



## News Release

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### **Don't Want to Fly? You're Not Alone!** **Helping Employees Get Past the Fear of Flying**

Tampa, Fla. (December 10, 2001) Yes, traveling is different since September 11. People all over the world are anxious about flying, even those who didn't give it a second thought before. More people are actually reconsidering their job responsibilities because they don't want to fly at all. If you don't have to fly for your job, the problem isn't quite so pressing. But what if your company needs you to attend a meeting across the country or on another continent and you are terrified of stepping onto a plane?

Psychologists have some reassuring words for people, especially employees, who are having trouble getting back in the air.

Fear is normal, but there are different kinds of fear, says Mark Schneider, Ph.D., a psychologist in Providence, Rhode Island. At one end of the spectrum, fear is a healthy reaction to danger. But at the other end is the kind of fear that limits our ability to be productive.

While anxiety can be a great motivator to help us do our jobs and succeed in our lives, it stops becoming a motivator when there's too much of it. Overwhelming anxiety becomes a problem because it stops us from acting, and we don't accomplish what we need to do.

We recognize that people experience a range of fear, says Dr. Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., clinical occupational psychologist and founder of Wood & Associates. On a scale of one to five, one represents 'no fear' and five is 'extreme fear.' At the low end of the fear scale we find people who are reckless, without a healthy respect for things they should be afraid of. But at level five we find people who are paralyzed to a point they will avoid what they fear.

Healthy fear helps us respect limitations and have a regard for realistic

phenomena, Wood continues. It is realistic to be afraid of terrorism. But when people get to the point that they are reluctant to fly, then we've reached a level where some professional intervention and evaluation is needed. The good news is that there is help for people who have a severe level of anxiety about flying.

Employees who find they cannot do their normal jobs because of anxiety about flying may want to contact their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if their company offers one, to gain guidance and coaching regarding normal fear and anxiety, advises Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D., a Licensed Mental Health Counselor with Wood & Associates. For severe reactions, their EAP provider may help them work out an individualized plan of action.

### Identifying and Naming the Fear

The first thing we recommend is for people to make a distinction between dislikes, fears and phobias, says Schneider. Just because you dislike dogs, for example, doesn't mean you have a phobia about them. But it becomes a phobia of dogs when you walk across the street when you see a dog, or become nervous just thinking about the possibility of someone with a dog moving into your neighborhood. A phobia can have a pervasive interference - people think about the thing they're afraid of even when that thing isn't directly present. A phobia is an irrational fear that becomes so disabling that it prevents us from carrying out our normal routine. If you've never had a reason to fly, then a fear of flying hasn't stopped you from doing anything. But if flying is a necessary part of your life, that's a fear that interferes with your life.

Two questions can help individuals discover whether they may need outside help to conquer a particular fear, says Schneider. First, ask yourself, 'Does my fear prevent me from doing something important?' If it does, that's an indication of a problem you may need help to overcome. Second, ask 'Do I think about my fear even when I'm not in the presence of the thing I'm afraid of? Do I worry about flying even when I'm not in an airplane?' If you answer 'yes,' then you may want to seek the help of a professional.

There is help for someone with a particular phobia, says Schneider. It's important to get the assistance of someone who is specifically trained in behavior therapy for anxiety disorders. This is usually a psychologist, a social worker or a psychiatrist. Schneider also recommends that employees who have access to an EAP take advantage of this resource.

### **What About Medication?**

"There is good evidence that people who use medication to overcome phobias don't really benefit," Schneider says. "It's because they don't really learn anything, or develop their own coping skills if they rely on medicine. Studies looked at two groups of people who were afraid to fly. One group took anti-

anxiety medication before a flight and the other group didn't. Then both groups flew again, without any medication. The group who used medicine was okay on the first flight, but on their second flight, without medication, their anxiety actually got worse, because being on medication doesn't give you a permanent strategy. But the people who didn't get medication, even without therapy, were less anxious about flying the second time. It's because they went through a process of exposure and learned something-they flew, and they didn't die. They were then able to incorporate that experience and learned how to control own reactions."

