

Question and Answers About Anxiety and Fear for Pilots

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1. I Had an Anxiety Attack While Flying

Dear Rod:

I'm an engineer and flown for years and have accumulated over 3,200 hours of flight time.

On a cross country trip in April I experienced an anxiety attack while flying alone, and had to make an unscheduled landing. I have never experienced anything like this before.

I have made a dozen flights since this occurrence, with a safety pilot, and still can't get comfortable. No further episodes but a general uneasy feeling. I am able to fly the airplane well and have never struggled with my flying ability. Since flying is such an important facet of my life, I feel a great loss. Do you have any suggestions or information on this matter.

Thank you,

Dan

Greetings Dan:

First, let's be clear about what you experienced. Most likely, you didn't experience the clinical (DSM) version of an *anxiety attack* or *panic disorder*. If you did, you would have experienced heart palpitations, dizziness, sweating, trembling, chest pain, choking, chills, panting or rapid breathing. You've not indicated experiencing any, or even one of these. In my opinion, you don't need professional therapeutic help (and if you ever decide to visit a professional mental health worker for this or any other problem, please consider the serious consequences in regards to how the FAA might interpret the event. In other words, make that visit but only if it's absolutely necessary. Sorry, but the FAA isn't very understanding when you visit a psychologist/psychiatrist for a mental problem. That's why I recommend that you first try to solve your problem by yourself, just as people have been doing for thousands and thousands of years).

Over the years I've known more than a few pilots who've managed to scare themselves by dwelling on aviation accidents or by not actively searching for a solution/antidote to something that frightened them. Some, like yourself, even considered giving up flying. Let me provide you with a little perspective on the problem and suggest a possible remedy.

Attacks of uneasiness or discomfort can be caused by any number of problems. They may be physically based where someone with a biochemical imbalance in his or her brain feels anxious in the presence of a

stimulus. I'm assuming that this isn't your situation, since this is a rather rare cause when it relates to a cause of the uneasiness or discomfort problem when it relates to a medically certified pilot. A more common cause is that which stems from a psychologically healthy pilot dwelling too long or too intensely on some area of aviation danger or specific aviation event (i.e., falling, in-flight fires, mid-air collisions, etc.) that might result in injury or death. This is more properly referred to as an attack of "fear" since it references a specific event, but I'll use the term "uneasiness or discomfort" to represent lesser degrees of the problem. These are common reasons pilots experience attacks of uneasiness or discomfort.

For instance, I knew one pilot who was obsessed with losing consciousness (passing out) in an airplane while flying alone. After many months of dwelling on the topic he felt an increasing sense of anxiety while aloft. Finally, he decided to quit flying because the pleasure he received from being in an airplane was diminished by his constant sense of fear. He eventually found his way back into the cockpit but only after I pointed out that he had never lost consciousness in his entire life and that he was unlikely to do so based on his current state of good health. I told him that he was going to have to convince himself that his fear wasn't logically based given his good state of health.

This wasn't, however, the hard part of his road back to flying. Remember that he had spent many months reinforcing the idea that he might lose consciousness in the cockpit. As a result, he would now need to spend at least an equal amount of time reinforcing the idea that there was no logical basis for him to ever worry about passing out while aloft. In other words, he would need to tell himself through frequent verbal repetition (or other form of reinforcement such as journal writing) that he was in good health and that, since he had never lost consciousness before, he was therefore unlikely to do so in the future. He also needed to use whatever visual reinforcement was necessary to further reinforce this idea, too. This means visualizing himself remaining awake and alert under different flight scenarios. How much self-talk and visualization was necessary here? That's a very subjective question, but the best answer is: enough to induce a sufficiently positive change in his own behavior.

As an additional step in helping him return to the cockpit, I suggested that he try to modify his environment in some way to diminish his initial fear. We discovered that one of his concerns was not being able to descend in sufficient time to land before passing out (keep in mind that this isn't necessarily a logical assumption as much as it is a "psycho" logical one). The solution that he found helpful was to fly at lower altitudes, at least until he found it more comfortable to do otherwise. As an aside, I've known pilots with a similar problem who were anxious (to the point of being "dis"tressed) about falling asleep on long night flights (a form of losing consciousness). These folks reduced their cockpit anxiety by carrying loud "bell-type" clocks with alarms set and reset to ring every 15 minutes. In this instance, the pilot simply resets the alarm every 15 minutes, thereby helping reduce his anxiety about falling asleep when tired. My point here is that some modification in a pilot's environment is often helpful in getting that pilot back into the cockpit.

OK, that's a basic model for dealing with self-induced attacks of uneasiness or discomfort. Now let's look at your situation more closely.

