



Dance your way to a flight without fear

Jun 12 2006

What do tigers, rock 'n' roll and Jingle Bells all have in common? Surprisingly they all helped Health Reporter Emma Brady overcome her fear of flying...



For most people, that hard-earned two week break in the sun is something they look forward to.

But for nine million Britons - 15 per cent of the population - arriving at the airport is not just the start of their holiday but can be a nightmare for those who have a fear of flying.

Despite being a frequent flyer, I count myself among them.

After witnessing first-hand the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, I refused to allow terrorists to stop my travels.

My problem is not with suicide bombers or jumbo jets: it is with turbulence and very small planes.

Until now I hid my anxiety by distracting myself with glasses of wine, glossy magazines and duty free shopping.

But the time had come to seek help on terra firma, rather than rely on divine intervention.

Step forward clinical psychologist Elaine Iljon Foreman, who specialises in treating fearful flyers using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

"If you were a cavewoman, what would be the biggest danger to you?" she asked.

"Er, a sabre-toothed tiger perhaps," I answered.

"Well you have to imagine how to tackle this beast. You've got to starve it, not stroke it."

A relaxing glass of wine while reading a trashy magazine is apparently not the best way to deprive this 'tiger' of its 'food'.

Hiding fears behind black humour can be counterproductive, while asking about the size of a plane at check-in is also a big no-no.

"Information is not power in this case. The only person who has to know anything about the plane is the pilot - he's the one flying the plane, not you," explained Elaine.

"You do not need to know how to fly the plane, you're here to learn how to be flown."

After discussing my 9/11 experience and small plane phobia, I had to come up with three realistic reasons why the flight will probably be safe.

"They're checked and serviced regularly, if something was wrong the plane would be grounded, and aircraft are designed to withstand stormy weather," I suggest.

"Good, I'll see you tomorrow, just be ready to go tiger-hunting," is Elaine's parting shot.

YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO LET GO

"Freedom to Fly is not about learning how to fly, it's about how to be a better passenger - how to be flown."

That is what Elaine Iljon Foreman has been doing since she took her first group of reluctant travellers from Aberdeen to Amsterdam in 1978.

Since then the travel industry has expanded to all corners of the world and flights are much cheaper, making foreign travel accessible to everyone.

The events of 9/11 may have threatened to wreck airlines' profits and shatter public confidence in air travel but instead more people are flying more frequently.

Elaine, a 51-year-old clinical psychologist, has devised a two-session programme and explained that for many holiday-makers their fear was linked not to the plane but their own need for control.

After a disturbed night, due to dreams of being chased by prehistoric big cats, it's arrival time at Birmingham International Airport, ready as ever to face my fear on a flight to Glasgow - but will the therapy work?

Over breakfast Elaine soon notices my 'closed' body language and hesitant nature. And even I know it's too early for a relaxing drink or two.

"Right when we get on the plane I'm going to teach you some basic steps," said the former dancer, who has represented Britain in rock 'n' roll competitions. "This is what CBT is about, it is training yourself to develop new behaviours which ultimately can lead to a more satisfying way of life."

As we approach the gate I'm shocked to see a tiny plane - Dash 8 Q400 - with huge propellers on each wing.

I feel my palms sweating and shot nerves. Elaine recognises the nervousness and grabs my hand to start some basic rock 'n' roll footwork, in front of a packed gate.

Not sure what is worse, embarrassment or fear, I follow her lead and surprisingly the plane and impending flight are banished from my mind. Moments later, we are safely belted into the front two seats - with me by the window.

The dancing lesson continues as the plane fills up with passengers, then as it begins to taxi along the runway we are reciting Jingle Bells.

Once flight BE 824 is up in the air I begin to relax and find the sessions begin to make sense, even if I look foolish wriggling in my seat and quietly singing.

After 50 minutes flying at 20,000ft, the plane begins its descent, which is slightly bumpy, but when it touches the tarmac at Glasgow International I feel safer - but a few hours later I'll be back in the air.

Elaine, clearly pleased with my progress, said: "I don't like being shaken around on a plane as much as I dislike being stuck in traffic jams or in a overcrowded bus but it doesn't affect my life, I don't fear these situations.

"You have done better than you've given yourself credit for."

SELF-HELP TIPS

* It's useful to tell airline staff you are a nervous flier when booking or checking in - they can be helpful

* Get involved in the experience: eat the meal, walk around, look out of the window

* GPs may prescribe medication, such as beta blockers, but this is only a short-term solution

* Avoid drinking alcohol before and during the flight: it is not a relaxant, it only heightens anxiety

On the return flight I found myself sitting beside a window overlooking the wing and propeller, and telling myself everything was in order: the plane has been checked, the pilot knows what he's doing, I just have to enjoy the ride.

Again my feet were shuffling in time to Jailhouse Rock, but it was difficult to drown out the sound of the propellers.

The flight was calm but as I sat in the middle of a packed plane, so was I. Genuinely calm.

"So have you enjoyed your tiger hunt?" asked Elaine. "I think you showed that tiger a thing or two."

With that, flight BE 825 from Glasgow landed back in Birmingham with a bump, but I do not bruise so easily any more.

She said: "When I started treating people with anxiety disorders at Middlesex Hospital Medical School in 1976, I found that while there were many different fears, very often the worst one for people going on holiday was physically getting on a plane and flying.

"If they have any other problems, such as panic attacks or claustrophobia, then the things they fear might happen in situations where they have these experiences are often the things they worry about during a flight - fears of crashes, things that could go seriously wrong.

"Part of helping someone is to let them see, and later believe, that planes go through rigorous, regular checks and if something was wrong or broken they wouldn't fly.

"Obviously the events of 9/11 made a lot of people think twice about air travel but I think people are travelling more now. Flights have become much cheaper so people have now got a reason to tackle their fears."

Since Freedom to Fly was established in 1985, Elaine has helped hundreds of travellers over-come fears they have had for up to 20 years - achieving a 95 per cent success rate.

She added that cognitive behavioural therapy enabled people to obtain a different understanding of what was happening and to learn new 'behaviours' to help them cope with phobias.

"I have had clients who previously avoided flying for ten or 20 years, whereas before they were frequent flyers, but also as we get older we become more aware of our own mortality, so people can be more unwilling to put themselves 'at risk'.

"This isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. I tailor treatments to meet individual cases to help them deal with their own anxieties and fears."