

More Than Just Fight Or Flight

Most everyone is aware of the fight or flight response. This describes how a person reacts to extremely stressful situations, such as being attacked.

Fight means you aggressively fight back, because you believe you can defeat the danger. When it happens, you feel intense anger, may cry or punch or kick people or things, you may grind your teeth & chances are excellent your stomach will be in knots.

Flight means you run from the danger, because you believe you can't defeat it. When it happens, you feel fidgety & anxious. You can't stay still. You want to run from the situation immediately & will if the opportunity arises.

There are two other responses beyond fight or flight that are seldom mentioned. Freezing & fawning are these other two responses.

Freezing means when you're unable to act in these awful situations. You can't think clearly or act in a way to protect yourself. Think of a deer in headlights. That deer sees the danger heading straight for him, but is frozen in place. This happens when you believe you can't escape or defeat the attacker. Freezing literally makes you cold when it happens. Your body feels heavy & hard to move, sometimes it can feel numb as well.

Lastly, there is fawning. This happens when in an acutely stressful situation, you do your best to comply with your attacker as an attempt to save yourself. Like freezing, it happens when you believe you can't escape or defeat your attacker. Fawning is a very typical response of those who have been in abusive relationships in particular with their parents. People who fawn realized that fighting, flight & freezing didn't work, which is why they resorted to fawning. They found that concerning themselves with the well being of their abuser was their best chance at diffusing the situation.

While fight, flight, freeze & fawn are very different reactions, they all share the same goal: to diffuse or preferably end the situation & to protect yourself.

A problem is often people get stuck in only one or maybe two responses when each one can be helpful in different circumstances. This is especially common in those who have PTSD or C-PTSD. Their responses become habitual, so they don't consider which one is most useful in each unique situation. The best way I know to overcome this is to recognize what you do in such situations. Considering how you acted, without any judgment of course, can help you to discern which acute stress responses you have used. When faced with danger after doing this, you're more likely to respond after a bit of thought rather than react as in acting without thought.

There also can be another issue for those who have experienced multiple traumas. We can perceive threats when there isn't one. It helps to learn to slow down your

thinking slightly so you can decide whether or not the threat is real. Taking a long, deep breath in then releasing it slowly only takes a couple of seconds, but it can slow your body & mind down enough to help you figure out the situation as well as the best way to respond.

Past trauma can affect your life in so many ways. Learning to manage your responses can be one way to help yourself handle stressful & even new traumatic situations in healthier ways.