While I'm not sure what's causing your uneasiness or discomfort, there are a few possible categories that it might fall under. You might either fear losing consciousness as we previously discussed. Structural failure might be another concern. In-flight fires, flight control malfunction and mid-air collisions can also be a source of worry. On the other hand, the problem might be an existential one where the detachment and separation from earth generates a source of anxiety that doesn't seem to have any specific cause. So, we might separate all these sources of anxiety into two categories: *mechanical sources* and *existential sources*. Let's examine how we might handle the mechanical sources of anxiety first.

In case you haven't noticed, the new Cirrus aircraft is very popular for a very important reason: it comes equipped with a ballistic parachute recovery system (it's also a wonderful airplane and fun to fly, too). This is a great source of relief to many pilots who worry about not being able to handle serious mechanical problems aloft. But not everyone can afford the hundreds of thousands of dollars necessary to buy one of these airplanes. Therefore, if a pilot is immobilized by the anxiety of mechanical problems I suggest that he buy a parachute and carry it with him in the airplane.

Sounds crazy? It really isn't crazy.

Aerobatic pilots wear parachutes and the pilots of Cirrus airplanes bring a one-size-fits-all parachute along for everyone onboard. There's nothing crazy about this at all. Seldom, however, will any pilot need to use a parachute because the airplane, itself, is intrinsically safe. Nevertheless, the reason you might bring along a parachute is to help diminish your anxiety, not because you'll need to use it. If you are about ready to give up flying because of anxiety induced by mechanical worries, then carry a parachute with you if you so desire. Do this even if you decide not to wear it while flying (many of the newer parachutes on the market are actually very comfortable to wear in the cockpit). I'm not at all concerned whether or not you've taken a parachute course, either (however, it would be preferable if you did). The fact is that it's very, very, very unlikely that you'll ever need to use a parachute. Once again, the main reason you'd carry one is for comfort (of course, if you are planning on flying with someone else in the airplane then you might want to bring along more than one parachute otherwise it will be your passengers that feel the anxiety). On the other hand, instead of carrying a parachute, you might find it just as helpful to learn all the necessary survival skills to handle in-flight fires, prevent mid-air collisions, manage flight control failures and so on. These can be learned by listening to my In-flight Emergency lectures found on "*Rod Machado Live – 14 CDs*" set. This set contain 4.5 hours of information on how to handle in-flight emergencies.

Now, let's move on to the existential source of anxiety I mentioned (jump directly to the article titled, *Pilot Demons*, that is also relevant to the issue of anxiety here). It's often more difficult to identify the root cause of this type of problem. The only thing you are sure of in this instance is that you feel uneasiness or discomfort, but you can't put your finger on the reason why. In these instances, it's as if there are two different parts of our human psyche acting in opposition when existential anxiety is present. One part is the *logical* part that tells us there's no good reason to feel this way; the other is the *anxious* part that compels to behave this way. Unfortunately, our anxious part often seems to grow in dominance, its voice and presence often gaining an ever increasing influence over our behavior. The logical part of ourself, however, often recognizes this unwanted growth. As a result, we might consciously try to *dismiss* the psychological meddling of our anxious part. Unfortunately, this occasionally produces just the opposite effect, resulting in our anxious part increasing in strength and gaining even more influence over our behavior. Here's where the problem becomes serious and must be handled properly.

Goethe, the famous German poet once said that he never dismissed any of his *personal thoughts* no matter how disgusting, grotesque or disturbing they may be. He realized that these thoughts belonged to him, were his, were part of his human condition and therefore he let them into his psyche for one reason: *so as not to give them greater power by dismissing them*.

Goethe seemed to have a keen understanding that there was great peril in dismissing a psychic part of him that he didn't like. Instead, he realized that it was better to recognize these thoughts for what they really were—errant or perhaps spurious ideas that didn't actually reflect his true values or beliefs.

For instance, suppose Goethe had violent and disturbing thoughts about doing severe harm to someone who said that reading *Faust* was like going through hell in a gasoline suit. By letting these thoughts into his psyche instead of dismissing them, he could coolly and calmly consider the consequences of this behavior then

debate himself over whether or not such an idea was useful or practical. On the other hand, suppose he said to himself, “No, I won’t think of such things. These are terrible thoughts. I refuse to acknowledge them.” It’s a good bet that these disturbing ideas might have taken residence in his mind, perhaps becoming more powerful and developing ever more influence over his behavior. You may have experienced something similar to this phenomenon when you’ve tried to keep a song out of your mind. If you think, “I want to stop thinking about this song. I want it out of my mind,” it’s more likely that this will just reinforce the song’s presence, helping it stay longer. If, however, we just let the song into our mind by recognizing its presence and stop trying to will it away, it’s likely that it will disappear from our awareness much more quickly.

