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Stress is any change in the environment that requires your body to react and adjust in response.The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses.Stress is a normal part of life. Many events that happen to you and around you -- and many things that you do yourself -- put stress on your body. You can experience good or bad forms of stress from your environment, your body, and your thoughts.The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive ("eustress") -- such as getting a job promotion or being given greater responsibilities -- keeping us alert and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative ("distress") when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between challenges. As a result, the person becomes overworked and stress-related tension builds.Distress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases.Stress also becomes harmful when people use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to try to relieve their stress. Unfortunately, instead of relieving the stress and returning the body to a relaxed state, these substances tend to keep the body in a stressed state and cause more problems. Consider the following:Forty-three percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.Seventy-five percent to 90% of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.Stress can play a part in problems such as headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, arthritis, depression, and anxiety.The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) declared stress a hazard of the workplace. Stress costs American industry more than $300 billion annually.The lifetime prevalence of an emotional disorder is more than 50%, often due to chronic, untreated stress reactions.SOURCES:National Institute of Mental Health: "Fact Sheet on Stress."American Heart Association: "How Does Stress Affect You."Mayo Clinic: "Stress: Constant stress puts your health at risk."Has your heart ever started racing during an argument? Have you ever wanted to run away from a tough situation, felt completely frozen, or found yourself saying yes just to avoid conflict? These are all examples of a stress responseyour body and brains automatic reaction to a perceived threat.Stress responses can be physical and psychological. You might notice a pounding heart, shallow breathing, muscle tension, or even stomach issues. At the same time, you could feel overwhelmed, anxious, panicked, or disconnected. These reactions are part of your nervous systems way of trying to protect you, but when stress becomes chronic or intense, it can take a real toll on your well-being.Most people have heard of being stuck in fight or flight mode, but theres more to the story. In fact, there are four main ways our brains respond to stress, commonly referred to as the fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses to trauma.These stress responses evolved as survival mechanismsour ancestors needed them to react quickly when faced with life-threatening situations. But in modern life, these same responses can be triggered by situations that feel emotionally or psychologically threatening, even if they arent life-or-death. Stress can come from a looming deadline, social anxiety, a tense relationship, or unresolved trauma from the past.Heres how each response might show up today:Fight could look like lashing out at someone or getting defensive.Flight might mean avoiding a conversation or physically leaving a situation.Freeze often feels like shutting down, feeling stuck, or zoning out.Fawn shows up as people-pleasing, over-apologizing, or putting others needs first to avoid conflict.Understanding the fight, flight, freeze, fawn responses to trauma can help you notice your own patterns and respond with more self-awareness. In this post, well break down what each response looks like, why they occur, and how you can work with your nervous system to feel safer and more in control when stress hits.Our brains are wired for survival, and the autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a big role in how we react to situations that threaten or frighten us. The ANS is like our bodys autopilot, controlling things we dont always think aboutlike heart rate, digestion, and blood pressure. When we encounter a perceived threat, whether its an actual life-threatening situation or just a high-pressure meeting, the ANS kicks into action.The sympathetic nervous system is the part of the ANS responsible for the stress responseits what makes your heart race, your breathing speed up, and your muscles tense when you feel threatened. These changes are triggered by two key players in the brain: the amygdala, which acts like an alarm system, and the hypothalamus, which sends signals to the rest of the body to prepare for action. In ancient times, this response helped humans escape predators or fight for survival.Today, these trauma response types are triggered by stressful events that arent life-threatening, like public speaking, job interviews, or high-pressure social situations. Over time, if were constantly stuck in a stress response, it can lead to health problems like anxiety, high blood pressure, and burnout.Thats why managing stress is so important. By understanding the flight, fight, freeze, and fawn responses and how we can manage them through techniques like deep breathing, movement, or mindfulness, we can shift from survival mode to a calmer, more balanced state.When stress hits, some people go straight into fight modeready to confront the threat head-on. This stress response is fueled by adrenaline and cortisol, raising our heart rate and sharpening our ability to focus.How someone might react in fight modeWhile this reaction is essential for survival, it can also show up in everyday situations where an all-out battle isnt necessary. For example, someone receiving constructive criticism at work might automatically get defensive and start arguing instead of considering the feedback. A person who grew up in a volatile home may develop trauma response types that make them lash out when they feel unsafe or out of