

For the thousands of people who suffer from a fear of flying, an approaching summer holiday can fill them with dread. Happily, hypnosis is helping many of us get over our phobias – so we decided to put it to the test

Cure your fear of flying

Elena Hughes is lying on a sunlounger by the side of a swimming pool, sipping chilled Chardonnay as she looks down at the view from the hills above Cannes. The 19th century ivy-clad Le Manoir de L'Etang, where she's staying, is one of the most elegant and luxurious small hotels on France's Côte d'Azur.

To Elena, 44, a busy working mum of two girls, it's nothing short of a miracle that she's here. She had to make a two-hour flight on a plane – something that, up until she had hypnotherapy just 10 days before, would have turned her into a terrified wreck.

'Many of us have to face this fear'

Fear of flying – aviophobia – is an increasingly common problem as more of us seek our fix of summer sun and make the most of bargain-price holidays. Most people have experienced a degree of nervousness at some time on a plane. If God meant us to fly, he'd have given us wings, right? But the deal is: no plane trip, no sun-soaked paradise. So we might not like it, but we cope.

Aviophobes are different. The really bad cases only have to think about booking an overseas trip and they come out in a

cold sweat. Others can just about get themselves to sit on a plane, but when the doors slam shut and the plane starts taxiing towards the runway they're already panicking and may well be screaming to be let off.

Elena knows exactly how they feel. Since having a car accident 24 years ago, she struggled with increasing panic attacks whenever she flew. Despite taking the prescribed sleeping tablet temazepam before flights, Elena – a nursery school teacher from Towcester, Northamptonshire – remained wide awake with her heart racing.

'I can only describe what I went through as sheer panic. I was rigid with fear,' she says. 'So for a few years we took a sleeper train to the South of France instead, but it really ate into our holiday time. And I was aware that as my children got older they'd want to go to places further afield, just like their friends, and they'd start to ask questions about why we couldn't.'

The situation might not have changed if it wasn't for her husband Alan's job. He's the rugby master at Stowe School in Buckinghamshire and also coaches the England under-18s rugby team. A tour is taking place this month in South Africa and Elena and Alan's sports-mad daughters Yasmin, 13, and

Alice, nine, are desperate to go. 'This was the wake-up call I needed to do something about my phobia,' explains Elena. 'Somehow I had to make the 10-hour flight to South Africa, so I decided to try hypnotherapy.'

'This was my wake-up call'

As one of the UK's most respected hypnotherapists, Ursula James was the perfect person to help Elena. She lectures at Oxford University

Medical School, where her pioneering work is convincing sceptical doctors that hypnotherapy can help their patients. She's also vice-president of the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis and lectures around the world on the role of hypnosis in clinical medicine.

In the first part of the one-hour session, Ursula asked Elena how long she'd been afraid of flying, when and how she'd decided she could no longer fly and, most importantly of all, what she thought was the main reason behind her fear.



So far so good... Elena on her first flight since the hypnotherapy

feeling is totally part of her unconscious mind and she can't really control it. It's like a habit. She has inappropriately high levels of anxiety, which show most obviously in her fear of flying.

'The role of hypnotherapy is to get to the unconscious part of the mind that's controlling the panic, wipe the slate clean and reboot the system – so that the only response to danger is a healthy and appropriate one. I do this by taking Elena into a state of deep mental relaxation, so that her unconscious comes to the fore. Then I make suggestions to her unconscious, which will remove the anxiety she's been feeling.'

'Hypnotherapy heals the mind'

Before the hypnotherapy begins, Ursula asks Elena a vital question: 'If one is calm and 10 is total panic, how do you feel about flying at this moment?' Elena reckons she's about a nine and a half. A bit of a challenge then.

'Elena might think she's bad, but I've had people coming to see me who literally had to be dragged through the door and would burst into tears if anyone even mentioned the word flying,' says Ursula.

Elena settles back into the comfortable leather couch as Ursula begins the process. She tells her to close her eyes and start to daydream – perhaps by imagining she's relaxing by a swimming pool somewhere hot and exotic. Then, as Elena's breathing slows down, Ursula tells her that when she's sitting by that pool her fear of flying will seem like a distant, vague memory.

'I'll now count backwards down from 10 and each

descending number sends you deeper into your mind,' says Ursula quietly. 'Each step will be another step towards your conscious mind taking control of your unconscious mind. So you'll enjoy your plane trips and look forward to the adventures that they'll take you on.'

After the countdown and with Elena now totally relaxed, Ursula takes her even deeper into her subconscious. She tells Elena to first lift one finger, then another on the same hand, then the whole hand until her entire hand is raised up to elbow height.

'Your conscious mind takes over'

'Now the mind that's in control of your unconscious responses has come to the fore,' says Ursula gently. 'I'm going to make some suggestions to this part of your mind. When you were in your accident you went on high alert and that was appropriate at the time. But now it's time for that part of your mind to hand back control to your conscious mind. Tell it to do that now. As you instruct your mind to do that, you'll feel sensations in your hand as it returns to normal and your hand and arm will come back down.'

As Ursula counts to 10, Elena begins to feel more alert and aware; by 10, she's opened her eyes. 'I feel totally shattered, but very relaxed,' she says. 'I could hear Ursula talking to me, so I wasn't asleep, but I can't remember much of what she said. I do feel much calmer than I did about flying, though. I'd say I'm now down to a five.'

'Ursula's brilliant. She's so calm and confident that hypnotherapy will work she inspires you.'

She's given me a relaxation CD and I'll play that before I get onto the plane.'

Ursula had suggested that Elena needed an incentive to get onto the plane – a treat at the end of the journey. And what better treat than Le Manoir de L'Etang? At Luton Airport, Elena was nervous but controlled. She walked up the steps to the plane without hesitation and hardly winced when the doors were shut.

'I couldn't believe I was actually on the plane and I didn't want to run off screaming,' she says. 'I did feel slightly nervous during takeoff and I had a few bad moments during the flight, but overall it went really well.'

So will Elena make the trip to South Africa? 'Of course,' she says. 'But I think I might be playing Ursula's CD a few times before I go.'

Isla Whitcroft

To contact Ursula James, visit www.ursulajames.com. For details of Le Manoir de L'Etang, visit www.distinguishedhotels.com. To contact a registered hypnotherapist near you, visit the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis at www.bsich.org.uk



As an incentive to get on a plane, Elena visited Manoir de L'Etang



Hypnotherapist Ursula James talks Elena through the process