Likewise, one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, similarly had to deal with his sometimes disturbing thoughts, which he referred to as his *demons*. For instance, in the book *Jefferson’s Demons*, Michael Beran details Thomas Jefferson’s battle with the many different and sometimes disturbing voices and personas with which our third president struggled. Like most intellectuals of his time, Jefferson was skilled in the classic literature of the Greeks and the Romans. He knew that the ancients perceived these demons and their accompanying voices, as instructional forces that could either hobble a man’s creativity or help him marshal it effectively. Socrates, for instance, was known to chat with his demons, which the great Greek sage recognized as nothing more than the whispers of his conscience.

Like many great men of the Renaissance, Jefferson learned to carry on conversations or dialogues with these internal voices, his demons. In the process, he and others like him, found a way to talk to themselves, letting their wiser parts offer counsel and guidance to their more troublesome personas. This is the means by which Dan and pilots with similar afflictions might come to terms with their demons and the uneasiness and discomfort they produce.

Your job here is not to interpret your anxious parts as foreign intruders. Instead, it’s to do what wise men have done for years (with great success, I might add). Let those thoughts in and treat them as allies. Accept that anxious part(s) of you as a natural part of your psyche in much the same way that Goethe, Socrates and Jefferson did. This is the first step in dealing with cockpit anxiety. The next step is to find a way to make this ally work for you.

Consider this anxious part of you as an overseer of your safety. If your anxious part suddenly chills you with pictures of danger or peril, acknowledge this as well intended advice from a part of you that’s concerned for your safety. If you like, talk to this part of you (you can do this subaudibly or, if you like talking out loud and are in a public place, hold a cell phone up to your ear as you talk. This way no one will think you’re kooky. But don’t accidentally make a call or the person on the other end will think you’re kooky). Respond to your anxious self by saying something like, “OK, thanks for the warning and the information. I do appreciate it but I’ll be fine.” Then go about your business always keeping in mind that you welcome thoughts and ideas from your anxious part.

Remember, it’s because we treat our anxious voice as unnatural that it takes on an unnatural presence in our psyche. Once we begin treating our anxious part as a nagging mother instead of the grim reaper, it often begins to offer us something good instead of winding us up into a frenzied ball of fear. For years psychologists have talking about our different parts and the problem with denying them. Jung, the Swiss psychologist, once talked about the *shadow* that seems to reside in the background of our consciousness. You can think of the anxious part of you as Jung’s shadow. Making that shadow an ally instead of recognizing it as a foreign intruder is the key to keep from being spooked and immobilized by its presence.

These ideas are not based on mysticism, instead they are derived from the basic principles of existential philosophy. I can assure you that these ideas work for many people. I’ve seen them applied successfully both in and out of aviation. I hope they help you. I wish you the best success in dealing with your anxiety problem.

2. I failed Two Checkrides-Help!

Dear Mr. Rod:

I unfortunately have failed two checkrides while performing a non-precision partial panel approach with a holding procedure. My brain just turned to mush in both instances. In my training prior to and after these events, there has never been a problem in this area. Is this a case of checkride-itis? Do you have any words of wisdom?

*Much thanks,
Mushman*

Dear Mushman:

As you well know, we call it a partial panel approach because we don't realize how partial we are to all those instruments until some are missing. This is indeed a challenging part of the instrument checkride. The secret solution to your problem is in realizing that there is no secret. If you want to overcome your performance anxiety (and that's what you have) don't look for special cures in nicely worded discussions about encouragement or in coveted mystic techniques that involve incense and planetary orbits.

The solution here is twofold and simple. First, keep doing partial panel instrument approaches but do them in such a way that your instructor demands more and more of your performance on each attempt. There should be less and less tolerance for heading, altitude, and course deviations. This should help simulate and acclimate you to the mental pressures similar to what you've experienced on the checkride.

Next, give up the assumption that you must pass this portion of the checkride on your next attempt (I'm assuming that you only need to be rechecked on this area of your performance). As far as you're concerned, if it takes you 10 more attempts to pass the partial panel, non-precision holding portion of the checkride, then so be it. There's nothing wrong with wanting something so much that you can't imagine living without it. If, however, your desires sabotage your performance (as it appears to be doing here), then you need to change your level of expectation regarding your performance (which should be to get the rating no matter how many times you have to retake the ride). The sooner you approach the checkride on these terms, the sooner your performance will improve on your next attempt.

3. Spouse Has Acrophobia in Small Airplanes

Dear Rod:

I have a potential student whose husband recently purchased a Cessna 172. She has yet to fly with him as a passenger nor has she started her pilot training. In fact, she's never flown in a small airplane. She appears sincere in her interest to learn but is concerned about her acrophobia. Yes, she has a fear of heights and complains that she can't look over her home's second floor balcony without feeling queasy. She says she's not afraid of flying on a commercial airline but she's never been in a small airplane. She's worried that she'll experience her fear of heights during flight training. Is this a hopeless case? Is there a theory that explains acrophobia? How should I go about introducing her to flying?

