SABRINA WOODS

GET-HOME-ITIS

The Keys to Treating an "Airborne" Disease

Well, here you are, sitting in the back of an ambulance as it carefully picks its way through the rutted, muddy cow pasture from which you were retrieved. You watch as a medical technician dutifully takes your vitals and assesses your overall status. You are pretty well off, considering. You escaped with a bumped head, and some minor cuts and bruises — the largest being an ugly purple thing above your left knee where it hit the instrument panel during your rather abrupt "landing." Your beautiful Beechcraft Bonanza, however, has not fared so well. It lies in a heap, having been knocked from the sky only an hour earlier.

How did you get here? Let us rewind the clock a bit and go back to before the *dénouement* — a literary term for the outcome of a dramatic sequence of events. In this case it was the moment when things went sour.

Mental Conversations

"If that other guy made it, then so can I!"

"I'm almost there, let's just do it and get it over with."

"I don't want to divert — too much work."

"I've done this before, I can do it again."

"I can handle this. I've got 20 years of experience on my side."

"I'm so tired,

I JUST WANT TO GET HOME!"

Have you ever found yourself uttering these phrases in the back of your head while flying — maybe even aloud to a passenger, or to no one at all? Likely it was at the onset of a particularly harrowing situation that gave you enough pause to start a cycle of rationalization. It could have been anything from flying VFR into IMC, to trying to execute an unstable approach. Regardless of what got you into the hairy situation, you had some decisions to make.

Decision-making is a pretty complicated process broken into many stages in order to effect change. First you have to figure out that something is amiss and then determine if you need to act or if you would rather adapt to it. Once you choose the most desirable outcome, you then identify which actions will successfully put things back to right. Lastly, once you do whatever it is you decided to do, you then evaluate whether or not it worked. Sometimes this requires beginning the cycle all over again if it didn't end up the way you wanted it to.

This might seem really drawn out, but, in reality, decision-making can happen in a split second, or it can take a more systemic, deliberate path. Aeronautical decision-making tends to be a hybrid of both.

Many Aliases, Same Danger

The study of human factors in aviation has grown exponentially since its World War II days. As a result, accident and mishap analysts have realized that most incidents occur as a result of human error, rather than mechanical failure or external hazards. Some of the better known human factor categories are fatigue, poor communication/CRM, compartmentalization, and disorientation. In this article, we will focus on get-home-itis, otherwise known as fixation.

Get-home-itis is a funny sounding colloquialism, but the danger behind it is very real. It is when the desire to get to a destination overrides logic, sound decision-making, and basic instinct. This urge to push on regardless of the data telling you that it might not be the best decision can often result in

An aircraft after a thunderstorm encounter.

Photo by David W. Cox, Fairbanks FSDO

mishap, and it's a prevalent issue for the general aviation (GA) community.

Get-home-itis struck the pilot who, after filing IFR with a controller, was notified that inclement weather was on the way. He acknowledged, pointed his plane down the runway, and initiated takeoff. In all his haste to get home, he never made it.

Then there were the football fans who, in their quest to make it to the big game, deserted their aircraft in a field after a mechanical issue forced them to crash-land. Instead of alerting officials and getting checked out by a medical facility, the group hailed a cab and went on their way to the game, leaving local officials scratching their heads when they finally arrived to the vacated scene.

Abandoning the scene of an accident notwithstanding, one must also wonder if the rush to get to the event might have trumped a sound preflight airworthiness check. This is an example of get-home-itis' equally evil twin, get-*there*-itis. The phenomenon takes on many other aliases: press-on-itis, hurry-home syndrome, and goal fixation, to name a few. They all result in the same willful determination to push through regardless of the results.

Anatomy of an "Itis"

The Go/No-Go Game

The scenario: You've done it! You managed to score tickets to the big game — seats so close you will be able to feel the spray from the celebratory "Gatorade dunk" at the very end. You will be treating your teenager and his best friend to the festivities.

It isn't a long flight — just under two hours from your home base at Manassas to the airport at Virginia Tech. It isn't a route you are terribly familiar with, but it has been well-traveled by other members of your club and nobody has described it as a big challenge. Your Piper Cherokee Six is equipped with an approach-capable IFR GPS. You also have a standard navigational radio that has glideslope, and a hand-held GPS with weather datalink. In addition, you have a shiny new iPad complete with your favorite electronic flight bag app. You are instrument-rated and legally current, but you haven't flown in instrument meteorological conditions for quite a while and it's been ages since you made an actual approach in IMC.

When you did your initial flight planning a few days ago, the weather was forecast to be colder than it typically is for this time of year. Your Cherokee Six is not approved for flight into known icing conditions, but no problem since it is — or was — VFR weather. On game day, you find that it's VFR at Manassas, but IFR at Virginia Tech. Weather en route starts with VFR, falls to MVFR, and then to IFR nearer to Blacksburg. A review of the TAFs, though, indicates that conditions are supposed to improve to VFR by your ETA. You're a mite uneasy about these conditions, partly because you

lack recent experience operating in IMC, and partly because the combination of freezing temperatures and visible moisture could lead to icing conditions in flight. If the TAFs prove overly optimistic, you might find yourself in somewhat challenging conditions later on. You briefly consider pulling the plug on the flight, even though it's too late to get there in time by driving. But one look at your teen's eager face makes you dread having to disappoint him. And, admittedly, you don't want to look like a wimp in front of your teen and his best friend.

So off you go. As expected, the weather at departure is cold but clear and sunny. As you fly south, though, the clear skies gradually become murky, and then milky. You start to realize that it's difficult to see straight in front of you but you can still see the ground when you look straight down. That's still VFR, right? And anyway you can always turn around and head back to better weather.

