



10 ways to regain piloting confidence

A little nerve for the unnerved

By: Dan Namowitz

1 - Recall the positive

What made you want to fly? After that, what caused you to feel those "This is what it's all about" moments? All of them are preserved in your memories. Some of them are documented by photographs, video, logbook entries, trip logs, or souvenirs. Break out the evidence; relive the moment. Think up ways to feel that way again.

2 - Be an environmentalist

Few pilots aren't entirely captivated by the airport environment, its every detail and nuance. Some quality hanging-out time amid the sights and sounds, the familiar faces and N-numbers, has restorative powers. Watch a few takeoffs and landings. Allow yourself a private smile as you imagine the mental and physical struggles taking place in a soloing student pilot's cockpit as an arrival unfolds (or unravels) before your eyes. Remember how it was--no, how it is. This should get you reflecting on how far you've come, how much you have achieved.

Even a cup of the bad airport coffee, when regarded in a medicinal context, can be restorative. (One does not need to be a licensed physician to prescribe airport coffee as a cure for what ails a pilot. A flight instructor certificate is sufficient, and you won't be charged for an office visit.)

3 - Take yourself by surprise

Having given yourself some of the quality down time described above on a non-flying day, here's a method for breaking out of your rut that has helped apprehensive pilots get going again: Go fly!

The more you fly, the more you *want* to fly. The less you fly, the harder it is to feel confident when faced with challenging conditions for a flight.

This conflicting set of emotions can take a pilot by surprise. You thought you wanted to fly, but now that you're at the airport, you just can't seem to make up your mind. That windsock seems to be flapping about most briskly--a bad crosswind landing on a solo flight months ago flashes into your memory. Or a rude surprise such as the substitution of an unfamiliar aircraft for Old Reliable, which you'd scheduled for your flight, takes the edge off your enthusiasm. You decline and head home, relieved to have ducked the discomfort but puzzled that your reaction was so negative. Next time, you say to yourself, things will be better.

Is next time better? Maybe. If next time comes soon and conditions are inviting, next time is usually positive in every respect, and the strange lapse of confidence fades to a vague memory. But if next time is delayed further or if similar challenges exist, the same avoidance mechanisms can kick up again, perhaps more strongly than before. Now there's a snowball effect, and even the attempt to get back in a groove with flying becomes a burden that the pilot seeks to avoid.

Underneath all the doubt, however, there is still that desire to fly, but its power to overcome hesitancy is greatly diminished. While it may seem like a downward spiral, but the truth is that it's easy to break out of the loss-of-confidence trap. All it takes is recovering the feelings that made you enthusiastic about flying in the first place.

You already checked the schedule of the aircraft so that you could pay your ground visit. If conditions are inviting and your currency has not yet slipped, this may be a great time to practice maneuvers or some takeoffs and landings. Go ahead! Often, it is the waiting and worrying that causes a pilot to lose confidence in his or her abilities after a disappointing flight.

Once in the air again, those apprehensions disappear, and they stay gone after landing. This time you avoided all that negativity by coming out to the airport ostensibly to give yourself a dose of familiarization therapy. Then you decided to fly, and the preparations left no time for becoming unnerved. The actual flying is as much fun as it used to be. Problem solved!

4 - Team-tackle a daunting mission

Some pilots feel that by now that they "should" be ready to take on a particular kind of flight, but still aren't. Crossing the mountains on a cross-country, or making a "go" decision in higher winds, still doesn't seem like a good idea despite all the past training. What's wrong? Could be, the expectations are still too high--that more training or experience in the environment to be faced on that daunting flight is still needed. Or the problem could be workload management.

Two solutions present themselves here: Ask an instructor whom you trust to fly with you on a rehearsal flight over the same route you want to fly alone or with passengers later. If time doesn't permit a rehearsal, or your anxiety level isn't quite that high about the mission, an alternative is to ask a fellow private pilot to come along for the ride for fun and to help to reduce your workload. Make clear who's flying and making decisions, but then take advantage of the extra skilled labor present to make the trip easier. (This second option is not available to student pilots unless the other pilot is current and agrees to be the designated pilot in command.)

Whichever solution you choose, study the flight route and facilities carefully. Are you getting as much help as possible from ground-based sources? Radar flight following, recorded weather broadcasts at airports you'll pass, and filing a VFR flight plan all add to your sense of safety and comfort.