*Thank you in advance,
John*

Greetings John:

No, I don't suspect this is a hopeless situation at all. You might be surprised to learn that an aviation professor at the University of Southern California once told me that the rate of acrophobia in some of the pilot

groups he's encountered is upwards of 90%. This is pretty interesting when you consider that acrophobia in the nonpilot population is only about 6-10%, depending on whose study you read.

My experience also indicates that acrophobia is more common among pilots than nonpilots. Now, I'm not suggesting that her fear of heights qualifies her to be a pilot. I do, however, suspect that it won't have the same effect on her when she's inside the cockpit of an airplane as opposed to looking over her balcony. Here are a few things to consider.

Many pilots still enjoy flying even though they have some degree of acrophobia. That's because there seems to be a difference in how they experience acrophobia.

Many pilots with acrophobia report that they, too, often have great difficulty looking over the edge of a tall building. I've known a few who must get on their belly and crawl to the ledge just to peak over the side. Some even report getting woozy while watching a TV show where a camera pans from the steeple of a building then tilts downward toward the ground. (Some pilots might get queasy just reading this.) Others can't even climb a ladder to change a light bulb. Yet these same individuals willingly enter an airplane and blast off without giving it a second thought. What's happening here?

Perhaps the best explanation deals with pilots' sense of control over their environment. For instance, a current cognitive theory describes acrophobia as generated by the stimulation of a visual fantasy. When a pilot approaches a precipice, he or she responds with an inner visual drama. He may see himself falling and might even feel the physical sensations of sliding, tilting and being drawn over the edge. This is called somatic imaging and it helps explain a phobic's feelings of dizziness or queasiness in high places. To put it simply, pilots—who like being in control—don't react well to thoughts of falling. It's the ultimate loss of control for them.

This explains why pilots with acrophobia seldom experience symptoms in an airplane. Sitting in the cockpit gives them a definite sense of control. Consider that a pilot's left hand controls bank and pitch, his right hand controls power and his two feet control yaw. The pilot has immediate control over four separate items. If this doesn't give an aviator a sense of control, then not much will. The pilot is also sitting down, strapped in by a seatbelt, feels his feet firmly planted on a solid surface (the rudders, hopefully) and is looking through a force field (Plexiglass). All of these conspire to provide the pilot with a sense of physical stability and protection, thus diminishing or eliminating his or her acrophobia.

It's my guess that your student's acrophobia won't manifest itself in the cockpit the same way it would while looking over the edge of a building. So explain these concepts to her. Let her know that, while acrophobia isn't uncommon in the pilot population, its symptoms don't manifest themselves in the cockpit. Explain why. Then, if she elects to fly, give her the one thing that makes a pilot comfortable in the airplane: a means of controlling her environment. Since she doesn't know how to use the controls to do this, give her the power of veto. Inform her that she can stop the flight or stop any activity just by speaking up. Of course, you must make good on this promise.. Then introduce the flight controls to her in the same manner you would any other student.

4. I Find Reasons Not to Fly

Dear Mr. Machado,

I have read many of your articles on the Internet and in Flight Training magazine. I have noticed your references to fear and flying and enjoyed your article on finding reasons not to fly. Well, I hate to say it, but after 80 hours of student flying I find myself looking for reasons not to fly. I soloed after 45 hours, which was one of the most courageous things I have done in my 40 years on this earth. It was a moment I will cherish for my remaining years.

Shortly after that I went too far from the airport. Upon turning around I realized that there was nothing but 23 miles of air between the runway and me. After a few moments of terror, I made an uneventful return to the nest. The next flight out I had trouble with the electrical system and lost the radio. I followed standard procedures for landing at my towered field. I didn't start shaking until I shut the plane down. My instructor advises me to just keep flying and it will get easier.

I wonder if you have any advice to help me get past this wall. I would greatly appreciate any help you can give.

*Thank you,
Max Fear*

Greetings Max:

Your question and others like it are the most frequent questions I receive at Flight Training. So here are a few additional thoughts to add to those that I've already provided on aviation fear.

There are basically three ways to deal with aviation fear. You can deal with it logically, by trying to understand why your fear may be irrational. You can deal with it emotionally, by trying to understand how your attitudes, expectations and values generate and support your fear. You can even deal with it behaviorally, by conditioning yourself to be less fearful. I've discussed all these methods and their combinations in previous writings. I haven't discussed a fourth way to attack your fear and that is to attack your fear.

Let's suppose you are fortunate enough to train with a very wise flight instructor. He or she would most likely try the methods mentioned above to help you overcome your fear. If these methods fail to produce positive results, I have a good idea what this wise person would do next. He will probably sit you down, look you straight in the eye and ask, in a rather stern (but compassionate) voice, "Max, just what the heck are you so afraid of? Why do you seem unable to thrive on all of the challenges flying offers? Why are you so frightened when there's no obvious reason to be scared?"

