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MON JAN 6, 2014

LOCAL NEWS

TTC: tight-train claustrophobia

Toronto's subways are never more crowded than in the dead of winter. So how are commuters prone to claustrophobia and panic attacks supposed to cope, and what can the TTC do to make their ride less hellish?

BY: KIM HUGHES

Travelling by TTC is trying at the best of times, yet there is a particular misery to riding right now, in the frigid depths of winter.

For one thing, it's quantifiably more crowded as many cyclists and pedestrians ditch their fair-weather mode of transport to climb aboard. School is in session, meaning students wielding gargantuan backpacks are out in force. And, of course, this being Canada, we are all swathed in bulky layers of clothing.

TTC-riding door blockers and seat hogs might be infuriating. But no hell is more acute than being squished into a slow-moving subway train during rush-hour, your temperature ticking steadily skyward thanks to that toasty parka that forestalls hypothermia outside but guarantees overheating indoors. Extreme sufferers walk among us.

"Getting stuck in a subway tunnel for 20 minutes or more back in the late-'80s made me so claustrophobic that, to this very day, I only ride in the first or next-to-last car where there is a driver or the person who closes and opens the doors," offers Toronto photographer Kris King.

She continues: "I'm not as bad on the new subway cars, as one can move around even if it's crowded. I just try not to be on the subway at rush hour. If I am on a subway that seems to have a problem, I get off. Otherwise, my heart pounds and I start sweating, have to take off my coat, all the while telling myself I *can* breathe."

That creeping, panicky feeling of faintness is grimly familiar to regular TTC subway riders. Streetcar and bus passengers can feel like sardines, too, but anxiety never seems to spiral to unmanageable levels on surface routes the way it does below-ground.

Still, if you think pressing that yellow passenger-assistance alarm will deliver you from your clammy, claustrophobic despair—and untold hundreds if not thousands think just that every year despite printed instructions to only use the alarm "for fire, harassment, illness, accidents, passenger safety

and vandalism”—consider this: According to the TTC, of the staggering 6,000 emergency alarms activated in 2012, 70 per cent were for non-emergencies such as passengers feeling unwell. That’s an average of 16 alarms per day, sometimes for reasons even less vexing than mere illness, such as passengers seeking directions.

All those alarms in 2012 added up to some 51 hours of delays to a service already stretched to capacity, according to the TTC, which pegs current usage at 1.7 million rides every day, with five days in 2013 registering 1.8 million rides. “And not all on the 501 streetcar, in case you were wondering,” quips Brad Ross, the TTC’s executive director of corporate communications.

“Make no mistake: we want people to use those alarms in an emergency,” Ross says. “If somebody loses consciousness, if someone is being assaulted, if there is a fire—any danger that requires fire or police or an ambulance—then, by all means, press that alarm.

“But if trains are crowded, which happens every day at rush hour, then people need to deal with that in other ways. If you are feeling unwell on a crowded train, the best advice is to get off at the next stop, have a seat, and maybe get some water or fresh air. Head to the Designated Waiting Areas that are on every platform and allow you to talk to the station collector if you need assistance. Just get off the train.”

The problem is “a panic attack *feels* like an emergency situation,” says Toronto retailer AI (last name withheld by request), who was diagnosed with panic disorder and suffered many white-knuckled TTC rides through the 1990s before switching to driving a car full-time.

“Little by little, you start breathing heavy, hyperventilating, and you don’t realize it until suddenly this fight-or-flight response kicks in. Everything feels really surreal and all your brain can think of is, ‘I gotta get the fuck out of here,’” adds AI, who never pressed a passenger-assistance alarm despite enduring many harrowing rides.

He notes that 21st-century riders do have more options: iPhones allow rattled passengers to distract themselves from their crowded surroundings by watching movies or playing games. And apps that help people regulate their breathing are also now widely available.

As for the passenger-assistance alarm, Ross and TTC CEO Andy Byford demonstrated best-practice uses in a video posted to YouTube last summer. But Ross admits the message doesn’t always get through. Moreover, pressing that yellow strip doesn’t actually stop the train, and can actually exacerbate a tense or crowded situation.



“The train will continue to the next station where the doors will then open and the train will hold while the guard on the train goes and investigates,” Ross explains.

“While that’s happening, the train behind is held up between stations waiting for the incident train to clear, and so then someone on that second train will feel unwell and press the passenger-assistance alarm and so you get this domino effect, especially during inclement weather when we see high incidence [of alarms being pressed]. People dress warmly for outside and then get on the train and feel warmer and warmer until they feel unwell.”

Ross says the TTC bears some responsibility for the misuse of the alarms: “It says ‘press for assistance,’ which is part of the problem,” he says. Ross confirms that plans are underway to better clarify appropriate usage to riders, possibly even by renaming the strip.

“That will happen sometime in 2014,” he says. “We are doing focus groups to make sure the wording makes sense to people, then we will launch an information campaign probably starting around February or March.

