

Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn

THE BODY'S FOUR RESPONSES TO THREAT

When we sense danger — real or perceived — the nervous system responds automatically, often before conscious thought catches up. These four patterns are protective survival responses, not character flaws or personal failings. Understanding them can help you recognise what is happening in your body and mind, and respond with more choice.

THE FOUR RESPONSES



01 Fight

The nervous system mobilises to confront the threat directly, preparing the body to defend itself.

COMMON SIGNS

- Irritability or anger
- Muscle tension, clenched jaw
- Urge to argue or push back
- Racing heart, heat in the body



02 Flight

The nervous system mobilises to escape the threat, seeking distance or removal from the situation.

COMMON SIGNS

- Restlessness or urge to leave
- Racing thoughts
- Shallow, rapid breathing
- Avoidance of people or places



03 Freeze

The system pauses or shuts down, a response that can occur when fight or flight are not possible.

COMMON SIGNS

- Feeling stuck or unable to move
- Numbness or disconnection
- Difficulty speaking or thinking
- Holding the breath



04 Fawn

The system seeks safety through appeasing others, reducing threat by prioritising their needs over one's own.

COMMON SIGNS

- Difficulty saying no
- Over-apologising or people-pleasing
- Suppressing own needs or opinions
- Anxiety about others' reactions

Why does this happen?

These responses are coordinated largely by the autonomic nervous system, particularly the amygdala's threat-detection processes and the sympathetic nervous system's activation of the body for defence. They are automatic and adaptive — they exist to keep us safe. A response can also become a familiar pattern over time, especially if it was the most effective way of coping with difficulty in the past, including in childhood. No response is wrong; each was, at some point, protective.

WORKING WITH YOUR RESPONSE

1 NOTICE

Pause and observe what is happening in your body, thoughts and behaviour, without judgement.

2 NAME

Identify which response (or blend of responses) feels closest to your current experience.

3 GROUND

Use slow breathing, orientation to your surroundings, or gentle movement to support the body back toward a manageable state.



These responses are common and adaptive, but if they are frequent, intense, or significantly affecting your daily life or relationships, it may be helpful to speak with an appropriately qualified mental health professional. This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual clinical assessment or care.