

PREPARING WELL CAN MAKE AIR TRAVEL A HEALTHY EXPERIENCE

BY TONISHA MELVIN

Airplane travel has been around for more than a century, dating back to the Wright Brothers' first flight in 1903. What started as an experiment is now a routine part of modern life, connecting cities, countries, and continents in mere hours. While the convenience of air travel is undeniable, its psychological effects are more complex, a topic that's not often discussed.

Let's start with the obvious: Flying can be stressful. Before the plane even leaves the ground, there's the hustle of getting to the airport, often through traffic, with the pressure to make it on time. Then come the long lines, crowded terminals, loud announcements, and the general sensory overload that is the modern airport. For someone already dealing with anxiety, depression, or claustrophobia, this kind of environment can feel overwhelming. The stress can also involve cramped seats, recycled air, and high altitudes that can lead to fatigue. Another stressor is jet lag, which disrupts your sleep schedule and can dampen your mood, energy, and concentration.

For some travelers, flying itself triggers fear or panic, fueled by a perceived loss of control. Left untreated, that accumulated stress can lead to more serious mental health challenges.

Despite its challenges, flying can be mentally enriching and emotionally uplifting. For many, air travel represents freedom and an escape from the routines and responsibilities that wear us down. This can take the form of a vacation, a visit to a loved one, or an adventure abroad. Travel brings with it a sense of excitement and possibility. Leaving behind familiar surroundings can help reduce chronic stress. This break in routine allows for a mental reset, while the new environments can stimulate creativity and boost your mood. Studies have shown that exposure to different cultures and experiences can spark brain activity, particularly in the frontal lobe, which governs problem-solving, creativity, and emotional regulation.

Flying can also foster connection. Whether you're reuniting with family or exploring new places with friends, these shared experiences can deepen relationships and combat loneliness, both key ingredients for good mental health. Even quiet moments, such as staring out the window at the clouds, unplugging from Wi-Fi, or reflecting during a layover, can encourage mindfulness and presence, something that's increasingly rare in our busy lives.

Like most things in life, air travel is a mixed bag when it comes to mental health. It can be exhausting or energizing, stressful or inspiring, often all in the same trip. The key is learning to manage the downsides while making space for the benefits.

Be prepared by getting rest before flying, preplanning, bringing comfort items, staying hydrated, and building in time to adjust postflight. Stay open to the moments of joy, wonder, and growth that travel can bring.

Air travel isn't just about getting from Point A to Point B. It's also a journey of the mind. And if we learn to navigate it well, it can leave us not just somewhere new, but feeling renewed.



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