



Season 4
Episode 8 Transcript
Bonus

Torah Kachur:

Darren Harrison is flying home after a fishing trip in the Bahamas. He's on a small plane with the pilot and one other passenger.

Darren Harrison:

We went up to 12,000 feet to start with, and it was smooth sailing. I was spread out in the back. I had my feet propped up.

Torah Kachur:

Shortly after they reached their cruising altitude, Darren hears the pilot say something alarming.

Darren Harrison:

He said, "Man, I don't know. I got a really bad headache, and just I don't feel good."

Torah Kachur:

A moment later, the pilot slumps back in his seat, unconscious.

Darren Harrison:

He was out, he was gone, and the plane's in a dive.

Torah Kachur:

Darren crawls to the cockpit and grabs the controls, known as the yoke.

Darren Harrison:

Basically at that point, it clicked in my head, "If you grab the yoke and pull back, you're probably going to really rip the wings off this thing, if they haven't already come off."

Torah Kachur:

He tells himself-

Darren Harrison:

"If you panic, you will die."

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar.

Every day, when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

Darren lives in Lakeland, Florida. He works at his family-owned flooring business.

Darren Harrison:

It gives me the capabilities to do what I like to do in my free time. And so, I fish a bunch and I hunt a bunch.

Torah Kachur:

Darren fishes all over the country and regularly goes on trips to the Caribbean. In May 2022, Darren went down to the Bahamas for a weekend fishing trip. His friends

stayed to compete in a tournament the following week. Darren had to work, so he headed home early. He also wanted to get home to his wife.

Darren Harrison:

She was six months pregnant, had the baby on the way, so yeah, I was really excited to get home to her.

Torah Kachur:

The pilot flying Darren home was a man named Ken Allen. Darren had flown with Ken several times before. This time, Ken brought a friend, Russ, along for the ride. As they walked across the tarmac to the plane, Russ joked.

Darren Harrison:

"I do this with him all the time and he hasn't killed me yet." And I was just shaking my head, going, "Well, that's a hell of a comment to make."

Torah Kachur:

Ken was flying a Cessna 208 Caravan, a small nine-seat, single-engine plane. Darren had the entire cabin to himself, so he stretched out his legs and put on his headset.

Darren Harrison:

I like to listen to air traffic control. I just like to hear all the conversations that are going on. Plus, if you want to have a conversation with the pilot in the front, it's a lot easier. You're not yelling across anything.

Torah Kachur:

Darren also had a habit of asking pilots questions about flying.

Darren Harrison:

I'm just intrigued by how things operate.

Torah Kachur:

After about an hour in the air, Darren saw Ken grab his head.

Darren Harrison:

I immediately came over to the headset and I said, "Ken, what's wrong?" And he goes, "Guys, I got to tell you, I don't feel good." And at that second, I was like, "This is not going to be good."

Torah Kachur:

Ken told him that he had terrible head pain.

Darren Harrison:

I said, "What do we need to do?" And at that point, he was out. He was gone. He wasn't responding anymore, and things were about to get real serious.

Torah Kachur:

Ken slumped back in the pilot's chair and the plane started to plunge.

Darren Harrison:

We were yelling his name. "Hey, Ken. Ken. Ken." And Russ was grabbing him, trying to shake him. You got to consider Russ' best friend is sitting there, basically dying or dead, and we're about to die. So, he is panicking, obviously.

Torah Kachur:

They were in a dive. Darren crawled up the seats to the front of the plane.

Darren Harrison:

I can feel the gravity pulling my face down. That's how bad it was.

Torah Kachur:

Then, he looked out his window.

Darren Harrison:

And I could see there was five, seven-foot waves down there, and seeing the waves and knowing that water's coming real fast. And it's not going to be good when we hit it. We dropped 3,500 feet in less than 20 seconds or something like that. We were basically in a straight dive.

Torah Kachur:

Then, he thought about his family.

Darren Harrison:

I can't die today. I got a six-month pregnant wife at the house. I can't do that.

Torah Kachur:

When Darren got to Ken, he reached over, grabbed the controls, and looked at the plane's airspeed indicator.

Darren Harrison:

We're way past max on the airplane. There's alarms going off, and I know at any second, one of these wings is going to come off this thing.

Torah Kachur:

From previous conversations with his pilots, he also knew that if he pulled back too hard, the plane could stall or break apart.

Darren Harrison:

Basically, instead of pulling back, I just took it and I turned it to flatten out. And then, at that point when I flattened it out, then I started to pick it back up and get us out of losing altitude.