It doesn't matter how you respond because these questions are more rhetorical than fact finding. You see, the instructor's objective is to kindle within you a fire of anger at your apparent willingness to be a slave to your own fear. I say willingness because, at this stage, it's more likely that you aren't doing enough on your own to solve your fear problem. That's why your instructor wants you to become angry—angry enough to fight that fear. He's attempting to provoke your natural instinct to fight what oppresses you—your fear. And there's nothing like oppression (self-imposed oppression in this instance) to foment a fighting response.

This is very similar to dealing with the school bully. Some would have you talk to the bully, flatter the bully, or even alter your life to avoid the bully. Either way, you lose and the bully wins. But in most instances, if the bully hits you and you hit him back, then you win, even if you lose the fight. At the precise moment you stand up and fight, you diminish that which frightens you.

Max, if other means of handling your fear haven't worked, then you need to fight. You need to stand up for yourself and fight your fear as many, many others have done in the past. In the same way that people overcome their fear of public speaking by speaking in public, you need to get in the airplane and confront that which scares you. You will, of course, do it smartly and with common sense.

If you're scared of spins, you'll fly with a CFI who you respect and spin until your head spins. If you have to (and can afford to), you'll spend 10, 15 or even 20 hours practicing spins if necessary. The same applies to stalls, turbulence, and anything else that you might fear. If you're fearful of heights, you'll take skydiving lessons. If you're fearful about flying more than 23 miles from the airport, then force yourself to fly 23.5 miles from the airport today. Tomorrow fly 24 miles. The next day do 25. Yes, this may be scary, but so what? You

were scared when you went too far from the airport, but you weren't hurt, right? You were scared when your radio failed, but you weren't hurt, right? As long as you confront your fear in a safe and responsible manner, you won't get hurt. If flying is important to you and traditional means of handling your problem fail to work, then confront the thing that scares you head on. Let your anger (at what fear does to you) be your sword. Let it motivate you to stand up and fight for yourself. Then, grab your fear by the ears, wrestle it to the ground and thump it a few times until you're no longer scared of it.

I have seen this method work many times in airplanes, the karate school and on the speaking platform. It might just work for you.

If this approach fails to produce satisfactory results, then you have an important decision to make. You need to decide if you can live with your present ratio of aviation pleasure to aviation discomfort. If not, then have the courage to admit that being a pilot isn't for you. At least you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you tried to overcome your fear. There's no shame in trying and failing. You only dishonor yourself if you fail to try.

5. Pilot Afraid of Gusty Winds

Dear Sir:

I fly a Warrior and have nearly 100 hours of time. I hate to admit it, but flying in gusting wind really unnerves me. I even sweat and shake in these conditions. Recently, I flew a long cross country in gusty winds and had to call Approach Control to help me get to the airport. I'm about ready to give up flying if I can't get over this feeling. Flying hasn't been an easy thing for me. I need a solution. Help!

*Thank you,
Alice*

Greetings Alice:

Yes, wind can be a problem. Without knowing all the specifics I can only offer some general advice.

First, there are two general reasons pilots fear gusty winds. They fear the airplane will either come apart in flight or be rendered uncontrollable and flip over like a flapjack. I've written quite a bit about airplane strength—they are incredibly strong—so let's focus on controllability and flapjacking. First, airplanes are seldom flipped over by wind. In seminars I ask for a show of hands of those who have been turned upside down by the wind. When I ask the two in a hundred who raise their hand about the conditions in which they were flying when the event happened, I always get the same answer: the winds were in excess of 25 knots near mountain ranges (more like 35-50 knots). Furthermore, I've been flying near mountains for nearly a third of a century and have yet to be flipped inverted by winds. Nevertheless, if the thought of being flapjacked frightens you, then visit a skilled, competent aerobatic instructor. Spend one lesson learning how to return an airplane to the upright and locked position if it's flipped upside down. A good aerobatic instructor can teach you to do this on the first lesson (and this isn't unreasonable for you to learn, given your flight time).

Your problem, however, more than likely stems from another issue. I suspect that you haven't learned that there are times when it's necessary to physically muscle an airplane instead of being gentle with it. Yes, I know that pilots are taught to be smooth and gentle on the controls but the wind doesn't care about a pilot's daintiness. The more turbulent and gusty the wind, the more aggressive you need to be with those controls.

For instance, if you're on final approach and the wind lifts a wing or yaws the airplane, then do something about it. Don't just sit there like a meditating Buddha. Move those ailerons to keep those wings level and press that rudder to keep the nose straight. Be aggressive enough to accommodate the situation.

In most instances where I've encountered pilots who fear the wind, these same pilots are terribly deficient in rudder and aileron coordination. In one instance, a pilot had both feet folded under his seat as he tried to wrestle the plane to the ground in gusty winds. I recall looking over at this fellow, incredulous that he didn't feel the need to use rudder in controlling his airplane. That's when I said, "Hey, Lotus Blossom, how about letting me see some rudder action here?"

