

LIFE & ARTS

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Six ways to soothe travel anxiety

Make your next trip the best it can be with these strategies for stress management

DIANA BALLON

Despite being away from home several months a year as a freelance travel writer, I'm an anxious traveller. I hate airports. I sleep terribly the night before a flight. And COVID-19 has made me extra worried about getting sick on planes. And while I don't have relatives to visit in the United States, if I did, crossing the border would raise a whole new set of concerns.

Apparently, I'm not alone. The uncertainty and unpredictability of travel is inherently stressful, explains registered psychologist Dr. Kristin Buhr, a director at the North Shore Stress and Anxiety Clinic in North Vancouver. While not knowing what will happen on a trip can bring excitement and an element of surprise, it can also cause worry if your tendency is to want to control things.

When people feel anxious, they also tend to focus on the negative. "We overestimate the likelihood of bad things happening and underestimate our ability to cope with them," said Dr. Judith Laposa, a psychologist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto who works with people with mood and anxiety difficulties.

If you find travel stressful or anxiety-provoking, here are six strategies that can help manage the worry and make your next trip the best it can be.

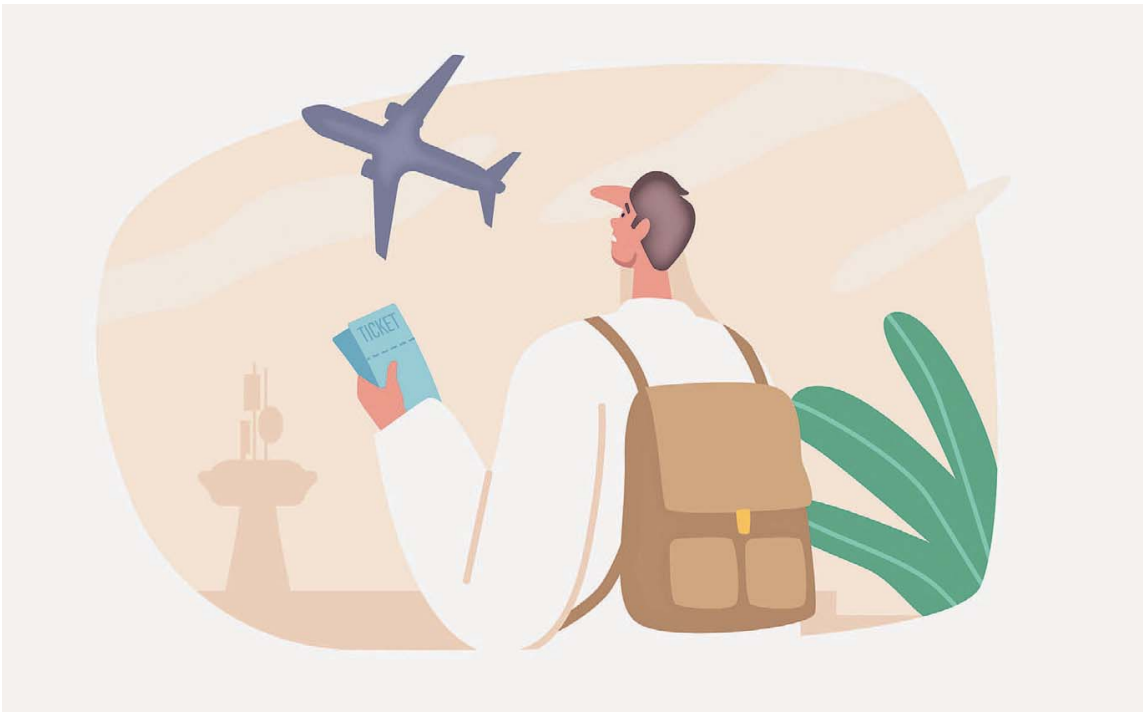
WORK YOUR WAY UP

If a long-haul trip feels overwhelming, consider a gradual approach to pushing beyond your comfort zone, Dr. Laposa says.

A day trip by public transit, followed by a weekend getaway by train, then a short-haul flight may help you work up to a longer flight with stopovers.

IDENTIFY YOUR STRESSORS AND PRACTISE DEALING WITH THEM

What part of travel stresses you out? Is it being late for a flight? Getting lost? Forgetting to pack something important? Clarifying your worries allows you to cope with them.



GETTY IMAGES

One technique that can help is building tolerance for uncertainty or specific anxiety-provoking scenarios by "practising" in lower-risk, less stressful situations. For example, if you're nervous about trying different foods on your trip, Buhr suggests sampling a new item on a menu at home before you go. If you're scared of talking to strangers while you're away, strike up a conversation with the barista at your local café.

PLAN AHEAD – BUT DON'T OVERPLAN

Remembering all the details associated with travel can help ease worry before a trip, including checking that your passport is up to date and that you have received any other necessary travel documents or vaccines. Packing enough prescription medication in your carry-on, arranging for someone trustworthy to watch your pet or planning an itinerary are also on many people's to-do list.

But Laposa cautions against too much pretrip planning. "Overplanning may just create more stress." For example, if you create a jam-packed itinerary with things to do every second, "will you be okay if some of it

doesn't work out due to factors outside your control? That's where overscheduling can backfire."

Buhr says it's important to set realistic expectations. "Don't go into travel expecting it will be perfect. Expect the good, neutral and the bad."

CONSIDER SEEKING SUPPORT

Even before you get on the plane, navigating airports can be stressful, with long lines and unexpected delays. Give yourself extra time and consider using supports that may be available. For example, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program, which is available in some airports, allows people with a non-visible disability, such as a mental-health challenge, to wear a lanyard indicating they may need additional help or time.

