

WORDS ANNA RICH

How to... fix your fear of flying

We take you by your clammy palm and help you board.

Megan Fox listens to Britney on her iPod during flights 'because it's not my destiny to die listening to a Britney Spears album.' Unkind, maybe, but she's not alone in needing to find some way of coping – fear of flying (FOF) is a common phobia. An *American Science* study calculated that for flying to carry the same risk as driving, a plane crash as disastrous as 9/11 would have to happen every month. But the point is, phobias are not rational.

Why am I so afraid?

Fearful fliers are invariably intelligent people with vivid powers of imagination, says pilot and therapist Captain Tom Bunn, who runs a programme that is successful in countering FOF in the US. (See www.fearofflying.com.) If FOF sufferers hear an unnerving sound, for example, they immediately imagine the worst, he says. 'Because these images seem so real, they produce the same physical effect as actual danger. When you face danger on the ground, you do something about it. But at altitude, you can't take control – you feel helpless and trapped.' The fear of flying isn't really about the risks inherent in aviation, it's the fear of what might happen rather than what is, says www.guidetopsychology.com/airfacts.htm. 'Up in the sky, sealed in a



'I pity the fool who likes to fly.' For BA Baracus (Mr. T) of *The A-team*, the fear was intense; his mates had to knock him out or drug him before flying.

machine, we can hear our deepest whisperings of vulnerability more clearly than anywhere else.' It might also be another thing you could blame your parents for: neuropsychologist Allan Schore points to research using neuro-imaging that suggests that phobias like FOF could be related to 'chronic exposure to emotional dysregulation in childhood from a misattuning primary caregiver which hindered the development of the right prefrontal orbital cortex', so the brain is less able to carry out its role of emotional regulation. Simply put, if your parents didn't provide a secure attachment and instil in you ways of calming yourself in the face of uncertainty, you're more likely to feel anxious.

What am I afraid of?

Take your pick: fear of in-flight mechanical difficulties, turbulence or bad weather, heights, being over water, flying at night, the unknown, terrorism, claustrophobia, boredom, crashing, lack of control; there are as many reasons as there are FOF sufferers.

Can I fix my phobia?

Yes, you can, says Prof Christine Lochner, clinical psychologist at the Dept of Psychiatry, University of Stellenbosch. 'As with any other phobia, frequent exposure to what you fear is the most effective way of overcoming it.' And understanding why you find flying traumatic informs how you treat it, she adds. Knowledge of the principles of aircraft flight, what each noise means and how pilots deal with bad weather and turbulence is a start. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), systematic desensitisation and hypnotherapy are helpful. (See box for SADAG details.) Medication can also help, but psychiatrists are unlikely to prescribe medication that has to be administered irregularly. Some doctors prescribe sleeping pills, and many passengers rely on self-medication at the bar (which worsens the effects of flying on the body). Whatever route you take, here's to flight-free flights. ♣

Quick fixes

Fear of Flying Course

Duration? 1 day Where? Morning side, Jo'burg Who presents it? A psychologist and a pilot. Cost? R5500, including flight. Does it work? There's a money-back guarantee. Contact? Anxiety and Trauma Clinic (011) 883 4552, fly@atclinic.co.za

Cheaper Tricks

- **Understand the science:** guidetopsychology.com/airfacts.htm
- **Book the best seats:** an aisle seat if you're claustrophobic; up front if you hate turbulence.
- **Get to the airport in time** – rushing heightens anxiety.
- **Counter your vivid imagination with strong visuals:** flick through FAIRLADY (really).
- **Distract yourself:** watch the film, listen to music, eat that meal.
- **Do relaxation exercises:** see the in-flight channel and magazine.
- **Visualise** something that comforts you; call it up when fearful.
- **Try these online programmes:** www.guidetopsychology.com/pmr.htm; and www.guidetopsychology.com/neghyp.htm. Worth a shot.