control. Even getting cut off in traffic can trigger fight mode, leading to road rage or aggressive driving.While standing up for yourself is important, an overactive fight response can do more harm than good if your stress responses jeopardize your job and relationships.Managing stress starts with identifying and recognizing triggers before reacting impulsively. Deep breathing techniques can help calm your nervous system, while mindfulness strategies like pausing before responding can create space for a more thoughtful reaction.Finding healthy outlets like exercise, journaling, or talking with a trusted friend or therapist can help process emotions. The fight response isnt all badthe key is learning when to channel it and when to step back.The flight response is all about escape. When your brain senses a potential threat, it might push you to avoid it rather than confront it. While this reaction makes sense in life-or-death situations (like running from something harmful), it can also show up in everyday lifesuch as avoiding responsibilities, overworking, or staying constantly busy to sidestep stress or discomfort.What takes place during the flight response?One way the flight response manifests is social avoidancesomeone with anxiety might cancel plans or dodge social situations to escape discomfort. This might look like job-hopping- leaving jobs not for growth opportunities but to avoid challenges. For some, the need to move on becomes constant, making it hard to feel settled.This response often starts in childhood traumaa child who hides when their parents argue may carry avoidance patterns into adulthood.While avoiding stressors may feel like a relief in the moment, it can keep stress hormones high, leading to anxiety, exhaustion, and poor coping skills. Recognizing these patterns is key. Ask yourself: Am I leaving a situation because its truly bad for me or because its uncomfortable?Small stepslike exposure therapy techniques, grounding exercises, and healthy breakscan help you shift from automatic escape mode to handling stress with more confidence.What is the freeze response?The freeze response is often the least understood of all the stress responses. Unlike fight or flight, which pushes us into action, freeze is like hitting a mental pause button. When a situation feels too overwhelming to handle. Instead of running or fighting, your brain decides that staying still is the safest option.The freeze response can show up in extreme moments, like during an assault, where a person feels paralyzed and unable to react. But it also occurs in everyday life. A student overwhelmed by a big deadline might completely avoid starting their work. Someone in a heated argument might suddenly go silent, unable to respond. Its a stress response that can leave you feeling stuck, foggy, or disconnected.While freeze is a natural survival mechanism, getting stuck in it too often can affect mental health and daily life. The key is recognizing the signszoning out, struggling to take actionand using small steps to unfreeze yourself.Grounding techniques like deep breathing, holding something cold, or touching a solid object can help bring you back to the present. Movement, even just stretching or a short walk, signals to your body that its safe to engage again. By understanding the freeze response and practicing these tools, you can regain control and keep stress from holding you back.The fawn response is one of the lesser-known trauma response types, but its just as powerful as fight, flight, or freeze. Instead of confronting or avoiding a stressor, fawning involves prioritizing others needs or emotions in order to stay safe. Its a survival mechanism that develops when a person learns that being overly accommodating is the most effective way to avoid conflict, rejection, or harm.This response often stems from past trauma, people-pleasing tendencies, or codependency, and while it may feel like a way to keep the peace, it can have a serious impact on mental health over time.What does fawning look like?In the workplace, someone with a fawn response might always say yes to extra tasks, even when theyre overwhelmed, because they fear upsetting their boss or being seen as difficult. Rather than asserting their workload limits, they push themselves past burnout to maintain peace.Fawning can look like staying in unhealthy or toxic relationships or friendships out of fear of conflict or abandonment. Someone might ignore their own needs, go along with things they dont agree with, or suppress their emotions to avoid upsetting their partner. For many people, this response starts in childhood. A child in a volatile household learns that keeping their parents calm and satisfied leads to less yelling or punishment. Over time, this survival tactic becomes ingrained and carries over into adulthood.Recognizing a freeze or fawn response is the first step in breaking free from it. One of the most important skills to develop is setting boundarieslearning to say no without guilt and understanding that you cant be everything to everyone. Building self-awareness around people-pleasing habits helps, tooasking yourself, Am I doing this because I want to, or because I feel like I have to? can reveal patterns of fawning behavior.Finally, practicing self-validation rather than constantly seeking external approval is key. Instead of basing your worth on how others see you, remind yourself that you are enough as you are.We all react to stress differently, and knowing your go-to stress response can make a huge difference in how you manage challenges. Whether you default to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, recognizing your patterns is the first step toward regaining control. Self-awareness helps you notice when youre stuck in a reaction that isnt serving you, like shutting down in conflict (freeze) or overcommitting to please others (fawn).Once you identify your response, you can start making choices that better support your mental health instead of running on autopilot.Understanding these trauma response types also leads to healthier relationships. When you recognize your own reactions and those