STRESS AND EMOTION · ONE PAGE EXPLAINER

Fight, flight, freeze, fawn

The four automatic threat responses, and why they are not choices you make.

When the nervous system registers threat, it selects a response fast, without asking you first. The classic pair is fight or flight. Two more are now widely recognized in clinical work: freeze and fawn. Knowing your patterns is not about labeling yourself. It is about understanding why the same situation triggers the same reaction every time.

THE FOUR RESPONSES

Fight
Confront the threat. Signs: anger, tension, raised voice, defensiveness, a strong pull to argue or push back. Useful when the threat is fair, corrosive when it is not.

Flight
Get distance from the threat. Signs: leaving, avoiding, distracting, restlessness, chronic busyness. Protective in real danger, exhausting when danger is not there.

Freeze
Go still. Signs: blank mind, unable to speak, unable to move, dissociation. Common when neither fight nor flight is possible. Not weakness. A well-evolved response to being trapped.

Fawn
Appease the threat. Signs: agreeing, apologizing, over-accommodating, prioritizing the other person to reduce danger. Often learned in childhood environments where safety depended on managing someone else.

You have a default
Most people lean toward one under pressure. That default was shaped by early experience and by what worked at the time. It is not a personality verdict.

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

- After a difficult moment, name which response showed up. Naming is the first step in interrupting the pattern.
- Your default is not wrong. It is protective. The goal is more options, not a different you.
- When you can, add safety cues to the situation: someone with you, a way out, familiar surroundings. New responses become possible when the nervous system is less pressed.

Fight and flight described by Walter Cannon in 1915. Freeze added through work by Peter Levine and stress physiology researchers. Fawn popularized by Pete Walker in the trauma literature.

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