If you're on final approach in gusty winds, keep that nose perfectly straight (in the desired direction) with those rudders. Don't let it move an inch. Keep those wings level (until necessary to do otherwise) with the ailerons. Don't let them bank even a few degrees. If you can't use your flight controls in this manner, then it's unlikely that you'll ever feel confident about the ability to control your airplane in gusty-wind conditions. Yes, there's a time to be smooth but there's also a time to be aggressive on those flight controls.

6. Pilot Entered Clouds and Now is Frightened to Fly

Dear Rod:

Last year I did something very stupid. I'll skip the details. I'll just say I entered IFR conditions shortly after takeoff (500ft AGL) and was unprepared for it. I was mad at myself for making such a dumb mistake but figured it was something I could learn from. I'm instrument rated with 1,500 hours. As I entered the clouds I went on the gauges. No problem, right? Wrong. I perceived the turn coordinator to show a left turn and the AH showing a right turn. In seconds I was in a developing graveyard spiral. I survived but only by a few hundred feet. I did everything wrong. Had it been night, I wouldn't be here today. It's nine months later and I'm still scared of VFR flying and flying instruments. Any suggestions on how I can regain my confidence!

*Sincerely,
Bill*

Greetings Bill:

I once had a student who managed to spin an airplane while performing basic maneuvers in the practice area. He returned to the flight school scared to death. I knew that if he left the airport in that condition, he'd never return. So I dragged him back out to the airplane where we discussed the problem, then flew to the practice area for some stall and spin practice. Getting him back in the air liberated him from his fears. You need to do something similar. Unfortunately, you've waited nine months, which gave your fears time to multiply.

Find an instructor you trust and get back in the air. Do it on your terms: VFR, IFR, day or night, it doesn't matter. Just fly. When you're feeling more comfortable, have the instructor put you through a strenuous partial panel exercise. I suspect your unusual attitude was caused by misreading the attitude indicator's sky pointer or horizon line (not an uncommon problem, either). I caught one of my students doing something similar once. He interpreted the AI properly only when I asked him, "Which wing was pointing toward the ground?" A question you might ask yourself if you ever has a similar problem.

Don't let fear rob you of a very important part of your life. Fly now.

7. Wife Bounced on Landing and Now is Scared to Fly

Mr. Machado,

My student pilot wife had a landing go awry during one of her solo flights. From what we could put together, she was a bit hot on landing and bounced the Cessna 152. The plane got into a series of bounces that she described as getting more and more violent. The last bounce caused the nose gear to collapse and the prop to strike the runway.

Now she is very unsure what to do. All the confidence that she built up has totally evaporated. She has no trouble flying with me or going out with an instructor. While she won't admit it, I think she is scared to death to be alone in the plane. How can she regain her confidence in this situation?

*Thanks,
Tom*

Greetings Tom:

I know a lady who was attacked by a mindless thug. She wasn't badly hurt but was traumatized by the experience, nevertheless. She enrolled in a self-defense class where she learned kung fu (and several other Chinese words). Soon she gained confidence and her fears diminished. I think a similar parallel exists here.

In your wife's eyes, she was attacked by a problem that scared her. So, the first thing to do is understand the threat, then learn a little aviation kung fu to defend against it. It sounds like your wife experienced something known as a porpoise (the tuna-free kind). Porpoising can occur if a pilot attempts to force the airplane onto the runway at a higher than normal speed. This allows the nose-gear to contact the runway slightly before the main gear does. It can also occur if a pilot lands hard on the main gear, resulting in the airplane pitching forward onto the nose gear. Either way, the airplane responds by pitching up and becoming airborne. The pilot typically reacts by applying too much forward elevator pressure, resulting in the nose gear, once again, making hard contact with the runway. The cycle repeats itself, often with more devastating oscillations, sometimes resulting in a damaged nose gear.

Of course it doesn't have to end this way. Pilots can learn to handle this problem by having their instructor simulate porpoising on landing, then practicing the appropriate defense. Given a slightly higher approach speed, the instructor can simulate the initial bounce of a porpoise by letting the main-gear wheels touch the runway (not the nose-gear wheel!), then pulling back on the yoke gently enough to raise the airplane two feet into the air. At this point, the student, who has followed through on the controls, should take over and practice the recovery. He or she does so by continuing to flare the airplane instead of shoving the yoke forward, which caused the porpoise in the first place. This means that elevator pressure must be applied so as to prevent a further climb as well as a rapid descent. Of course, the instructor should demonstrate how and when to use power to maintain sufficient speed during this maneuver. As a final maneuver, the student should be shown how to go around from the top of the porpoise when landing is no longer an option.