Torah Kachur:

Darren managed to get back up to 8,000 feet. Then, Russ took the controls while he moved Ken to the back of the airplane. When he got back to the pilot's seat, he sat down and assessed the situation.

Darren Harrison:

When Ken was passed out, he basically killed almost all the electronics on the airplane. It killed the autopilot, and basically what happened is nobody's flying the airplane. So, at that point, I've got literally no electronics to tell me where I'm going. I'm in the middle of the ocean, I got no land for reference. I had nothing.

Torah Kachur:

But there was a compass on the dashboard. Darren knew if he pointed the plane west, he'd hit land. Eventually, Darren spotted the coast.

Darren Harrison:

I'll never forget. I was coming in, I could see the beach. And at that point, it sank in with me and I'm like, "I'm flying and this thing's eventually going to have to go on the ground."

Torah Kachur:

Darren knew he was going to need help. He hit a button on the back of the yoke and connected with Treasure Coast International Airport in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Darren Harrison:

I knew the call sign of the airplane because I listen all the time. So, I called out, "N333 Lima Delta, I got a serious situation here. I am flying this airplane. I have no idea what I'm doing."

Torah Kachur:

This is the recording from that call.

Darren Harrison:

Traffic, N333 Lima Delta, I've got a serious situation here. My pilot has gone incoherent. He is out. I have no idea how to fly the airplane.

Air Traffic:

For 333 Lima Delta, roger. What's your position?

Darren Harrison:

I have no idea. I can see the coast of Florida in front of me, and I have no idea.

Torah Kachur:

The air traffic controllers scrambled to locate Darren on their scanners.

Air Traffic:

Number 3 Lima Delta, just continue north down over the basin. We'll try to get in contact with somebody that can help you.

Torah Kachur:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important human connection is when you need help, whether you're hit by a hurricane, buried in a mudslide, or trying to land an airplane.

On May 10th 2022, Darren Harrison was flying back from a fishing trip in the Bahamas when his pilot had a medical emergency and passed out. The plane went into a dive, hurtling towards the ocean. Robert Morgan was not supposed to be working at Palm Beach International Airport that day.

Robert Morgan:

One of my co-workers just sent me a message. He said, "Hey, can you pick up my shift tomorrow?" I was like, "Sure." And it was overtime. You can always use money, right?

Torah Kachur:

Robert's a flight instructor and air traffic controller in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Robert Morgan:

Papa Bravo India is our identifier. And I have a nickname. It's just Captain Morgan sometimes because my last name's Morgan and I'm a pilot.

Torah Kachur:

Robert's been flying since he was 13 years old. He feels like it gives him a different perspective on life.

Robert Morgan:

Just like you can escape all these problems by flying away from them, and everything looks smaller when you're above. If you go in the evening every time the sun sets, it's going to be a little different. You're always seeing something new. It's similar to scuba diving. You're exploring different things that people don't normally see.

Torah Kachur:

Robert decided to become an aircraft controller because the work is more stable and predictable than piloting a commercial airliner. It's also a pretty important job.

Robert Morgan:

So, everything's controlled by us, the routes. We get them around weather, we separate them from traffic. We're viewed sometimes as being the police of the sky. Do anything we can to keep airplanes safe.

Torah Kachur:

On May 10th, Robert was a few hours into his shift and taking a break when the day took an unexpected turn.

Robert Morgan:

Just sitting out on a back patio that we have. I had my shoes off because I was just lounging in this hammock area. And I was just actually reading a book about learning how to fly seaplanes, because me and my friend were signed up for a course in the near future.

Torah Kachur:

He heard a page come over their PA system.

PA System:

Robert Morgan, come to the radar room immediately.

Robert Morgan:

I put my shoes back on, I take the shortest path. As I'm passing through one of our break rooms, there's a bunch of people just sitting in front of the TV. And they said, "Oh, I wouldn't go in there if I was you."

Torah Kachur:

Robert thought his co-workers were just teasing him. When he reached the radar room, his supervisor explained the situation.

Robert Morgan:

"We have a passenger flying the plane, the pilot's unconscious. They have no flying experience. We just want you to help them."

Torah Kachur:

A whirlwind of thoughts go through Robert's mind.

Robert Morgan:

"What did I walk into? Why did I come in today? I should've just stayed home. Run the other way." But they're still flying, so maybe they have some kind of experience. The story can't be right.