But … do you? Every mile you fly is an additional investment in the idea of getting to your destination. Just a few more minutes and you can start descending to land. You tune in the ATIS, only to learn that it's still IFR, which means you'll have to shoot an approach in IMC to an unfamiliar airport and with challenging terrain.

What would you do?

In addition to defining human factor errors, researchers have also tried to understand why it is we do the things we do. What motivates experienced, safety-conscious pilots to make poor decisions or invite unnecessary risk? And why does it seem to happen often, despite the educational materials out there warning us about the peril? It is important for us to understand the "why" if we are to avoid falling prey to it.

With get-home-itis, the focus is so intense, it seemingly comes at any cost. It can be self-generated or externally imposed; like wanting to make a loved one's social event. We will ignore data contrary to our own plans. We will disregard warnings from outside resources such as air traffic control and weather applications. Even more alarming, we will dismiss our inane "Spidey sense" — that feeling we get when we know something is wrong, or that danger is near.

Patience is essential to survival, and hindsight can be a real devil.

It doesn't just happen in flight, either. I can recall times when I have been so focused on getting to a destination while driving, especially here in traffic-heavy Washington, D.C., that I took more, ultimately unnecessary risks in order to achieve my goal. Perhaps I was running late. I might have sped. I might have cut just a bit too closely to that Suburban in the adjacent lane in order to pass another vehicle. I might have gunned it rather than slowed at a yellow light. Each of these decisions could have had costly consequences and, in reality, taking my time and arriving safe and sound should have been my true focus.

Does any of this sound familiar? If so, you too might have fallen victim to an *itis*, and it isn't hard to see how these behaviors might transfer to the cockpit. The "why" is because we simply want to get there, and a host of reasons act as validation for this. We may feel that we have already invested too much to turn back or change plans. We may argue that our experience and flight prowess will surely prevail. We may just wish and hope for the best, and feel that that serves as enough reason to keep going. What we don't realize is that in doing this — in *rationalizing*— we have passed up much safer opportunities.

Lower Risk ≠ Less Desirable

The best way to combat the phenomenon is to study up on it; recognize that it exists and that you might be susceptible to it. Articles such as this and others published by aviation and safety forums are available to help you understand the process a bit better. Check out the scenario in the sidebar on page 11. Give it a read and surmise for yourself; what would you do? The point is to get you thinking about it. Education and awareness go a long way in preventing a mishap.

So does data collection. This is a key part of flight preparation. Make sure that all essential information for your flight is available at your fingertips if needed and that your charts are up to date. Ensure that your destination is ready to receive you. Evaluate your aircraft to make sure you have the fuel required should diverting be necessary, and review anti-icing procedures germane to your aircraft. And if there is a weather report, NOTAMs, or pilot cross-tell to be had, heed it!

Next, always have a contingency plan when you go out to fly, because let's face it, just because you *intend* for something to go a certain way doesn't mean it's going to happen — particularly when Mother Nature is involved. Before you take off, identify potential hazards en route to your destination. Determine your personal threshold — the point that your skill, experience, and that "Spidey sense" meet their no-go limit. Doing this beforehand goes a long way in decreasing the inevitable stress having to deviate can bring later.

The best time to form a Plan B is before you need to use it. Then once in the air, if plans change, take the necessary time to set up for a new approach and proceed already having an idea as to what it is you want to do.

In conclusion, lower risk does not necessarily equal less desirable. Yes, it might equal more work: more paperwork; an unexpected overnight stay; a more serpentine route; an aborted landing; or a go-around. But the fact of the matter is that these lower risk options are not less desirable, especially if the result can be the difference in arriving safe and sound. Patience is essential to survival, and hindsight can be a real devil.

Back to you and your beached Beechcraft; you admit it — you were in a hurry to get home. You had promised you would be there for your son's first time in net for his high school varsity hockey team, so you took some risks. Your buddy warned you that the weather was getting rough out towards your destination, and your favorite weather app on your tablet also noted winds in excess of 20 knots with potential for downbursts. You remembered an old CFI had once warned against hurrying off to fly when

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installed levers, crossed wires, missing locking devices, and inappropriate hardware. I am willing to bet it was correct in the book every time, but somewhere, someone made a mistake. Someone might have even become complacent. In short, someone failed to "sweat the small stuff."

Avoiding this pitfall is pretty easy. Always, always, ALWAYS perform every job according to regulation and procedures. Checklists are your friends — use them! Never work from memory. Always go back and verify your job upon completion. Finally, remind yourself of the dangers of complacency. It exists. We can all be susceptible if we aren't careful, and when that happens, we stand to lose a lot more than a batch of cookies.

Sabrina Woods is an assistant editor for the FAA Safety Briefing. *She spent 12 years in the active duty Air Force where she served as an aircraft maintenance officer and an aviation mishap investigator.*

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the weather wasn't agreeable — or something like that — but you figured if you could just get airborne, you would outrun the weather and be home in time to catch the last two periods of the game. Despite the warnings and that ominous feeling in your gut, you took off into the iron gray clouds. All seemed well until you started the descent to your destination. Then it happened; the bottom simply dropped out.

As the ambulance makes its way down the highway in the direction of town, you realize several things, the first of which is that you are very lucky to be alive. The second is that you have just learned the hard way what succumbing to get-home-itis can do. The last? You are most definitely going to miss that hockey game.

Sabrina Woods is an assistant editor for the FAA Safety Briefing. *She spent 12 years in the active duty Air Force where she served as an aircraft maintenance officer and an aviation mishap investigator.*

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