

by Julie Stromberg

FEAR OF FLYING



Dr. Michael Neboschick with his 1973 Piper Cherokee four-seater, "Carolina"

His business is piloting clients to a smooth mental landing

Airplanes, airports and flying — for most, a good way to get from here to there if you don't mind a few hassles and less-than-gourmet food. For others, just hearing someone utter the word "airplane" results in a jaw-clenching, muscle-stiffening sense of fear.

A fear that can be faced, according to Ellicott City-based psychologist Michael Neboschick, who offers specialized help for those with a flying phobia. "Fear restricts people from living life," he says. "As a professional, it's very rewarding to help people transcend limitation."

When it comes to the fear of flying, Neboschick knows his stuff. A practicing psychology professional for more than 30 years, he is also an experienced commercial pilot and flight instructor. "People come to see me for one reason, and some end up also being treated for a fear of flying," says the 60-year-old.

Raised in Charleston, S. C., by a mother who was afraid to fly, he didn't take his first flight until age 30. In 1974, with a newly earned doctorate in psychology from the University of Georgia in hand, he flew from Georgia to Illinois for a job interview. He landed the job and began his counseling career at a clinic in Aurora, Ill.

"One of the other psychologists had a plane," Neboschick remembers with a smile. "A Cessna. He took me up for my first flight in a private plane."

After that flight, Neboschick signed up for flying lessons. By his third lesson, he had purchased his own Cessna 150 two-seater. He eventually became a certified flight instructor. As his passion for flying soared, so did his career as a psychologist. In 1982, his wife, Beth, and he relocated from the Chicago area to Howard County with their son, Ashley, and daughter, Havalah.

"I worked in several group practices before opening a solo practice six years ago," he says. "I have also taught aviation science at Howard Community College for the past seven years."

In addition to the variety of conditions Neboschick treats within his practice, he finds that helping people conquer the fear of flying

allows him to combine his two areas of expertise. "It also gets me out of the office," he says with laugh.

So what does it take for someone to overcome air-induced anxiety? According to Neboschick, it involves a few office visits followed by a friendly, non-threatening visit to an actual airport. During the office visits, he focuses on fear-management skills.

"It is important to substitute negative thoughts with positive ones," he explains. "Self-calming skills are very important."

In the office, Neboschick uses a combination of techniques to help a person understand and apply self-calming skills. He considers cognitive behavioral therapy and neurolinguistic programming to be very effective. Cognitive behavioral therapy involves teaching the fearful person to manage his or her thoughts in a more constructive manner. Instead of focusing on what could happen during a flight, the person might choose to think instead about the lovely beach that awaits him after the flight.

With neurolinguistic programming, Neboschick helps the person establish a mental or physical cue to use when fear arises. "When fear sets in, for example, a person's cue might be to imagine his feet firmly on the ground or to touch his fingers together as in yoga practice," he explains. "The goal is to stay in the here and now."

Once the cues have been established, Neboschick works with the individual on desensitizing him to the fear. Using hypnosis and visualization, the person mentally goes through the sequence of events involved with flying until the fear can be managed.

Then it is time to head over to the airport.

Neboschick keeps his own Piper Cherokee four-seater at Tipton Airport in Odenton, near Fort Meade. "I give the person a choice," he explains with a gentle tone. "We can go up, or we can stay on the ground. It is important for the person to do it on his own and not because he feels pressured."

He has never had someone refuse to soar past his fear. "People have a choice about being afraid," he says with a knowing smile. "By choosing to move beyond the fear, they gain confidence. While real fear is a part of life, a person should not be controlled by it." **CM**