

Stop living in fear



Whether you're terrified of flying, can't bring yourself to speak in public or are too scared to put yourself forward for a promotion, our expert guide will help you overcome your fears and go for it

WORDS Charlotte MacNeil

We all experience anxieties that hold us back. And we're programmed this way for good reason – fear stops us taking dangerous chances, failing or risking social rejection. The trouble is, it can become excessive and inappropriate, so we develop anxiety about situations that aren't really that risky. Unfortunately, we tend to 'believe' our fears and avoid the 'terrible' situation in question. As a result we never learn that the thing we fear can be safe or even a positive experience. So we continue to avoid it, which leaves us with a psychological block or full-blown phobia.

Sometimes, irrational fear is rooted in experience – a terrifyingly turbulent flight may leave you reluctant to set foot on an aeroplane again, for example, while a job interview in which you felt humiliated may make you reluctant to try for another new position. And it's common to develop an

anxiety or phobia after a difficult life event such as redundancy or bereavement, due to heightened levels of stress chemicals in the brain. 'Often, though, an irrational fear can develop for no discernable reason,' says life coach Ali Campbell. 'It just comes from a picture you have built up in your mind. When you think about whatever it is, it seems terrifying, but in truth these thoughts have no basis in any reality – it's just your imagination working overtime.'

Three steps to beat your fears

The good news is that you can overcome them. Here are our top tips for vanquishing your fears and living your life more fully.

1 Step back

First, you have to stop believing what your mind tells you,' says Campbell. 'For example, if you have the thought "I'm going to make a fool of myself in that presentation", understand that's just a

thought you're having – it isn't some kind of premonition. Learn to distance yourself from your thoughts, rather than assuming they are true.' Mindfulness meditation can help – spend 10 minutes each day sitting quietly and focusing on your breathing. Whenever a fearful thought floats into your brain, observe it. Say to yourself, "There's that thought about the presentation going wrong again." Don't try to push it away – evidence suggests trying to suppress fears can actually cause more anxiety. Over time, this technique will coach you into understanding what you think is different to what is real. 'Worries are like background noise – you don't have to obey them,' says Dr Robert Leahy, author of *The Worry Cure* (Piatkus, £9.99).

2 Challenge your thinking...

When you are worried about something, you generally focus only on the



'A COURSE HELPED ME FLY AGAIN'



Kevin MacNeil, 39, a writer, took the British Airways Flying With Confidence course (www.flyingwithconfidence.com) to overcome his phobia.

'The night before the course I watched planes flying high over London and thought with a gulp: "They're going to try and get me up there tomorrow?" A former jet-setting writer, I had turned down invitations to read around the world after I developed an intense fear of flying, for no obvious reason, eight years ago.

'But my pre-course worry was - as I learnt on this fantastic one-day course - "anticipatory anxiety". First, cheerful pilots took us through

the technical side of flying. I learnt how a plane stays in the sky - it's through a process called "lift" which means that, effectively, a big hand of air holds it up. They assured us that turbulence, while sometimes uncomfortable, is never dangerous. Planes are designed to withstand everything from a lightning strike to the malfunction of all engines, and a modern plane can fly with literally zero visibility. Then we were given the statistics - I was stunned to learn flying is 18 times safer than staying at home, and 29 times safer than travelling by car.

'After lunch, the psychological expert talked us through the nature of fear and helped us understand that much of it comes from the imagination, which we should challenge. If

you're phobic, it's easy to imagine the air stewardess looks nervous (when she's probably just tired) or that you can smell burning (that'll be the in-flight meal). We were shown physical relaxation techniques such as slow breathing and tensing then relaxing our muscles.

'It all worked - the majority of people on the course decided to face the ultimate challenge of going up in a plane that very day (but there's no pressure if you don't feel ready). We flew from London to Southampton and back. The pilots helpfully explained everything they were doing, so we knew, for example, that that strange noise - which could have sounded worrying - was actually just a gear change. After landing, we all felt a sense of great achievement. The following week I flew to New York and did my first reading there for a decade. I've got an important and exciting part of my life back.'

negative,' says Dr Leahy. He suggests writing a list of the evidence for and against your belief the negative outcome will occur. For example, if you're scared your plane will crash, write down the evidence that supports it in one column, and the evidence that refutes it in another. You could even research the odds online - most fear has its basis in lack of information. Then weigh up the evidence you have for your belief. Is it objective and based in fact, or mostly rooted in emotions? Learn from experience, too - think about what you've worried about in the past. Did your fear come to pass? Research has shown that 85 per cent of worriers' fears never do. Even if your worst fear materialised, the chances are you coped with it - so remind yourself of that.

3...and do it anyway
Once you start trying what scares you, and surviving it (even if it doesn't go exactly as you'd hoped), you'll gain confidence. 'You have to learn to accept uncertainty,' says Dr Leahy. It's extremely unlikely something catastrophic will happen, but, other than that, none of us can know how something will turn out. 'Uncertainty is part of life,' says Dr Leahy. 'People who worry excessively are often those who feel uncomfortable with that. But it's important to understand uncertainty's OK. If it goes wrong, you can try again or do something differently.' One thing is certain: avoidance will just keep you trapped - so what have you got to lose? **II**

'I GAVE MY BEST MAN'S SPEECH WITH CONFIDENCE'



John Catherall, 28, a graphic designer, was petrified about giving a speech at a friend's wedding until he took a public speaking workshop with

TV presenter and voice specialist Helen Sewell (www.simply-speaking.co.uk).

'I hadn't spoken in public since I was at school, so when an old friend asked me to be his best man, my first thought was "Yikes - I'll have to give a speech!" Whenever I thought about it I felt intensely nervous. So I jumped at the chance to do a one-to-one public speaking workshop with Helen Sewell, a former BBC presenter who coaches people to speak in public with confidence.

'Helen was very friendly and approachable, which instantly put me at ease. She asked me to stand and do my speech as I normally would, and immediately began critiquing my posture. She explained that it's important to stand up straight with a strong stance on both legs - if you're not balanced, some of your mind is on that rather than on speaking, which can affect your confidence, as well as the quality of the speech.

'Helen showed me some relaxation techniques to calm myself before giving my speech, such as doing gentle exercise to use

up some adrenaline. And she went through a few of the reasons people want to listen to speeches: because of the speaker's expertise (in this case, my knowledge of the groom); because they want to learn something (about him); or simply because the wedding would be a lovely day, with everyone relaxed and good-humoured. Hearing that helped lift my confidence.

'Helen also told me that rather than focusing on what might go wrong, I should visualise the best scenario. She encouraged me to do this in detail, picturing how I will look, stand, feel and sound. She gave me some breathing exercises to do, too, in the run-up to the wedding, for 10 minutes each day, to help myself feel calm and positive.

'When it came to the big day I wasn't as nervous as I thought I would be - in fact, I was actually feeling quite confident. I knew I had prepared and practised the speech well. I remembered the tips that Helen had given me, especially about my posture and voice projection. I think the most valuable pointer Helen gave me was to believe in myself and exude confidence. If you think you are going to fail, then you almost certainly will - but a confident and positive attitude helped me to deliver my speech perfectly... And I even managed to make everyone laugh!'