Other people are afraid of flying. Anxieties range broadly – from fear of taking off, to turbulence, crashing, claustrophobia or vomiting while mid-air. Some people's anxiety is triggered by a past experience, while others have listened to the news about crashes or watched a film about one.

If anxiety is preventing you from doing activities you want to

do, such as travel, experts suggest you may want to seek professional help.

Both Buhr and Laposa use cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), a psychotherapeutic approach that helps people identify and challenge the thinking patterns or beliefs, and the behaviours that are maintaining or fuelling the anxiety.

Exposure therapy is a central component of CBT. It involves gradually and repeatedly "exposing" someone to feared situations to help build their confidence to tolerate it. For people with a fear of flying, this could mean watching videos of a flight, visualizing or imagining the experience, or using a flight simulator or virtual reality to mimic the experience before the person flies.

Other strategies include anti-anxiety medications and meditation apps you can use while on the plane.

Kind words and empathy can also make a huge difference. Long-time Air Canada flight attendant Sue Farquhar says she has had anxious passengers ask to stand next to her at the door to the plane while they decided if they could board. Others have asked to hold her hand during turbulence.

"If I see a nervous flyer – I can see that look on someone's face – I will ask, are you good?" Farquhar said. "And I'll invite them to come to the back galley to chit-chat or stretch their legs if they're feeling anxious."

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF BEFORE YOU GO

When you're busy preparing for a trip, it can be easy to forget to look after your health. But Buhr says it's important to try to have a good mental-health baseline before you travel.

That means eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising – and making time for stress-reducing practices, such as yoga or meditation.

REMEMBER THE REWARDS

For me, what I love most about travel are the random acts of kindness from strangers, along with the mystery and excitement of new experiences and places. Ironically, it's the same uncertainty that keeps me up before a flight that also keeps me getting on that next plane. Anxiety may sometimes be high, but so too are the rewards.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Should I get a measles booster?

DR. YAN YU

ASK A DOCTOR

Many adults I see in my practice have been asking me lately: With measles spreading across Canada, should I get a booster dose of the measles vaccine?

Here's why measles is a growing concern right now and what you can do.

WHY ARE PEOPLE GETTING MEASLES AGAIN?

Measles is a highly contagious, airborne disease that can result in serious health complications in some cases, including death.

Measles was eliminated in Canada in 1998, after the introduction of routine childhood immunization with a two-dose vaccine. The highly effective and safe measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine eliminated endemic transmission in Canada and created herd immunity in the population, which prevented further spread. However, the country is now seeing the largest measles outbreak in decades owing to several factors, including a decline in routine childhood vaccination rates in some regions after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Public Health Agency of Canada recently warned the country could lose its measles elimination status if the current chain of transmission continues beyond October.

DO YOU NEED A MMR BOOSTER?

If you are already fully vaccinated (i.e. you received both doses of the MMR vaccine) or have proven immunity to measles from a past infection, it is unlikely you will ever catch the virus and you do not need a booster.

You're immune if one of the following



ILLUSTRATION BY THE GLOBE AND MAIL

- applies to you:
- You received two documented doses of measles vaccine after one year of age, delivered at least 28 days apart
 - You have serologic proof of immunity (i.e. a blood test that found antibodies to measles)
 - You have had prior lab-confirmed measles
 - You were born before 1970

WHY PEOPLE BORN BEFORE 1970 ARE CONSIDERED IMMUNE

There was no measles vaccine prior to 1970. Given that measles is a highly contagious airborne virus, it can be safely assumed that everyone born before 1970 was exposed. If you survived this exposure, then you have already developed antibodies and are considered immune.

In this case, you do not need another shot of measles vaccine – unless you are in one of the groups Health Canada's

Immunization Guide lists as susceptible, such as health care workers.

WHAT TO KNOW IF YOU WERE BORN AFTER 1970

If you were born after 1970, check your measles vaccination records, if possible, to see if you received two doses of the MMR vaccine. Protection is estimated to be 85 per cent to 95 per cent if you've had one shot in your lifetime, and nearly 100 per cent if you've had two shots. Some people may need a second shot to boost their measles protection to near complete levels.

If you fall into this age group but don't have your vaccination records and – importantly – if you have a healthy immune system, there is no harm to getting a dose of the MMR vaccine, which has a decades-long history of proven safety and efficacy for immune competent individuals. Sometimes getting another shot is easier than

getting a bloodwork requisition to check for measles immunity.

However, a minority of people should not get the MMR vaccine. For example, if you have an immune compromising condition or are on immunosuppressant drugs, or if you are pregnant, you may not be able to get an MMR vaccine. For some immunocompromised individuals, other treatments may be given to prevent against measles.

Consult with your primary care provider to find out what the recommendations are in your specific case.

WHAT IF I'M PLANNING TO TRAVEL TO ONE OF THE OUTBREAK ZONES?

The same advice applies: You do not need a booster if you are already immune to measles.

However, if you are pregnant or immunocompromised and thus at higher risk for serious outcomes of infection and not able to receive a dose of MMR vaccine, consider deferring travel or reaching out to your doctor for specific travel advice.

If you will be travelling to one of the outbreak areas with an infant under one year old, it's worth noting that infants are able to get an early dose as young as six months old. Babies who receive a shot before they turn one would still need two more shots to be fully protected against measles.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Dr. Yan Yu is a family physician in Alberta and the Northwest Territories and the founder and director of Joyce Health, an online child and adolescent psychiatry clinic. He works in a wide range of clinical settings, including in rural and remote communities and creates medical education videos in his spare time.

Ask a Doctor is a new series of physician-authored columns offering insights and advice on common health topics. It is not a substitute for seeking medical care.