

# 18 Ways to Navigate Stress at the Airport

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Even before takeoff, the airport itself can be a stressful phase of travel. Here are strategies for dealing with anxieties and annoyances, large and small.



Passengers scanning the departure boards for canceled or delayed flights at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. Remko De Waal/EPA, via Shutterstock

Between the crowds, the security hassles, the need to be timely, the frustration of flight delays and perhaps even a fear of flying, the airport can be a stress-invoking phase of travel. The following tips address strategies for dealing with anxieties and annoyances large and small to help make your next plane trip less turbulent before takeoff.

# Safely Clearing Security

There's nothing like entering an airport and seeing an hourlong security line to send your stress levels soaring. Couple that anxiety with the bark of a T.S.A. agent instructing you to divest of all electronic devices, shoes and jackets and just getting to the gate can be harrowing.

The simplest way to avoid the stress caused by security lines is to arrive at the airport early for your flight. That cushion may vary, based on the size of the airport and your own comfort level, but should be at least 90 minutes for domestic flights and three hours for international.

Another way is to buy your way out of the lines with [T.S.A. PreCheck](#). Getting the clearance, which puts members into separate, expedited security lanes, requires an online application, an in-person interview, fingerprinting and an \$85 fee. Once approved, PreCheck status is good for five years and allows members to keep their laptops and toiletries in their bags and keep their shoes and light jackets on. In April 2018, the agency said 92 percent of travelers with the status waited less than five minutes to clear security.

## The TRavel Tips ISsue

*A collection of tips and techniques, from saving on travel to the tech gear you'll need.*

With or without membership, once fliers reach the metal detectors and body scanners, an aggressive security agent can compound stress and present the potential for conflict. Generally, because fliers are required to follow agents' orders, they can do little to control the situation other than to control their attitude toward it.

"If you want to fly, you have to comply," said Jeff Price, a professor in aviation and aerospace at the Metropolitan State University of Denver and

the co-author of “Practical Aviation Security.” “The passenger attitude goes a long way to what the screening experience will be like.”

Mr. Price suggests “being polite in the face of impoliteness,” noting that agents “have the ability to make your life miserable if they want.” In the case of extreme harassment or escalation with a particular officer, ask for a supervisor. Travelers also can request a private screening, in which case they are allowed to bring along a witness.

## Overcoming Annoyances

The potential for annoyance at an airport, even after the security process, is seemingly infinite. Traveling crowds, directional confusion and the blare of televisions tuned to cable news stations in gate areas can make it hard to relax.

Fortunately, many airports, recognizing this, have begun adding more serene spaces, including yoga rooms equipped with yoga mats. Look for them at [Dallas Fort Worth](#), [San Francisco International](#) and at both of Chicago’s airports, [O’Hare](#) and [Midway](#). The app [GateGuru](#) sometimes lists such amenities.

For cardio-induced stress relief, download the app [Sanctify](#) that identifies gyms near 90 global airports offering day passes for an average of \$25. [Roam Fitness](#), an airport gym with showers and rental fitness gear, is currently available only at Baltimore Washington International Airport, but plans to open a second location later this year at San Francisco International Airport.

When you can’t find a space to chill, make your own.

“Find a quiet corner, whether that’s an empty gate, a lounge, or even a chapel,” said Sara Clemence, the author of “Away and Aware: A Field Guide to Mindful Travel.” She also recommends standing yoga poses. “In order to

reduce the jumpiness that comes from being away from my gate, I set a timer on my phone to remind me to check the departures board, say, every 15 minutes.”

Come prepared with a [meditation app](#) or two and some relaxing music. Or seek a therapy animal, if you didn't bring your own. (An accompanying animal generally requires a prescription from a mental health professional.) As used in airports, therapy animals are said to raise spirits, reduce anxiety and improve communication by being available for travelers to pet and interact with. A number of airports have therapy dogs including [Denver International](#), which has 100 dogs and one cat in its volunteer pool, [Phoenix Sky Harbor](#) and [San Francisco International](#), which also has a pig on patrol. The [Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport](#) even brings in [miniature horses as therapy animals](#).

## Fear of Flying

The prospect of hurtling hundreds of miles an hour in a metal tube at 35,000 feet is a very common stress-inducing idea. The National Institute of Mental Health has found that 6.5 percent of Americans have a [phobia](#) that prevents them from flying. Estimates of regular flight anxiety are much higher.

“Because fearful flying is so common, it's hard to know from an epidemiological point of view how many people have it,” said Julie L. Pike, a clinical psychologist in Durham, N.C., who specializes in treating anxiety disorders.

Her first approach is rational: learn the odds. According to the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), some 42,000 flights take place daily carrying 2.5 million passengers. Accidents are rare. The [National Transportation Safety Board](#) found 412 people died as a result of aviation accidents in 2016 versus 37,461 in automotive accidents. Analyzing data from 1983 to 2000, the board [found](#) more than 95 percent of fliers involved in accidents

survived.

“We encourage locating the problem in yourself and not in the industry. That empowers the individual,” Ms. Pike said. “I have zero control over whether the pilot lands the plane or not, but I have a strategy to deal with physical discomfort.”

Some specific strategies for dealing with symptoms of anxiety, such as hyperventilation, include holding your breath for four seconds and exhaling through your mouth. Repeat 10 times.

“This deprives the body of oxygen and forces you to slow down,” Ms. Pike said. “You can’t make yourself relax but you can starve the body of oxygen and force it to shut off.”

Another physical approach at the gate or in an airplane seat: place your arms inside the armrest and press out against it as hard as possible for as long as possible while also contracting your legs and core, forcing your muscles to fatigue. Repeat three to four times.

## **Arrival Issues**

Arriving from an international flight and answering questions from customs and immigration authorities can invoke stress. Immigration and civil liberties advocates [say](#) that the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and [travel ban](#) on five majority Muslim countries — Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia — as well as North Korea and Venezuela has heightened tension. The Supreme Court upheld the travel ban on June 26.

“For anyone passing through the inspection process, facilitate entry by being prepared to answer questions about how long is your trip, the purpose of your trip, where you’re staying,” said Elizabeth Foydel, the deputy policy director of International Refugee Assistance Project, a

nonprofit legal aid group in New York. “The more you stay calm and know what you need to say, the easier the process generally is.”

[Know your rights](#) at the airport. Fliers called out for secondary inspection are entitled to a translator if they have difficulty communicating in English. They are also entitled to food, water and bathroom breaks.

The legal group advises foreigners or American citizens anticipating the need for a lawyer to engage one before travel on a provisional basis and to fill out and carry [form G-28](#) from United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. The form indicates that the traveler has an attorney to represent them.

Customs and Border Protection agents are not required to disclose the reasons for a traveler’s detention to anyone awaiting them. American travelers concerned about this may request a privacy waiver form from the congressional representative in your district, execute it in advance and give it to family or colleagues in the district. The form will enable those relations to contact a congressional representative who can then approach the authorities and learn the reasons for a detention.

Before travel, both domestic and international travelers can contact the International Refugee Assistance Project for advice at [airport@refugeerights.org](mailto:airport@refugeerights.org) or call the [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#) at 646-665-7599.

The American Civil Liberties Union also has a [page](#) devoted to travelers rights and what to do when encountering law enforcement at airports.

### ***Correction: June 27, 2018***

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly included Chad as part of President Trump's travel ban on several Muslim majority countries. Chad was taken off the list of banned countries earlier this year.*

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