Torah Kachur:

Robert had a few things going for him. He was an experienced flight instructor and he had some knowledge about the plane Darren was flying. But there was another complication. Just as Robert settled into his station and adjusted his headset...

Robert Morgan:

My supervisor says, "Oh, well, you don't need your headset." And I'm like, "What do you mean I don't need my headset? It's the thing we use all the time." And he said, "Because we're talking to him on this emergency radio."

Torah Kachur:

Why an emergency radio? Darren was on the Fort Pierce Airport frequency when his pilot passed out. When the air traffic controller at Fort Pierce handed the situation to Robert at Palm Beach International, Darren couldn't figure out how to switch to their frequency. The old school radio had a bigger range, which allowed Robert to talk to Darren. This was a first for Robert.

Robert Morgan:

This, by far, was the hardest part about the whole thing, because nothing's in your ear. It's in a speaker five feet above your head. That was the first like, "Oh, you got to be kidding me. Why this?"

Torah Kachur:

Picture a large, old-school police radio. That's similar to what Robert had to use for this call.

Robert Morgan:

This is something we never practice. This is all going to be shoot-from-the-hip type of stuff. What do I say? So, I just say, "333 Lima Delta, can you hear me?"

Darren Harrison:

He's like, "Okay, I'm going to help you through this thing. Tell me what you're looking at, what the controls look like."

Torah Kachur:

Robert had to figure out what Darren could see on the control panel, so he could give him some guidance. But he also let Darren know what he could see on his end, on the radar scope.

Robert Morgan:

"I can see your altitude. I can see your heading. I can tell which way you're flying. I can see your airspeed, so don't worry about the instrument so much. Your job is to just maintain control of the plane, and you're doing great already."

Torah Kachur:

Robert listened closely to his voice, trying to get a read on how Darren was feeling.

Robert Morgan:

Is he panicking? Is he calm? And from just a one or two-minute talking to him, it was like, well, he's not on the edge of crashing this plane. So, he's able to maintain control, at least just cruising around.

Torah Kachur:

Darren's habit of observing pilots and asking questions was paying off. He knew enough to stabilize the plane and make minor maneuvers, but landing a plane is a different story.

Robert Morgan:

I knew I could always get him to the runway. I just didn't know how that landing was going to go. Because you can't really teach someone how to land. You can just tell them what to do, and then they go through the motor skills to get the timing and everything right.

Torah Kachur:

At that point, Darren was about 25 miles offshore, flying north up the coast. But before Robert could worry about the landing, he needed Darren to practice a few things.

Robert Morgan:

I just kept telling him, "If you want to descend, you just push forward on the controls. If you want to climb, you pull back on the controls."

Darren Harrison:

I'd go up and then I'd try and play with it and level it off. And I'd try and mess with the altitude, to see if I can control it and be comfortable with it. And basically, what I was doing is, I was practicing controlling the altitude on the airplane, knowing I had to eventually put it down on the ground.

Torah Kachur:

Robert could see that Darren was able to follow his instructions, so he pointed him towards the closest airport, Boca Raton.

Darren Harrison:

I said, "Well, I see an airport. I see a runway."

Torah Kachur:

Then, Robert started having second thoughts. The Boca Raton Airport only has one short runway.

Robert Morgan:

Is he going to run off the runway and go into these hangers? The ramps are really full, so we get a lot of snowbirds and stuff that come down. And it's just a jam-packed ramp. So, possibly kill everybody on the plane, do a lot of destruction on the ramps, and then maybe even run into a building or something like that.

Torah Kachur:

So, Robert told Darren to fly north up the coast, following the I-95 Highway as a reference point, to the airport he was working from, Palm Beach International.

Robert Morgan:

I don't want to, had to rush him into this landing, so I literally had to fly him by the airport.

Darren Harrison:

I'm like, "Okay, I'm too high." So, I actually flew past the airport. You can see it, plain as day, on the flight track data. I fly up and I go back around, and I'm basically working on getting the altitude down.

Robert Morgan:

And then, he said, "Well, what about flaps? Don't I need flaps to land?"

Torah Kachur:

Flaps allow a plane to get more lift when it slows down. It allows pilots to approach runways at a steeper angle and maneuver to avoid obstacles. Robert told Darren which button to push to use the flaps.

Darren Harrison:

I'll tell you, the nose of that plane shot up and I said, "Man, it throws the nose up. And I'm afraid this thing's going to stall out or do something crazy, and I'm not going to be able to recover from it."