5 - Schedule for success

Key moments in flight training must happen on schedule for your training to continue at an effective clip. Lose time because of weather, or maintenance delays, and your training can go on hold for long periods. Keeping yourself in the game with practice sessions is fine in the meantime, but for those with finite financial resources, there is a limit to how much of this is possible.

To break out, borrow a trick from the airlines and double-book your most important flights such as solo cross-countries and checkrides. Don't be greedy and abuse the privilege. But covering your bases once in a while to avoid serious setbacks can make all the difference to a training program. Your fellow students won't mind, and some day you can return the favor by deferring to their needs.

Just remember that if your flight goes off as scheduled the first time, call up early and release the aircraft on the alternate date you blocked out. Another idea here is to have the FBO go ahead and schedule a back-up flight in the event that you will not need the aircraft. Here again, let the other folks know as early as possible who's going to use the time.

6 - Get a second opinion

A clumsily executed go-around, a blown altitude assignment, or a misunderstood instruction from ATC are all that are needed to make a pilot shy about the next flight. Getting lost, running low on fuel, or stumbling into weather surprises can be discouraging. Instead of being your own harsh judge and jury, talk about what happened with your flight instructor, mentor, or an experienced pilot you know. Review your understanding of that subject area or procedure. You may find the problem and correct it right there in the classroom. Then you can move on.

7 - Instructor attitude

Could this be the cause of your uncertainty? If so, switch now. Be honest about it, and don't blame your CFI if it is not his fault. But if the truth is that your instructor is not letting you feel good about your flying, you'll know as soon as you give another CFI a tryout. Then the remedy is simple: change. Remember, this is a business relationship, not a commentary on anyone personally. But, don't spend another dollar flying with a CFI who is unwilling or unable to let you grow as an aviator.

And while it is tempting to tell yourself that the instructor is experienced and that therefore the source of the problem must be you, that not necessarily the case. Some CFIs, unfortunately, have their own confidence problems that result in their being too controlling in the aircraft. They never let their students truly fly (which includes not letting them make those important mistakes from which learning comes). Other inspiration-deficient CFIs are putting in their time instructing pending a piloting career elsewhere, and just don't like the work. This shows through in a lack of enthusiasm and an absence of encouragement--a general sense of detachment from the responsibility to teach.

The solution is to find someone who is as much a teacher as he or she is a pilot, and make a change. True, "firing" an employee is never easy for anyone with heart. But let that dullard of a CFI go. You'll be doing both of you a favor, and you'll both learn from the experience.

8 - Quality down time

You're not planning to fly today, and a glance at the flight school or FBO schedule shows you that your aircraft isn't either. Time for some bonding. Whether it's the familiar old warhorse that has taken you this far, or that aloof stranger you hesitated to fly on short notice the other day, ask if you can go out there for a while and just sit in the cockpit. Run your checklists in your mind, or study the pilot's operating handbook right there at the source. Take a digital photo of the panel for future home study. While exercising your visitor's privileges out there, be considerate of others. Don't run down the battery needlessly by playing with the avionics, or leave an untidy cockpit behind when you depart.

9 - Don't fixate

When you learned how to control your aircraft solely by reference to instruments, you heard a flight instructor tell you not to fixate on one instrument, but to keep your scan moving. Fixating on some error you made while flying is equally unproductive and tends to saddle you with grossly disproportionate interpretations of what went wrong. (Combine this advice with the item above on getting a second opinion.)

10 - Visit the spa

Sometimes confidence wanes for reasons that do not become clear even after much soul-searching. You're not sure what ails you, except that you feel listless and uncertain. Time for a trip to the health spa. The aviation health spa, that is. Believe it--that's nothing more invigorating and restorative than being "wrung out" to the limits of your ability, and beyond, by someone whose pilot skills and teaching skills are top notch and who has performed this kind of tough-love instructional service many times before.

Don't feel you need to explain yourself in detail when asking for "the treatment." Reasons aren't important. You just need a good workout to get the hands, feet, eyes, and brain back in sync with flight. Since hesitation tends to feed on itself, just setting up this appointment may trigger the kind of avoidance behavior that caused you to shy away from the airport in the first place. Then try a combination of the methods offered here. Show up for some quality down time, and if the doctor is in, get that second opinion. Then ask if he'll fly with you on short notice (if he doesn't come right out and volunteer to do so).

Chances are you'll brighten up his day as much as he'll brighten up yours. Then you'll be back in the swing with your skills improving and your confidence high.

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