



The Five Fs of Trauma Response

When we face stress or danger, our bodies react in specific ways to help us survive. These reactions are called trauma responses. There are five main types: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn, and Flop. These responses can be triggered by both physical and mental stress.

Fight: The fight response makes us ready to face and fight off the danger. This happens when hormones like cortisol and adrenaline are released in our bodies.

Example: If someone is trying to touch you inappropriately, and you assertively tell them to stop or defend yourself, that's a healthy fight response. However, if you respond with excessive physical aggression beyond self-defense, it could escalate the situation.

Flight: The flight response makes us want to run away from the danger. Our brain sends signals to give us the energy to escape quickly.

Example: If you're in a situation where someone is pressuring you into something that you are not comfortable with or doesn't feel safe, you might leave the room or the location entirely to protect yourself.

Freeze: The freeze response can make us feel stuck or unable to move because of fear. We might feel numb or unable to act.


Example: If someone is experiencing sexual violence and finds themselves unable to move or speak, this is a freeze response. This is a common reaction where the body becomes unable to move due to fear.

Fawn: The fawn response is a trauma reaction where a person seeks to appease or please others to avoid conflict, criticism, or harm. It often involves people-pleasing behaviors, self-sacrifice, and a focus on others' needs at the expense of one's own well-being.

Example: If someone treats you badly and you try to make them happy to avoid getting hurt, you're using the fawn response. This can mean ignoring your own needs to keep the peace.

Flop: The flop response makes us completely shut down, sometimes even fainting. This happens when the stress is so overwhelming that our bodies collapse.

Example: During a sexual assault, someone might experience a flop response, where the body goes limp and becomes unable to resist or respond, almost as if disconnected from the situation.





Why We Have Trauma Responses

All animals, including humans, have built-in survival systems managed by the brain stem. These systems choose a response quickly to help us survive without taking time to think, which could be dangerous.



Getting Stuck in a Trauma Response

When we sense danger, our bodies respond automatically to protect us. These responses are driven by fear and are designed to help us survive. These physical responses include:

- **Increased heart rate and breathing:** This supplies more oxygen to our muscles.
- **Muscle tension:** Prepares us for action.
- **Deactivation of non-essential functions:** Functions like digestion slow down to conserve energy.
- **Sweating:** Helps regulate body temperature.
- **Adrenaline release:** Provides a burst of energy.
- **Cortisol release:** Relieves pain but can also cloud rational thinking.

After a stressful event, it usually takes about 20 to 30 minutes for our bodies to calm down. However, traumatic events, such as sexual violence, can alter how our memories are processed and stored. These memories are often tied to the emotions and sensations felt during the trauma. Later, certain triggers (e.g., a smell, sound, or sight) can activate the same survival responses, even if you're not in actual danger. This is known as being "triggered."

Understanding these trauma responses helps us recognize and address our reactions to stress. Learning healthy coping strategies through therapy, support groups, and mindfulness practices can help us better manage these responses and re-regulate our emotions.

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