



## ADAA Statement on Fear of Flying and Other Modes of Transportation

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Fears of flying, driving, and riding on a bus or train can be generally described as excessive, irrational fears of that mode of transportation and avoiding traveling in that manner at all costs or endured with high levels of distress. Many people cope with their fears in the short-term by avoiding that mode of transportation all together or, as with fear of flying, fly with the help of medication, drugs, or alcohol.

Fears of a specific mode of transportation are relatively common in the western world. Often the fears originate from one or more common themes:

- 1) fear of death or injury by transportation accident
- 2) fear of having intense anxiety or a panic attack while in transportation and that resulting in a catastrophica outcome (i.e. social embarssment, heart attack, stroke, losing control, not being able to function), and
- 3) not being able to escape the situation if the need to do so arose.

### Catastrophic Fears Associated with Transportation: Physical Injury or Death

A main fear regarding transportation is the risk of death or injury. While the National Safety Council suggests that being in a motor vehicle is the most dangerous daily activity most Americans will undertake, motor vehicle crashes have decreased by about 20% over the past 10 years. Improvements in vehicle safety technology, safety awareness, traffic enforcement, and infrastructure improvements have contributed to the decline in motor-vehicle injuries and deaths. In comparison, airline and train injuries or deaths are much less common. People innately ascribe more risk to events that are recent, dramatic, unforeseen, or intentional, while deemphasizing more common events that actually pose a greater risk. For example, in all of 2016 there were 19 fatal airline accidents worldwide (none of which were on commercial passenger airlines); with over 3.5 billion air passengers in 2016 that is 1 death per 10,769,230 passengers. Despite the rarity of these accidents, since they are dramatic, unforeseen, and result in large media cover over multiple segments for multiple days, we often worry even though our actual risk level is largely low.

Another common fear driving anxiety about transportation is the fear of having a panic attack while flying, driving, riding on a train or bus resulting in a catastrophic outcome such as a heart attack or stroke. This often arises from a misconception that panic attacks cause or contribute to heart attacks, may set off a seizure, or is a seizure in itself. However, this is not true and to better understand why, is often useful to learn more about seizures and heart attacks, their warning signs and risk factors.

**Transportation Statistics**

2017 has been one of the safest years on record for commerical air travel

You are 1,730x more likely to die in an car accident than in a commercial plane accident

You are 55x more likely to die in an car accident than in a train accident

Distraction (e.g. texting or otherwise engaging with a cell phone, grooming, eating/drinking, talking, or navigating while driving) and drunk driving accounts for 18% of fatal crashes

Seatbelt usage and airbags save an estiamted 14,800 lives each year

<b>Deaths per 1 Billion Passenger Miles Traveled</b>	
Motorcycles	217.00
Cars & Truck	5.75
Commuter Rail & Amtrak	0.47
Subways & Metro Rails	0.24
Bus	0.14
Plane	0.06

### **Catastrophic Fears Associated with Transportation: Psychological**

A variety of concerns around psychological functioning (i.e. losing control, not being able to function) can drive fears of transportation. Often this is related to a fear that they may have a panic attack while flying, driving, or riding on a train or bus. In fact, clinical experience and research show that having a panic attack will not lead to a total loss of control. Even though high levels of fear or anxiety, or even a panic attack, may make someone feel somewhat confused, unreal, and distracted, people are almost always still able to think and function. Often times, other people won't even notice when someone is having a panic attack.

### **Coping with Fear of Transportation**

While it can be natural to respond to the fear with avoidance and unhealthy behaviors such as drinking or taking medications to tolerate the trip because of the instant reduction in anxiety they offer, these actions often maintain the fear. Rather, facing the fear and the sensations the fear produces marks the start of the road to eliminating the fear all together. Through exposing oneself to the feared situation (flying, driving, riding on a train, etc.) one can learn that the situations are not as dangerous as once thought, that they can indeed tolerate the anxiety or fear the situation produces, and that they actually reduce on their own over time. If symptoms persist and are interfering with life and activities, mental health professionals can help provide exposure therapy through new emerging virtual reality simulations or by practicing in the real world.

#### **Basics of the Exposure Strategy**

- Acknowledge feelings rather than resist them – when we push feelings away they tend to come back stronger.
- Have confidence that the feelings of fear and anxiety will reduce on their own if you do nothing in response to them.
- Think critically about the fearful thoughts you are having – are they focusing on *possibility* or *probability*?