This is how a little aviation kung fu can prevent chop suey gear. The success of this solution, however, lies in how the problem is packaged. Make sure you identify the problem (the porpoise) as a specific event with a specific defense. This eliminates the mystery and provides your wife with a means of controlling her destiny in an airplane. While there are several other ways to increase her confidence, I believe this approach will be the most beneficial and have an immediate effect.

8. My Students Are Frightened to Land on a Short Field

Howdy Rod:

I am a CFI and am having problems getting my students to land at our home field. Our airport is approximately 2,150 feet long with one end of the runway pointing toward a hill and the other toward power lines. These obstacles are scaring my students to the point where they do not want to fly on certain days, especially if it's hot and humid. They are even more hesitant when crosswinds and turbulence are present in the summer months. I have tried many techniques and offered reassurance, but nothing seems to work. I've told them that they won't solo until I'm sure they can handle all the challenges. I am at a loss as to what else to do to alleviate their fears. Any advice that you might have if you have the time would be greatly appreciated.

Buck,
CFI

Greetings Buck:

I think I'd be scared to land at that airport under those conditions, too! I suspect that hangar stories from other more experienced pilots around the airport are the possible genesis for your students' concerns. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that you'll be able to obtain a restraining order to prevent others from blabbing these stories in the presence of your students.

I think that I'd handle all future students like salespeople handle a client's most common objections: up front. Specifically, address this difficulty with your students during the first few hours of flight training. Address it in a way that educates but doesn't scare them. This should provide some degree of inoculation against the effects of exaggerated hangar tales.

Regarding the difficulty with the students you now have, try this. Solo them at another airport with a longer runway, under calm conditions (in the morning, for example). After they've landed a few times on a 3,000 foot (or longer) strip with no obstacles, they should be better equipped to handle your home airport runway.

I think it's important to emphasize that a pilot never needs to land if things don't look right. He or she can always go around. Perhaps you should place more emphasis on the go-around as a vital option when things don't look right. Make it the rule, not the exception. Do at least two or three go-arounds on every lesson in the pattern. Let the student see them as being a vital option instead of the failure to fly properly. And emphasize that a go-around doesn't represent a personal failure or a lack of airmanship. It's simply another maneuver.

You might also give your students the option of landing at another nearby airport if they don't feel that the conditions are comfortable at the home airport. In other words, solo them at a nearby, easy-to-land-at airport, one within 25 miles of the home airport. Give them instructions on how to fly over the route from the home airport to this nearby airport in accordance with 61.93. Then, solo them at this airport. This way, if they return from a solo to the home airport and don't feel they can land safely, there is always the option of landing at the nearby airport. Yes, someone would have to come over and pick them up, but this would last only a short time before they gained enough confidence to handle the home airport.

I believe it's important to give your students options. Give them a few alternatives for handling their discomfort.

Make sure you're not conveying your personal landing fears to your students. If they see you tensing up or getting edgy during the landing, they can't help but interpret this as a sign of danger and risk. It's very easy for instructors to convey this message without realizing how it affects their students.

9. Pilot Taxied Into a Lockbox

Dear Rod:

I had a terrible experience last week. My instructor and I were taxiing to the runup area when our propeller hit an FBO's lockbox in the tiedown area (a lockbox is where some FBOs keep airplane supplies like oil, funnels, rags, etc., for use during non-business hours). Metal, oil cans, chains and debris were everywhere. I was scared to death and am now afraid to get back in the airplane. I have a little more than 10 hours, and love to fly. Is there anything I can do to overcome my fear?

Thanks,

Anonymous

Dear Anonymous:

Another name for the airport lockbox is "propeller magnet." Your instructor isn't the first person to tear one of these to smithereens. These things are bound to happen and it's best to get over them quickly when they do. This doesn't make him a bad instructor, either. It just means that if war is ever declared on lockboxes, he'll only need four more kills to become an ace.

On the other hand, fear is the real enemy. If there is anything to fear on this planet it's having the things you enjoy in life (flying and other pleasures) diminished by fear. In other words, you should fear having a less than fulfilling life because you've become too frightened to try (or continue trying) new things. Don't get me wrong. Fear can be an effective modifier of behavior, but it's important to fear the right things and know how long to fear them. Your fear is excessive, so let's deal with it rationally. The following questions will help you put your fear in perspective. They work for anything that scares you. Ask yourself these questions in the following order (I've supplied the answers for you).

1. What action would you like to take?

"I want to get back in the airplane and fly."

2. What keeps you from taking it?

"I'm afraid I'll hit something when taxiing." (It's more likely that you're afraid of becoming afraid again. No one likes the feel of fear. Nevertheless, this same model can be used to handle that difficulty too.)

3. What will happen if you take this action?

*What is the worst thing that can happen if you decide to act sensibly?

"The worst that can happen is that I hit another lockbox."

*What is the probability of that thing happening?

