course they have to do with someone who is 81 years old."

Dr. Hirsch talks about a "fear hierarchy" that



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identifies fears from the simplest to the most frightening. She helps patients develop tools for managing each level of anxiety. "We work on a patient's cognition, so they're no longer sending danger messages to themselves," she says. "You work on their behavior, how they hold that tension in their body, how they go through progressive muscle relaxation, and being in the moment and not the 'what if' thoughts."

### The Best Visualization: In Hashem's Hands

For Shlomo Nir, one of the most powerful tools was an inner one. "There's a spiritual aspect here," he says. "We're always in Hashem's Hands. When you cross the street, when you're in your home, or even when you take a bath, because there could

be risk in anything."

He received advice that became an integral part of his flying experience. "The turbulence was always the worst, but someone told me that when you're flying you should imagine that you're in Hashem's palm, that He's holding you as He transports the plane in a way that's not perfectly steady. That helped me quite a bit."

There are numerous techniques for overcoming phobias that range from deep breathing to visualization, summoning all five senses, developing mindfulness patterns, visiting airports, entering controlled spaces, and watching flight videos.

"The bottom line is that it's very treatable," Dr. Hirsch says. "And it's not long-term treatment either." ●



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