

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Responses To Threat: Freeze, Appease, Flight, Fight



Description

Teaching clients details of the fight or flight response is a common part of treatment for anxiety disorders. However, many individuals who have survived trauma may have experienced other automatic physiological and behavioral responses during their trauma including freezing, dissociation and appeasement. Traumatized individuals are often extremely self-critical concerning ways that they did or did not respond during a trauma. The *Responses To Threat: Freeze, Appease, Fight, Flight* information handout is designed to give these clients essential information about common responses to threat.

Clinicians should note that this handout is a somewhat simplified version of Shauer & Elbert's (2010) 'defense cascade'. Specifically, it condenses their 'freeze' and 'fright' responses into 'freeze' and then helps clients differentiate whether their freeze response happened early in the traumatic event (in which case dissociation is less likely) or later in the traumatic event (in which case dissociation is more likely).

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout. Suggested uses include:

- Client handout: Use it as a psychoeducation resource to assist traumatized clients to understand the defense cascade and why they might have reacted (or not reacted) during a trauma.
- Discussion point: Use it to provoke a discussion and explore client beliefs regarding action or inaction during a trauma.
- Therapist learning tool: Improve your familiarity with automatic responses to threat (the 'defense cascade').
- Teaching resource: Use it as a learning tool when training students or clinicians about normal responses to threat.

References

Schauer M., Elbert T. Dissociation following traumatic stress: Etiology and treatment. *Journal of Psychology*. 2010; 218: 109–127.

Walter Bradford Cannon (1929). *Bodily changes in pain, hunger, fear, and rage*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

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Our bodies and minds are adapted to **respond automatically to threatening events** – similar to how other animals respond to danger. We can think of this as our 'programming': built-in responses that are designed to protect us from harm. These reactions can occur quickly and automatically: *thinking and choosing* can be slow whereas *reacting instinctively* can save your life.

It is **not your fault** if you responded in any of these ways: **these responses are typical of people who are threatened and making the best of a bad situation** – not someone who is making calm, relaxed, free choices.

Freeze



Why is *freezing* a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✓ Early stages of the trauma: gives us time to evaluate a situation, makes us less noticeable.
- ✓ Later on: if it is not possible to escape or win then becoming unresponsive might be the best chance for survival.

What happens in the body and mind?



(Early on) Thinking becomes quicker.



(Early on) Attention is focused on escape routes.



(Later on) Dissociation:

- 'Out of body' experiences.
- Emotions become numb.
- Unable to move.

Appease



Why is *appeasing* a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✓ If the threat is another person (or people) then giving them what they want, placating them, begging, or submitting can reduce the danger...
- ✗ ...even if we say or do things that we later regret.

What happens in the body and mind?



Your mind focuses on options that might reduce the immediate threat.



You might not 'see' other options that seem obvious later.



Adopt a submissive body posture:

- Body cringes to appear smaller.
- Head bowed, eyes averted.

Flight



Why is it helpful to *escape* from a threatening situation?

- ✓ A successful escape can mean survival, often with fewer costs than other options.

What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Releasing adrenaline.
- Increasing heart rate.
- Speeding up breathing rate.
- Tensing muscles.



Thinking becomes quicker.



Attention is focused on escape routes.

Fight



Why can *fighting* be a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✗ Fighting comes with risks of injury, death, or other consequences...
- ✓ ...but winning increases our chances of survival.
- ✓ Sometimes looking aggressive can be enough to make an opponent back down.

What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Releasing adrenaline.
- Increasing heart rate.
- Speeding up breathing rate.
- Tensing muscles.



Focus of attention is restricted. Focus on danger, opportunities to win, or to escape.

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