Robert Morgan:

He started flying erratic, like a snake slithering away. So, I was like, "Oh, that's looking bad."

Darren Harrison:

And I was like, "Nope, this ain't going to work."

Torah Kachur:

They ditched the flaps. At this point, Darren had circled back around and was facing Palm Beach Airport. Robert helped Darren line up his approach. Robert noted his speed.

Darren Harrison:

He's like, "Hey, you need to slow down some more. You're still going way too fast."
He's like, "Back that throttle down."

Torah Kachur:

Darren reduced his speed.

Robert Morgan:

We did have a little conversation just about, “Are you okay to come in to make the landing?” So, on the final approach, I just keep giving him the countdowns, always keep talking to him. “You’re five miles away at 1,500 feet. You’re four miles away at 1,300 feet.”

Darren Harrison:

Robert was telling me, he’s like, “As you get closer, the ground’s going to get bigger. And as the ground gets bigger, you’re going to realize that you’re about to land. Everything starts getting bigger as you’re getting closer. That’s when you’ll be able to feel and know that you’re about to hit the ground.”

Torah Kachur:

Darren closed in on the runway. Both of them knew the hardest part was coming up.

Robert Morgan:

Even when you’re learning to fly, landing, until you get the hang of it, that’s the trickiest part.

Darren Harrison:

But I thought for sure, I’d wreck it or do something. I was like, “All right, I’m probably going to wind up upside down in a ditch. I’m probably going to be pretty banged up. It’s going to hurt, but it is what it is, as long as I survive.”

Robert Morgan:

I think everybody in the tower had a, “This plane’s going to have a really bad landing and go into a cartwheel,” where the wing hits the ground and worst-case scenario, can catch on fire.

Torah Kachur:

Darren checks his speed.

Darren Harrison:

I’m getting closer. We’re going way too fast.

Torah Kachur:

Then, he made a last-minute judgment call. He told the other passenger, Russ, who had the co-pilot yoke...

Darren Harrison:

“Hey, dump all the controls. Take the throttle and throw it as far down as you can and just take all the power out of this thing.”

Torah Kachur:

Robert is glued to his radar, tracking Darren’s approach. Then, something unexpected happened.

Robert Morgan:

What I didn’t take into account for is when he got about a mile away from the airport, he gets below our radar antenna coverage. So, he disappears off my radar scope.

Torah Kachur:

The radar room is dark and windowless. Robert couldn’t see the runway.

Robert Morgan:

So, now, all of a sudden, your heart sinks and you’re like, “Hey, are you still there?” He said, “Yeah, I’m still here.”

Darren Harrison:

When I touched down, I'll never forget what it felt like, because I know the wheels didn't come off of it. We should be good. And so, I was like, "It wasn't that hard. I think I got it." I even came over the radio and I say, "Hey, guys I'm pretty comfortable steering this thing at this point. You want me to take it off the runway and get out of everybody's way or anything?" They're like, "Nope. Nope, just get stopped. You're fine. Leave it right where you're at. Let's not get carried away."

Torah Kachur:

Darren slowed the plane down to a stop.

Darren Harrison:

I said, "Hey, guys, I appreciate everything. Thank you so much." And at that point, that's when reality sank in and I just lost it. I just threw the headset on the dash. I was shaking. I said the biggest prayer I've ever prayed in my life, and emergency personnel came straight up to the airplane.

Torah Kachur:

The pilot, Ken, was rushed to hospital. He made a full recovery. In the radar room, Robert celebrated with his co-workers.

Robert Morgan:

I said, "He's on the ground. He's safe." And everybody was just like, "Yes, you did it." They're just cheering and they're happy. And the people call from the tower and they said, "Oh, he made a great landing." So, there's just a bunch of emotion in the room, and people are coming by and shaking you.

Torah Kachur:

It took a minute for everything to sink in.

Robert Morgan:

I was just shocked and almost like, you're thinking you were in a dream and you just woke up from this crazy dream. Because you're like, "Oh, I think I just saved these people's lives." You couldn't even believe it happened still.

Torah Kachur:

Down on the tarmac, Darren stepped out of the plane and said to the ground crew-

Darren Harrison:

"I want to meet the guy I was talking to on the radio."

Robert Morgan:

I just shake his hand and he comes in for the hug. So, we just hugged and I think he was still... He's just in shock, and I was still in shock.