“We have to put new decals on all the trains and that’s going to take some time. We need to roll this out in a systematic way that is going to work and that people will understand. But we want to reduce the number of alarm activations because it does significantly delay service, which makes things even more crowded and uncomfortable.

“Our ridership continues to grow by about two-and-a-half per cent every year,” Ross adds.

“Crowding is an issue we are trying to address.”

Riders citywide can only holler, “hallelujah” to that, especially in winter.

TALES FROM THE TUNNEL

Claustrophobia notwithstanding, subway overcrowding precipitates all manner of bad behaviour in riders. A Facebook query seeking anecdotes drew numerous grisly tales from the frontlines:

“Back in the ’70s, I hopped on the subway at Dufferin station after work, only going two stops to Dundas West. Jammed to the rafters, I just stayed put with my back against the barrier by the door. This old and very weathered-looking guy gets up to exit at Lansdowne. In the very last second before exiting, he grabbed me by the crotch and jumped off as the door was closing. I yelled at him, then managed also to hop off, chasing him down the nearly empty platform still yelling all the way, ‘You cannot grab women’s vaginas and think you’ll get away with it—get back here, you creep!’ For an old guy, he ran like the wind. But I’ll bet he never tried that again—the stupid chicken-shit.”—*Joan Semple*

“I once saw a dude who had a knife out and he was gonna stab some other guy who was completely oblivious with his back to him... the guy with the knife saw me looking at him. I shook my head at him, silently saying, ‘Don’t do it man...’ then he pulled the cord and hopped out and ran away.”—*RJ Guha*


“I once saw a man in a business suit with a briefcase undo his trousers and pee on the subway train, close to rush hour. Mad as hell/wasn’t going to take it anymore? A snap in the psyche? Not sure, but it was unnerving.”—*Kathryn Rose*

“A guy in a black thong, pants down low, and wearing a black mesh top, chose to stand in front of me. I was sitting, his behind was in my face. Let’s just say he didn’t smell like roses nor was I prepared to see the makings of a man that afternoon... it was packed and I couldn’t move. First laughter, then anger, then feeling like I was in hell.”—*Cathy Marchese*

What’s been the worst thing you’ve witnessed/experienced on an overcrowded TTC vehicle? Share your stories in the comments section.

TAGS *Andy Byford, Brad Ross, Commuting, TTC*

post a comment 

Latest 

Despair

What a crappy and misleading article! I do suffer from claustrophobia and thought from the headline that this would provide some advice to people about coping with the TTC – but no – it's about BLAMING people with claustrophobia for asking for assistance.

I knew it was a mistake to veer from the Globe and Mail into Toronto Star territory.

 4  7

9:41 am on January 10, 2014

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

westofhere

TTC is not as crowded as Tokyo or Shanghai where they have dedicated employees who push more passengers into a train to ensure that doors close and the max number of people get on. People with anxiety disorders unfortunately might have to elect another mode of transportation. Not being insensitive, but rides are expensive as is, if we have to leave minimal room around others the prices will go through the roof

 4  4

2:41 pm on January 9, 2014

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

djr

I don't recall having any phobic moments during the rare occasions I used public transit. If there were times that my personal space was crammed against a throng of passengers, the worst concern would be if someone in close proximity to me had beans for lunch.

 2  3

10:23 pm on January 8, 2014

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

Albin

Of course one is sympathetic to riders with clinical conditions that make badly crowded conditions even worse.

I have to say though, about those new "open format" subway trains – I've had occasion to ride them late evenings recently and watching a whole train writhing like a snake in front of your eyes is unsettling in its own way.

 2  4

4:44 pm on January 7, 2014

[↪ Reply](#) [⚠ Report](#)

lol

I just got back from Tokyo... Trains are always crammed but people just take it in stride. With that said the number of slob,low lives and body Oder is much higher in Toronto

 6  4

 **Matt**

Grammar...it's your friend!

 10  2

9:59 am on January 7, 2014

 Report **transport guru**

I think the TTC should just add handles to the sides and roofs of streetcars...that should solve the congestion problem on king and queen lines until the new vehicles roll out.

<http://i.imgur.com/a5Rrg2W.jpg>

 10  0

10:14 am on January 7, 2014

 Report **Big Jim**

The demographics in that photo aren't that much different from a ride on the TTC in 2014....as Mayor Miller says, "Diversity is Strength"

 3  6

9:17 pm on January 7, 2014

 Report **starbbycat**

That was my first thought too – you haven't seen a crowded subway car until you ride Tokyo's – they even have staff whose job is to shove more people inside the car – it was crazy and there were lots of pervs who would use the opportunity to very gently feel you up – needless to say I found a way to not have to ride during rush hour there(had private English students, so set my own hours)

 1  2

10:54 pm on January 8, 2014

 Report **nutural**

Because they allow crazy people roaming around freely in Toronto. They have special places for them in Asia. Human rights are overrated and the HR group always stick their noses in places where they don't belong in North America

 3  4

12:32 pm on January 10, 2014

 Report