

# DEMONT: Fighting the fear of flying getting tougher these days

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The investigation into Sunday morning's Air Canada crash at the Halifax Stanfield Airport continues on Monday. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

For reasons that will become obvious, I first resisted looking at a photo of Air Canada Flight 624 after it came to rest at Halifax Stanfield International Airport on Sunday.

But I'm in the news business, so eventually I pointed, clicked and, well, yowza: the beaten-up undercarriage, the wrecked wing, the nose — where the heck did the plane's nose go?

Like all of us, I was overjoyed to hear that, although 25 people were taken to hospital, no one was seriously hurt in the incident.

**For more coverage on the crash of Flight AC624 click [here \(http://thechronicleherald.ca/tags/flight-ac624-crash\)](http://thechronicleherald.ca/tags/flight-ac624-crash).**

But my overriding emotion was not relief that this event proved just how safe air travel really is.

It was that, although I may have no idea what a "hard landing" is, I think I know what a crash looks like — and I'm willing to bet good money the jet that crash investigators are combing through right now at Stanfield International never sees another minute of flight time.

Like most of us, I wondered what a plane was doing trying to land in that storm anyway. And how does a pilot clip a power line or antenna or whatever it was that sent the aircraft skidding down the asphalt runway?

All of this will become clearer as the investigators do their jobs.

But mostly what I felt looking at that photo was that if I was on Flight 624 — with the Germanwings Flight 9525 tragedy still fresh in my mind — well, I might never get on a flight again.

Know that I'm not a complete phobic. If I'm flying regularly, I'm as relaxed as the next person when the fasten-the-seatbelt sign flashes on.

But when I haven't buckled up in a while, I sweat a bit until we reach flying altitude since most accidents happen then and during landing. If turbulence hits, I'm suddenly kicking myself for not grabbing something from the drinks trolley while I had the chance.

Now before you start, I know all about the numbers: every day, 100,000 flights leave and land around the world without incident; every 24 hour something like three million residents of this planet get on and off a plane safely.

I understand that fear of flying is totally irrational. I realize that a person is way more likely to get paged by a minivan in a Halifax crosswalk than they are in an airplane when the ground shows up too quickly.

But I step out the door and onto the street as fearlessly as Georges St-Pierre striding into the octagon.

In a plane I'm a little more like Louis C.K., who points out in one of his comic bits that everybody aboard a jet should be in a state of constant marvel because, he thunders, "you're sitting in a chair in the sky!"

I know I'm not alone in my periodic unease. Wayne Gretzky doesn't like to fly. Aretha Franklin hates it. It's said that Muhammad Ali, in his heyday, might have rather gone 10 rounds with Joe Frazier than take a short hop in a turboprop.

William Shatner — Capt. James T. Kirk, for heaven's sake — turned down an invitation to fly with the world's first commercial space flight company, Virgin Galactic, because, you guessed it, he's scared of flying.

One in six American adults is scared of flying. If the same ratio applies here, that means some four million Canadian men and women — or 135,000 Nova Scotians, or roughly 56,000 residents of Halifax — feel their blood pressure rise when they step aboard a plane.

What's up with all those folks? Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and associate professor in Dalhousie University's department of psychology and neuroscience, says several factors are imbedded in airplane anxiety.

"Fear of heights, crashing and loss of control can accompany the experience of flying," he explained via email. "And enclosed spaces, crowded places and unfamiliar people can trigger fear."

The good news is that fear of flying is a highly treatable condition. The therapy of choice, he says, is something called in vivo exposure, a treatment that's also used for a wide range of ailments including post-traumatic stress disorder.

"This treatment involves exposing a person to progressively more frightening aspects of the flying experience until they become relaxed," he says reassuringly.

A person might start by looking at a picture of a plane, then watching a video of a plane. Gradually, they might work their way up by reading about a plane crash, then going to an airport to stand in the terminal and watch planes coming and going.

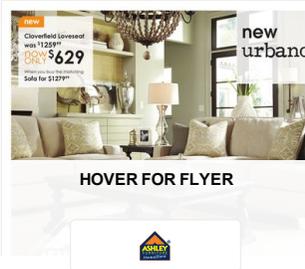
Sooner or later, though, they're going to have to get on an airplane. For the 133 passengers aboard Flight 624, that probably just got a little harder to do.

[About the Author »](#)

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