"Considering how anxious I am around lockboxes, I will taxi slower and will keep a sharp eye out for objects on the ground in the future." Just for fun, an alternate answer would be: "Not too great, since my instructor and I are methodically destroying all the lockboxes one by one."

*Do you accept this probability?

"Yes, it's very unlikely that I'll hit one again."

4. What support do you need from others to do what you want to do?

"I'd like to know that others make mistakes and get scared, too, and that I'm not incompetent. Since this is what you've basically told me, I have all the support I need now."

5. What action do you plan to take?

"I'm going flying this afternoon."

Remember, no action is free from risk. Henry David Thoreau once suggested that it would be pretty said to have reached the point of death and realized that you've never really lived. So live. Go fly. And the next time you're frightened in an airplane, try balancing the emotional response with the rational one as demonstrated above.

10. Question About Flying Fear

Dear Mr. Machado:

I have a confession about fear (for the record, I'm an ATP-rated pilot). About six months ago I took a job flying cargo in Cessna 210s in Tornado Alley. I flew a scheduled route from Saint Louis to Little Rock, back to Saint Louis and then Des Moines then finally back to Saint Louis. The Cessnas had no weather radar, no Stormscope, no DME and no autopilot.

It did not take long for me to become really afraid each time a cold front moved through my route with the potential of severe thunderstorms with tops to 65 thousand feet. I must have flown through four or five Level 3 or 4 storms. In each case I was sure I would not make it to the other side.

On one particular day (starting out at 4:30 in the morning), I had an engine failure on takeoff in a twin, an attitude indicator failure, and a door open in-flight that caused all the static instruments to fluctuate wildly due to the static being routed through the cabin. When I switched the alternate air, all the static instruments went to zero, thanks to an improperly installed valve. This probably would not have been so bad except I had just taken off with one mile of visibility and a 100 foot overcast. To top it all off, when I finally launched in my fourth airplane of the morning I ending up dodging Level 3 thunderstorms for two hours. So what did I do? I gave two weeks notice.

OK, so you're thinking, what is this guy's point? The point is that I have over 3,000 hours of flight time, a CFI, MEI, ATP certificate and I am afraid to fly when there are thunderstorms forecast. I am also afraid of icing. I had a good friend killed that way. I have had a few experiences with icing and I'm sweating the whole time.

Is the reality of an aviation career simply, "If the pilots gets time and experience without killing himself, we will hire him"? Or, is it time to find another career?

*Sincerely,
Ken*

Greetings Ken:

No, it's not time to find another career. No doubt, flying is still for you, but certainly not the way you've been doing it.

Let me play the part of your dad here and ask you a simple question. Why in the world would you do what no—NO!— airline pilot in his or her right mind would do? Specifically, I mean that no airline pilot would ever intentionally fly through a thunderstorm, nor fly in icing conditions that exceed the capabilities of the airplane (as is the case with your 210, I'm sure).

Please listen up. There is never—NEVER!—any reason for you to fly through a thunderstorm! One of those things can chew you up, spit you out and stomp your empennage flat. That's why I'm afraid of thunderstorms, and icing, too! I learned about these things the hard way. As a young instrument pilot I thought ATC would (could) keep me out of these things in my small, non-Stormscope/radar equipped airplane. Nothing—NOTHING!—could be further from the truth. Even in today's modern ATC system, a controller cannot —CANNOT!—offer you any predictable protection against flying into thunderstorms. There's only one thing that will keep you out of thunderstorms as an IFR pilot in an underequipped airplane: your eyes.

That's why I don't fly solid IFR in an underequipped airplane when thunderstorms are present unless I can avoid these storms visually. Often, this means getting on top of the clouds (when possible) or on top of any haze layer and operating in visual meteorological conditions (VMC) to avoid the buildups. To fly solid IFR when thunderstorms are present goes beyond foolishness. It's insane. Dangerous, too.

Icing? I don't fly in icing conditions in an underequipped airplane unless I have a surefire, 100% guaranteed way of getting out of it, moving through it, or getting on top of it. If I can't do any of these, I don't fly IFR that day. Period.

Regarding flying for a living, well, unless you're a cargo pilot flying a small airplane in Tornado Alley, there are few jobs that will ever put you in a position where you might feel compelled (for whatever reason) to fly IFR in thunderstorms and icing conditions. You quit, which was obviously the best decision for you.

Is it necessary for a pilot to have experience at flying in thunderstorms and dangerous icing conditions to be considered qualified to fly an airliner? If you believe that then you'll also believe that people go to the Orient

to get oriented. It's just not true. Consider this. The experience you obtain from flying in thunderstorms and icing teaches you one thing: stay out of thunderstorms and icing. Ironically, once you have this experience, you regret having it. Its only useful purpose is to teach you not to use the information you've learned ever again! There is no reason for you or any other pilot to directly experience these weather thrillers personally. That's why we read books. They teach us how to avoid these things before someone names an impact crater after us.

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