Travel Anxiety

The anxiety associated with travel and the tasks surrounding travel.

Anxiety - a vicious circle

As you drive or sit as a passenger you may find that you think “worse case scenario” thoughts – “that car isn't going to stop” “we are going to crash” “I'm not in control” “that car hasn't seen us”. This makes you feel more anxious. You may play, in your head, visions of accidents happening, like some kind of film. Again, this serves to worsen the anxious feelings and thoughts.

In order to avoid feeling anxiety, some people avoid being in a car if they possibly can. Others may avoid certain roads or trips- such as motorways or country roads; driving in cities; driving at night; driving with certain people in the car; or they may only drive certain routes.

Some people continue driving but their anxiety affects their behaviour as a driver - driving slowly or hesitantly; checking the rear view mirror constantly; avoiding overtaking on motorways or near lorries; pulling over when too nervous.

If you are anxious as a passenger, you may “back seat drive”; constantly look out for possible dangers; cling on to the seat or seatbelt, door or grab handle; or “brake” as if you have a passenger side brake. Or you may just close your eyes and try not to look.

Avoiding things that scare you, or behaving in certain ways because of your anxiety can in the short term, lead to relief from the feelings of anxiety. But it tends to lead to a vicious cycle:

What is anxiety?

When you are in danger, your brain sends a message to your amygdala (the part that deals with primal emotions like fear) telling it that you need help – that you need to activate the “fight flight” response. The amygdala sends adrenaline into your blood stream. This causes your body to respond in order to be efficient in fleeing or fighting:

- Blood reaches your muscles to help you run/fight, you may feel this as feeling “weak at the knees” as if your legs may give way, or you may shake.
- Blood is sent to your heart to make it more efficient, this causes a pounding feeling in your chest, or “palpitations”
- Your face may go red as blood goes to your face
- Your lungs work faster to push that blood around your body, causing breathlessness, this can also lead to trouble breathing or hyperventilation
- Sweating – you may sweat as your body tries to cool you down (so you can run further without over heating)

But when you cannot run/fight these symptoms can become overwhelming, and can then make you feel even more anxious.

If you have had a car accident, your brain may associate a car with a dangerous, painful and/or frightening situation, so the amygdala is triggered when you are near or in a vehicle.

Symptoms

- “Weak at the Knees”
- Palpitations
- Flushing
- Breathlessness
- Hyperventilation
- Sweating
Positive thinking and relaxation
When you are in the car (or on a bicycle), relax (tighten and relax all
of your muscles if necessary; breath slowly and calmly) and think
positively (tell yourself “This journey is going well” “I am safe” “I am
going to be fine”).

Be aware of your stress levels using a “mindful” approach. Notice
any tension or anxiety. Notice how hard you are gripping the wheel;
or if you are clenching your jaw; or if your mind is wandering into
frightening thoughts. Pay attention to your thoughts and body and
address these one by one.

As a driver try not to look in your rear view mirror more than is
necessary (ask yourself how constantly looking in your rear view
mirror can help, remind yourself that you need to be safe and ready
to move away when appropriate to do so). Drive at an appropriate
speed. Do not be difficult for other road users to “read” due to your
anxious thoughts.

As a passenger (in a car, bus or train) you can also add distraction –
do not look for potential accidents, but look out of a different window,
listen to the radio, talk to the driver if you are in the car.

As a passenger, try and avoid “back-seat driving”:

- You could sit on your hands if you feel the need to “grip on”
to the car
- Look out of the side window to avoid looking for potential
accidents in front of you.

“Avoidance will make anxiety worse.”

Think about where your feet are, and if you feel the need to “brake”,
notice this and remind yourself to put your feet flat to the floor and that
you do not need to tell the driver what to do (it is worth remembering
that if you were not in the car, the driver would not need your help, you
do not want to distract them, so try not to say anything). Take a deep
breath before you say anything, ask yourself quickly “do I really need
to say this? How would I feel if I were driving?”. The driver is likely to
have seen the hazard and may be reacting, but you may not be aware
(for example because he is braking gradually). Do not second guess
the driver.

Remember, back seat driving behaviours can irritate and distract the
driver.

It can help to let the driver know that you are a nervous passenger but
are working on it. They may then be more tolerant. It can be helpful
to ask them to distract you during the drive by talking about non-
accident related topics.

If you do find that you are panicking – your muscles tense up, your
heart pounds, you may find it hard to breath, feel hot/sweaty/shaky –
remind yourself that this is anxiety, it is normal and will not hurt you,
breath slowly and calmly.

Graded Exposure
On a scale of 0 to 10 (10 being the worse you can imagine feeling, and 0 being no problem at all) make a list
of car journeys you usually take, rating each one. Start at
a journey that causes no more than 4/10 in anxiety (this
may be driving around an empty supermarket car park, or
it may be a short drive around the block). Practice every
day if you can. Once you can do that journey calmly and
with little anxiety, move to the next journey.

This can apply to bicycling (start with cycling around
empty car parks, moving on to cycle routes and paths
and gradually increasing where you cycle). Similarly, with
buses you can start with just taking the journey from one
bus stop to another and then walking back; on a train,
have a friend meet you at the next train station and take
one short journey.

If you can, practice every day. All the time, you will need
to utilise relaxation and positive thinking.

Advanced lessons
As a driver an advanced motoring course (for exam-
ple, with the Institute of Advanced Motorists) or some
advanced or refresher driving lessons with a qualified
driving instructor may be helpful to increase your confi-
dence.

As a cyclist, you may find advanced cycling lessons
helpful to increase your confidence on a bicycle.

These courses and lessons can help by teaching you
safe manoeuvres, defensive driving/cycling and help-
ing remind you when you are being overly hesitant or
cautious.

Further Reading
Website
No Panic (a website to help anxiety difficulties) -

Books
Active Steps to Reducing Stress. By Koch and Koch
Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a
frantic world. By Williams and Penman
Overcoming Anxiety. By Helen Kennerley
Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway. By Susan Jeffers

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