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Travel

# Grounded by fear: A woman tackles the panic attacks that kept her from flying



(Niv Bavarsky/For The Washington Post)

By **Adrienne Wichard-Edds**

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Last summer, my husband and I and our two teenage boys flew to Iceland, then England, and then home to Virginia. For me, this was not just a vacation; it was a personal triumph. It was the first time I had flown across the Atlantic in almost two decades.

In my mid 20s, I had planned a seven-week trip through Europe. But halfway across the ocean and unable to sleep, I monitored our flight path on the screen in front of me and watched as the land on both sides of the map disappeared from view. A sickening panic gripped me as I realized that if I wanted to get off now, I couldn't — that in case of emergency, our tiny icon of a plane had nowhere to land.

When I landed in London, I was leveled by tidal waves of anxiety that I didn't understand and couldn't shake. I was emotionally and physically drained, and now unable to eat as well. I barely had energy to sightsee, and spent much of the next six days on the phone talking through my unfounded

despair with my bewildered parents and boyfriend back in the states. I was dead weight that my travel partners optimistically lugged around the city, for which I felt doubly guilty.

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I cut my trip short and returned home, defeated.

At home, fear circumscribed the radius of safety around me. I forced myself to get out of the house each day but could barely get on a plane, much less leave the country. After I read a magazine article about someone who had panic attacks, I began to wonder if that's what was going on with me. It was: I got a diagnosis of panic disorder .

### **An overactive amygdala**

"Travel anxiety is very common," says psychologist Greta Hirsch. Hirsch is the clinical director of the Ross Center for Anxiety in Washington and was the first person who helped treat me after I was diagnosed . "I see people who miss family weddings, parents whose kids ask why they can't go to Disney World, professionals who pass up promotions because they're completely avoiding traveling."

### *[When Americans land in trouble abroad, these expats step in]*

Hirsch says travel anxiety comes when people give in to the anticipation of catastrophic events that never occur. It falls into two categories: claustrophobia and fear for safety — sometimes a combination of the two. Physiologically, this is often caused by an overactive amygdala, which is the fear center of our brains and responsible for keeping us out of danger. Both types of anxiety stem from a perceived loss of control, although Hirsch quickly points out that any sense of control is an illusion, and that not only is flying the safest form of travel, the risk of death by air travel is statistically the same as the risk of death by bathing — and that rarely do you freak out when you have to take a shower. "The desire for control is false, but ironically, when you're looking for control and you start to panic, the anxiety ends up controlling you."

To combat this, Hirsch employs a combination of talk and exposure therapy — accompanying her clients into places that trigger their anxiety, then helping them de-escalate their fears — to help clients devise ways to deal with unexpected stress. She also works with them on accepting physical symptoms, such as an increased heart rate, shaking and cold sweats. "None of these symptoms is any more dangerous than when you experience them during a workout at the gym," she says. "The key is learning how to recognize your thoughts and feelings for what they are by staying in the moment."

### **Addressing shame**

But because panic attacks (and, frequently, the ensuing depression) feel shameful and preposterous, people who experience them often don't know how to identify them and are too embarrassed to talk about them. We beat ourselves up thinking: What's wrong with me? Why can't I just be happy? We learn to avoid triggers and make excuses.

It helped me to learn that my panic attacks, which cropped up seemingly out of nowhere after two decades of fearless travel, were probably rooted in a genetic predisposition coupled with a traumatic event that I hadn't recognized as a trigger. The week before my college graduation, a stranger broke into my house in the middle of the night and attacked my roommate. The fact that we had been so vulnerable — that there was nothing I could do help her, the survivor's guilt that it didn't happen to me — haunted me in ways that it would take me years to understand.

During pregnancies, my anxiety and, coincidentally, the need to travel, subsided. I

wondered if it was gone for good. But the first time I tried to get on a plane without my kids, I found my panic attacks right where I'd left them, waiting for me on a Friday afternoon flight from Reagan

National Airport to LaGuardia Airport in New York that was delayed on the runway. After an embarrassing moment when we pulled away from the gate and I experienced a panic attack so severe that the flight attendant asked the pilot to turn the plane around for me, I decided I was done with panic. I was sick of being the problematic wife, mom, friend with anxiety — especially now that my self-imposed limitations would be affecting my kids' lives, too.

I found a therapist who was able to see me during the precious few hours each week when both of my kids were at preschool. When she heard about my experience with the break-in, she suggested that my anxiety was a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, and that EMDR might help. She explained that EMDR, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, is a form of psychotherapy that aims to help our brains reprocess traumatic memories by recognizing them as past events and not present threats via a set of eye movements thought to be biologically connected to the Rapid Eye Movement stage of sleep, as well as therapeutic discussion.

