

in my experience

A tiny needle conquered my FEAR OF FLYING



Author Fiona Neill writes about the unusual treatment that has helped overcome her terror of planes

My latent anxiety around flying turned into a fully-fledged phobia following a flight in Central America when, 20 minutes after take-off, the panicky pilot informed us the electrical system had failed. He announced that we were all going to die, a scenario that seemed all the more plausible since I had just covered a fatal accident involving the same airline in my role as a foreign reporter.

As I adopted the brace position, I was overwhelmed with regret that I had never had children and that I had seen so little of my parents since living overseas. Above all, I remember the silence. But just as suddenly as we had begun hurtling downwards, the plane swooped back up into the sky. I wasn't the only person crying with relief when we landed.

Soon after this incident I flew with an American carrier to Washington DC. I managed to talk myself onboard because I knew if I didn't, I couldn't do my job. As soon as the doors closed, panic set in. I began to sweat; my heart pounded so much that I thought I was having a heart attack.

There followed a heavy dose of bad luck. An electrical storm meant we had to land in Virginia. I lost control. Crying, I announced to other passengers that we were all going to die. When we landed safely I was told that if I wanted to continue to Washington, I had to sit in a row with airhostesses because I was too disruptive.

Alone in a hotel room that night, I had a

flashback. I was back on that plane, hurtling to the ground, even though I knew in my rational mind that wasn't the case. The fear mushroomed. I began to collect statistics about air accidents. I started reciting Hail Marys during panic attacks, even though I am neither religious nor Catholic.

This fear lasted for an entire decade. In the end I returned to England, took a job that required no travel, and moved in with my boyfriend, who understood I would never get back on a plane. He didn't mind. I had become the worst flying companion. I was noisy, hysterical and embarrassing.

I had become the worst passenger – embarrassing, noisy, hysterical

When I first arrived at the Traditional Acupuncture Centre in London weeks after moving back to the UK, I was looking for help with severe back pain. It was several weeks before

I even mentioned in passing my phobia to acupuncturist Robin Herbert. He pointed out what now seems obvious – that there was a connection between the back problems that began while I was living in Latin America and my anxiety around flying.

Robin considered my medical history, took my pulse and looked at my tongue before inserting hair-thin needles into acupuncture points along meridians on my face and body. The theory was that by taking the body out of a state of panic and rebalancing its internal energy, the anxiety wouldn't have a chance to kick in. I found the treatment surprisingly comfortable.

After six months of treatment and almost a year since I had last got on a plane,

my boyfriend and I booked a holiday to Tunisia. The day before, Robin stuck a tiny needle in my ear with plaster and instructed me to press it if I felt anxious. Acupuncturists consider this point, known in Chinese as a Shen Men (the heavenly gate) to be the command centre for the entire body.

As we took off the next day I anticipated the familiar cycle of fear and terror, but there was no panic. I managed to read a book. Even my cynical boyfriend agreed it was nothing short of a miracle.

I now look back and see there were positive aspects to my phobia. I learned about the kindness of strangers. People I never saw again held my hand through my panic attacks. Airhostesses patiently explained all the engine noises. And I developed complete empathy for anyone who suffers from an anxiety disorder.

I still get anxious around flying. But the fear is manageable. I like to be at the airport exactly two hours before a flight. I have to go to the departure lounge as soon as it is called. I prefer to sit at the back of a plane. I still find it difficult to sleep. Sometimes, during take-off and landing, and much to the amusement of my three teenage children, I say a few Hail Marys. But I am in control. **w&h**

The Good Girl by Fiona Neill is out now (Penguin)



PHOTOGRAPH NAME