One important thing not to do is rely on alcohol as a way of getting through a plane flight, says Schneider. The anti-anxiety effects of alcohol are not that good. Alcohol delays the point at which people are consciously aware of their situation, and maintains the self-fulfilling belief 'I can't function in this environment.' We like people to realize that they need to be able to function as themselves, without the help of drugs or alcohol.

### **Practical Coping Techniques**

Some people can get through a fear of flying simply by obtaining reassurance and support from family and friends, and by gathering accurate information, says Wood. Speaking with a clergy member helps some people. Talking realistically to yourself, or using calming strategies such as meditation are helpful for getting people past their fear, he says. And some people benefit from using logic to reduce anxiety - telling themselves the statistical probability of being involved in a life-threatening air crisis are actually very low, for example.

Education, relaxation and confrontation are the three keys to the coping process, says Schneider. Education is especially important. Be aware of what your real risks are. Despite the events of September 11, the risks associated with flying have not, in fact, gone up. Knowing what to expect while on a flight is important, too, so that normal, predictable things like minor vibrations or noises don't cause undue anxiety. When you have an understanding of your surroundings you can have greater control over your physical reactions.

Relaxation can be as simple as saying a prayer or doing a formal exercise, Schneider says. Anything that allows you to focus your mind on something else can work as a calming influence. People may want to purchase a product such as a relaxation tape to listen to on the plane. They may choose to see a therapist to learn appropriate relaxation techniques, which can help control their physiological reaction, slow down their heart rate and breathing rate, and decrease the fear reaction. Having a ready strategy gives people a better sense of control over their reactions. Once you have mastered your reactions, you learn to cope better each time you fly.

Ultimately, says Schneider, the answer for any kind of phobia is exposure to or confrontation of the fear. People can't get over fear of flying until they actually get on an airplane.

### **Words of Encouragement**

The evidence on treatment outcomes for phobias shows that well over 80 percent of people are able to overcome them, says Schneider. To overcome a fear of dogs, for example, we help people get to the point where they learn to be comfortable living in a world where dogs exist. They don't have to go out and buy a dog. In the same way, it's important to remember that the goal of treatment for fear of flying is not for people to go out and get their pilot's license. It's simply getting them to the point where they can tell themselves, 'I don't like flying. But if I have to fly, I'll fly.'

The best advice Wood, Alexander and Schneider offer has been echoed all over the nation: If we don't fly, the terrorists win. But by learning to overcome the fear that keeps us from acting, we will triumph.

### **About Wood & Associates**

Wood & Associates is an Employee Assistance Program and behavioral health consulting firm that helps employers maintain productivity, safety and behavioral health in the workplace. Wood & Associates is a pioneer in the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) industry and has served employers and employees in the greater Tampa Bay area and nationwide since 1982. The firm's diverse group of clients includes a number of major employers who also contract for its mental health and substance abuse services.

Gary L. Wood, Psy.D., founder of the Wood & Associates consulting practice, is a pioneer in the field of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services. Since 1979, his practice has centered on providing solutions to employee and organizational problems. Wood is a licensed clinical psychologist, a member of the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology, and a graduate of Rutgers University, West Georgia College and Mercer University.

Patricia N. Alexander earned a Ph.D. in mental health counseling at the University of Florida. Trained in critical incident stress management through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, she is a Florida Licensed Mental Health Counselor and nationally certified counselor. Through her work experience she has addressed all types of critical incident situations, including explosions, multiple homicides, suicides, line-of-duty deaths, serious accidents and robberies. Alexander conducts training on stress management for law enforcement and businesses, and has developed peer support programs for law enforcement and industry. Alexander is an educator and consultant on a wide variety of behavioral health concerns.

