

HEALTH

There Are Two Types of Airport People

Some travelers love being late.

AMANDA MULL MAY 29, 2019



ARIEL SKELLEY / GETTY

It's not hard to spot people about to miss a flight. They're weaving between on-time travelers at a speed somewhere between a power walk and a sprint, or they're elbow-dancing their way to the front of the TSA line to plead their case for immediate screening. They look panicked, maybe red-faced. Their suitcase's wheels probably won't cooperate for portions of their journey, sending it flailing behind them as they move as quickly as their new vacation sandals allow.

Because I'm a compulsively early person, I've always assumed the other people trucking through the airport were doing their best to be on time, even if their best was different from my own (superior) best. Why would anyone look at an experience as expensive and anxiety-inducing as flying and want to make it a little bit riskier?

Some chronically late people do, of course, intend to be on time. But a smaller group of frequent fliers heads into air travel with lateness as the goal, relishing the

thrill of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. “I just really live for the feeling of literally running through the airport barefoot because you didn’t have time to put your shoes on after security, and your laptop is in your hand because you didn’t have time to put it back,” says my colleague Ellen Cushing, a senior editor at *The Atlantic*.

To the preternaturally punctual of the world, it can feel as though people like Cushing were put on this planet as an obstacle to our own timely destinies. But the willfully tardy are not simply trying to annoy their friends and family. Their motivations are much more psychologically complicated.

[*Read: Can you cure chronic lateness?*]

I started talking with friends and co-workers about their air-travel habits after Tim Herrera, an editor at *The New York Times*, live-tweeted his journey to the airport last Friday. “On my way to the airport. Flight’s at 2:45, boards at 2:20, my Lyft’s ETA at the airport is 1:48,” he wrote. “Feel like I haven’t been this early for a flight in years tbqh, might stop for a snack on the way.” That message and the updates that followed it garnered dozens of responses, mostly from people who could feel their own blood pressure rising as they imagined arriving to an airport on a holiday weekend with less than an hour to make it from the curb to their seat.

It wasn’t the first time Herrera had told the world about being purposefully late for a flight. “Tweeting about it is kind of fun and adds some drama,” he told me, as though the looming prospect of a missed flight wasn’t enough. Indeed, the thrill was the main draw for every purposeful late arriver I spoke with. “I kind of love the drama of running through an airport,” says Mac Joseph, a friend of mine who works in public relations. “I hate lines. I hate the idea of waiting. I’ll be the last person to board the plane, no matter where I’m sitting.”

Herrera says he usually consults Google Maps and traffic information to determine the latest possible time he can leave. He also has TSA PreCheck and never checks his luggage. Still, he admits it’s a risky game every time. “Everything is arranged in a way that nothing can go wrong, and if one thing goes wrong in that sequence of events, I’m screwed,” he says. He most recently missed a flight last summer, when the gate door was closed right in front of him after a last-second dash.

Most purposeful late arrivers have similar stories. The worst miss for David Covucci, a friend of mine in New York, happened in Spain. “I got into a revolving door at the airport and it was going so slow, so I shoved it and it seized up,” he says. He was trapped inside. “I could see check-in, I could see my flight listed, and I was waving my arms to try and get someone’s attention.” Covucci was eventually freed from the revolving door, but check-in for his flight had already closed. To add insult to injury, he was late on that particular day because he was trying to prove a point to his mom. She insists on arriving hours early.

Like Covucci, everyone I could find who practices airport lateness did so in spite of significant pressure from family and friends to be early. For Herrera, it’s his parents and his best friend. For Cushing, it’s her long-term boyfriend, who sometimes leaves their apartment more than an hour before she does for flights they’re taking together. Joseph frequently travels with his roommate, and they sometimes also take separate cars, hours apart, for the same flight. “I know I can pick at him,” Joseph says. “I’m like, ‘Oh, I think I’m just gonna go to sleep now and pack tomorrow.’ You can see the anxiety growing in him, physically.”

[*Read: Why does air travel make people so grumpy?*]

Jonny Gerkin, a psychiatrist at the University of North Carolina, told me that both airport arrival styles are likely just different ways of approaching the same emotional problem: the extreme anxiety of air travel. “One person is hyper-efficient and overprepared, and another is someone who doesn’t manage their anxiety that way,” Gerkin said. It’s not that late people don’t find the airport as stressful as early people do, in other words, but that their coping mechanisms indicate a fundamentally different approach to the negative parts of life.

“They distract and procrastinate, and next thing you know, they can’t do what they need to do to get there on time,” Gerkin said. “It’s not quite self-harm, but it’s in the same arena. It changes your feeling state and gets you out of that place that’s uncomfortable and into this place of excitement.” This can mean that even for people who experience higher risks from airport lateness—those who can’t afford rebooking fees, or members of ethnic groups more likely to be stopped for additional security checks—the siren song of lateness can be just as tempting. In some individuals, the additional stress of those factors might make lateness an even more attractive coping mechanism.

Gerkin's theory is in line with much of the research on the personality-based reasons people are late in general. According to Jeffrey Conte, an organizational psychologist at San Diego State University, type-A people—those who tend to be impatient and ambitious—are often punctual. Type Bs, who tend to be more relaxed and less neurotic, generally arrive later. Still, he says there are often mitigating factors, like how the culture in which someone grows up views punctuality in the first place, and whether or not someone has kids. “The relationships between personality characteristics and lateness are not what we would call strong (because there are other factors), but they are consistent,” Conte explained via email.

Those baseline differences in outlook can make the virtues of both earliness and lateness impossible to explain to people in the opposite camp. Joseph and Cushing say they're able to compromise, so the thrill they experience from lateness isn't a deal breaker in their friendships or relationships. Still, finding a mutual understanding does seem like a lost cause. “He's just like, ‘Why would you be late when you could be early?’” Cushing says of her boyfriend. “And I'm just like, ‘Why would you be early when you could be late?’”

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