Darren Harrison:

Robert, he's a good guy, and I'm just blessed that he was there that day to be able to help me with that. Having Robert on the other end of that line, telling me what to do and help walk me through it, being an instructor, knowing the airplane, is a miracle.

Torah Kachur:

But Robert thinks Darren was the biggest factor in the way things turned out that day.

Robert Morgan:

He was calm, and I was calm. And I was able to give him instructions, and he was able to accept those instructions. And if we would had somebody that maybe was

way in over their head and wasn't as confident as Darren, you could have a totally different outcome.

Torah Kachur:

Together, Darren and Robert pulled off an incredible feat. That ability to stay calm and make good decisions is critical in stressful situations, whether it's your first time flying a plane or you've simply got a lot going on in your life.

Dr. Fanny Ng is a psychologist with Clarity Therapy in New York City. She has extensive experience helping people manage stress, improve their focus, and make better decisions. And while we hopefully never have to face the kind of situation Darren found himself in, Fanny says that there are ways we can build the skills we need to handle the unexpected.

Fanny Ng:

I was in day-to-day situations. Stress management is critical. We face stressors in our day-to-day life all the time. We are dealing with so many things all at once that it can become overwhelming. And we can experience bits of that fight-or-flight response and day-to-day situations that can be paralyzing. That can make us feel defensive and block off opportunities for us, lead to poor decision-making. Distractibility at things that matter to us at our jobs, with our friends, with our family.

So, I think practicing really good stress management skills, taking stock of what's going on in your life, and use strategies that help them to relax, to promote that balance in their life, can, I think, be really helpful.

Torah Kachur:

Does it help to know if you tend towards a flight response in stressful situations versus a fight response?

Fanny Ng:

So, I think a lot of it has to do with our learning histories, our past experiences, the people around us. I think people may have tendencies towards one response or the other. Someone might have a tendency to run away from their problems, that they find a stressful situation and they exit. They avoid, they try not to be in that kind of situation.

The goal is not to necessarily figure out which type you are, but how to respond more flexibly. So, even if you notice you're responding only in this one way, or tend to respond more in one way than the other, you have more flexibility to make the best choice of the options that we have before us.

Torah Kachur:

Okay. So, what's going to help us be more flexible, make those good choices in these high-stress moments?

Fanny Ng:

I actually would recommend probably taking a deep breath as the first step. When we are stressed, our sympathetic nervous system is activated, so folks may feel a rush of adrenaline. They may have increased blood pressure, increased heart rate. Their respiration starts to change and they may feel jittery. They're in a high-stress situation. It might be life or death. And it is really hard to focus and take in all that

information in front of you in that moment. So, how do we manage that? How do we still perform and function the best? How do we make really good decisions when they are really important?

I think breathing deeply can often help us to slow down racing thoughts, can, again, help us to decrease those physiological responses. Slow down that thinking. Slow down our heart rate. Bring down our blood pressure a little bit, just to bring us back from that red line area of stress to a more optimal place, where they can continue to make really good decisions and still be attentive and focused. So that they can make those really important decisions.

Torah Kachur:

Is there anything else we can practice, maybe when we're not in the middle of a high-stress situation, that could help us prepare for those moments?

Fanny Ng:

So, I'm a strong advocate of mindfulness skills and practice. It's this idea of being present, being able to observe all your different experiences, your thoughts, your behaviors, where you are in the room, the situation. And to observe those without judgment in the present moment, to be fully present. And that can take some practice. A lot of us are always go, go, go that we don't take enough time to pause. And that is a skill that we can practice and build and, hopefully, use during more intense and pressured situations. That can help us, hopefully, think more clearly.

So, I think mindfulness skills, being able to pause and take stock of everything that's happening in the moment, in your body, can be really helpful. And partly, it's the practice. When we're able to practice these skills when we're not feeling stressed, when we're not feeling upset or overwhelmed and stretched too thin, can help us to use them when we are. So, because they become such a well-practiced tool, they become part of the arsenal of tools in our tool belt. So that when we do need them, they will be something easily accessible to us, and not from a class like ten years ago that you practiced for only a little while.

And I think confidence is built with practice. So, the more comfortable and familiar we feel doing certain things that are maybe hard or challenging for us, the better we naturally get at it. And with that, we get that feedback. When we practice a skill and it goes well, we feel successful. And I think that sense of confidence will build. And that, hopefully, will lead to better outcomes for the future.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people. If you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at [OnStar.com](https://www.onstar.com). Or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small.

While you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please, be safe out there.