Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn

Trauma: Understanding Your Body's Responses to Threat

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are four automatic ways your body can respond when it senses danger. Physiologist Walter Cannon described fight or flight in the early 1900s, and researchers later added freeze. Therapist Pete Walker added fawn, the urge to please or give in to stay safe, in his work on complex trauma. The four responses are a helpful model for understanding your reactions, and they are not a diagnosis. This worksheet helps you notice which ones show up for you.

1 The four responses

Fight Facing the threat	You feel a surge of anger or energy and want to push back. You might argue, raise your voice, clench your fists, or try to take control.
Flight Getting away	You feel a strong urge to escape. You might leave the room, avoid people or places, or keep yourself very busy so you don't have to feel it.
Freeze Going still	Your body locks up or goes numb. Your mind may go blank, and it can be hard to move, speak, or decide what to do.
Fawn Pleasing to stay safe	You try to keep the peace by giving the other person what they want. You might agree when you don't, apologize a lot, or ignore your own needs.

Why does this work? *These responses happen fast, before you have time to think, because your brain is built to react to danger first and think later. Each one can protect you in a real threat. Trouble starts when a response fires in situations that are not dangerous, or when one becomes your usual way of coping.*

2 Which responses do you notice?

Many people use more than one response. Think of a few times you felt threatened, stressed, or unsafe.

A time I noticed fight or flight, and what my body did:

Example: My boss criticized me in a meeting, my face got hot, and I left early

A time I noticed freeze or fawn, and what my body did:

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Your patterns

The response that shows up for me most often is:

What tends to set it off	What it may be trying to protect me from

4 Coming back to calm

When the danger has passed, your body needs help to settle. Try a few of these and notice what works for you.

- Name what is happening: "My body thinks I am in danger, and I am safe right now."
- Press your feet into the floor and look around the room, naming a few things you see.
- Breathe out slowly, a little longer than you breathe in. If you feel dizzy, stop and breathe normally.

What helps me come back to calm:

If these responses happen often, or they started after something painful, a trauma-informed therapist can help. If you are in crisis or thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

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