If this sounds kooky to you, you're not the only one. The psychological community hasn't wholly embraced EMDR as a valid form of treatment, but even if it didn't cure me completely, it did help — and certainly did no harm.

It also helped me to recognize how not-alone I was — and the more open I was about my own struggle with anxiety, the less intimidating it became. Therapist Jean Ratner, founder of the Center for Travel Anxiety in Kensington, Md., says that many of the people she works with had their first panic attack while on a plane — or crossing the Chesapeake Bay Bridge — and so have linked the two experiences.

“They think, what if I have a panic attack on the plane and make a fool of myself? What if I'm terrified the whole trip?” Ratner says. She helps them deal with these fears and symptoms on the ground, in everyday situations: “I design exercises for them to practice ahead of time — say, if they're stuck in traffic or waiting in line at the grocery store — so they can figure out what techniques work for them to help calm them down in stressful situations.” She'll also record calming messages and talk clients through strategies that they can listen to on their flights.

A former anxious traveler herself, Ratner knows how helpful those positive messages can be.

“I've gotten to the point where I can travel halfway around the world,” she says. “I've traveled to places like Australia and China. When I get nervous, I tell myself this: There is nothing wrong with the activity of being up in the air in this plane. What's wrong is that it's hard for my brain to wrap itself around the idea that it's not unsafe.”

## **A calming presence**

Steven Eskew, owner of Kent Island Express, sees this daily in his job driving people across the Bay Bridge. Eskew says his customers, who include airline pilots and therapists, may know that their fears are illogical but are afraid that they'll panic on the bridge and cause an accident. He drives at least 10 to 15 people across the Bay Bridge every day, twice as many in summer months. For \$35 each way, nervous bridge-crossers can meet up with Eskew and have him drive their car for them. He'll chat with his customers affably until they're comfortably on the other side, where a member of his staff drives him back to his office.

### *[Ready to go it alone? Tips for easing into solo travel.]*

“The majority of people's fear is not even the height of the bridge but the fact that it turns,” Eskew says. “People can't see the past the crest of the bridge so they feel like they're going to fall off — I call it ‘Christopher Columbus fear.’ Most people are fine once they've crested the bridge and can see the other side.”

Therapist Tom Bunn, a retired pilot who, in 1982, founded the video-based program SOAR to help people get over their fear of flying, says that this type of calming presence is exactly what anxious travelers need to help reprogram their negative thinking.

“Anxious travelers have an overactive parasympathetic nervous system,” Bunn says. “They get revved up and have a hard time calming down. But what helps calm the system is presence of someone you trust — like your best friend or a loved one who cares for you.”

Bunn tells me that if I ever get nervous on a flight, I should imagine that my best friend just walked through the door, said hello and gave me a hug. “Those three things — their face, voice and touch — will automatically start to calm you down.”

Bunn also suggests talking to the flight crew to let them know I’m a nervous traveler. (He sends clients a form letter they can hand to a flight attendant.) “You can ask to board early and visit the cockpit,” Bunn says. “Giving up control is tricky, but if you can meet the person who’s in control, that can be helpful.”

My friend Mary, a commercial airline pilot and former Navy aviator, likes to tell me that if I could spend one flight in the cockpit with her, I wouldn’t think twice about flying again. “Pilots are all so relaxed up there,” she assures me. “We’re completely confident in our equipment, our skills and our crew.”

Even if there’s unexpected weather or an engine failure, she promises me it’s no big deal.

“Planes can find somewhere else to land and even fly with only one engine,” she says. “Every nine months, all pilots go through extensive simulator training in conditions much more difficult than would actually be encountered.”

What us civilians know as turbulence, pilots call “light chop.”

“It’s just like going over bumpy water when you’re in a boat. None of us are sitting up in the cockpit thinking, *‘Oh no, here comes turbulence!’*” she says.



The author near London's Tower Bridge in July 2018. (Kevin Edds/For The Washington Post)

After two decades, I've learned to expect anxiety, not fear it. If panic does start to creep in, I channel the wisdom I've picked up over the years to help get myself into a calm place. I carry prescription medicine just in case, but I rarely use it. I continue to set goals for myself rather than avoiding the things that make me nervous: flying without my kids and letting them fly without me. My charge to myself isn't to fly without fear but despite it.

I also celebrate my achievements, anodyne as they may seem to others. Traveling requires me to plan feverishly, then relinquish control and be okay with whatever unfolds. I know that whatever awaits me on the other side of the plane will be worth it.

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