of the people around you, communication becomes easier and more effective. For example, instead of assuming someone is ignoring you, you may recognize that their freeze response has been activated. If you find yourself avoiding responsibility, you can identify it as a flight response and act accordingly. Knowledge is powerespecially when it comes to taking charge of your own stress responses.Understanding your stress response is the first step, but learning how to manage it is just as important. When your nervous system is constantly in fight, flight, freeze, or fawn mode, it can take a toll on your mental and physical health, including weakening your immune system. The good news? There are plenty of stress management techniques to help bring balance back to your body and mind.Journaling and self-reflectionOne simple but powerful tool is journaling and self-reflection. Writing down your thoughts and reactions can help you recognize patternsdo you tend to freeze in high-pressure situations? Do you always say yes to avoid conflict? Noticing these tendencies is the first step to changing them.Mindfulness and meditationMindfulness and meditation are also great ways to calm the nervous system. Deep breathing, grounding exercises, or even a few minutes of quiet reflection can help shift your brain from stress mode. For those with more profound trauma, trauma-informed counseling can provide support in understanding and rewiring automatic responses.Maintaining healthy habitsLastly, dont underestimate the basicsregular exercise, quality sleep, and good nutrition. Moving your body, resting well, and eating nutrient-dense foods all help regulate your stress levels and build overall resilience. Managing stress isnt about eliminating it entirely but about giving yourself the tools to handle it in a healthier way.For those healing from chronic stress or past trauma, understanding and awareness of stress responses is a game-changer. Once you understand your patterns, you can explore targeted therapy, coaching, or self-work to rewire old responses and build healthier coping strategies.Sometimes, no matter how many stress management techniques you try, your stress responses can still overtake you.If your fight, flight, freeze, or fawn reactions interfere with your relationships or overall well-being, it might be time to seek professional support.Signs that you might need extra help include:Constantly feeling on edge, anxious, or exhausted.Struggling with emotional outbursts, avoidance, or shutting down under stress.Realizing that past trauma is affecting your present life and relationships.Using unhealthy coping mechanisms like substance use, overworking, or isolation.You dont have to navigate this alone. Pacific Health Group offers expert support to help you understand and regulate your stress responses in a way that works for you. Whether youre dealing with past trauma, anxiety or just feeling overwhelmed by daily life, professional guidance can make a huge difference.Reach out today. Call 1-877-811-1217 or visit www.mypacifichealth.com to take the first step toward healthier stress management. Your well-being matters, and support is available when you need it.Experiencing a traumatic event can have a lasting impact. Many people wonder why they might feel irritable, on-edge, or unhappy long after the traumatic experience has passed. If youre feeling this way, youre not alone: the World Health Organization estimates that 70.4% of us experience trauma, and 3.9% of us will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at some point in our lives but the effects of trauma can be prevalent even without a PTSD diagnosis.In this post, were talking about the 6 Fs of trauma responses, how and why they can differ from PTSD, and the effect your attachment style can have on your response to trauma.DISCOVER YOUR ATTACHMENT STYLEWhat Is a Trauma Response?When we experience something that feels like a threat to our lives, we sometimes experience the effects of trauma. The traumatic event could be anything that made you feel scared and endangered, even if your life wasnt actually at risk. For example, 41% of burglary victims report severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the burglary, even though they may not have come face to face with danger.Your response to trauma is unique to you and what youve been through while you may recognize similarities with the 6 trauma responses listed here, the reality is that people usually experience a mix of thoughts and feelings that correspond to different trauma responses.A trauma response in this sense describes the ways that our bodies might react to trauma, and the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that result. These reactions happen during the traumatic event, but can also be triggered after the danger has passed. Triggers can be anything that reminds us of the event, including sensations, people, thoughts, and feelings.Experiencing a trauma response is not the same as PTSD, which is characterized by persistent intrusive thoughts, avoidance, negative mood, and high anxiety for a long time after the traumatic event.The 6 Trauma Responses ExplainedIf youve heard of fight or flight, then youre already familiar with two of our common trauma responses but there are many other ways your body might respond.You might find different variations of these 6 Fs of trauma responses, but each one is a valid and natural way to react to an unnatural event.Today, were going to take a look at these 6 responses:FightFlightFreezeFawnFineFaintThe Fight ResponseWhen faced with immediate danger, your sympathetic nervous system activates. This sends your blood to your heart and lungs, away from your extremities and digestive organs, so that you can take rapid action. Your focus narrows and your muscles become tense, and you might notice sweat, a racing heart, and fast breathing.At this point, your brain makes a snap calculation can I overpower this threat?When the answer is yes, you enter the fight response.In the fight response, you might feel intense anger, a surge of energy, or an urge to physically lash out. You may find your jaw or fists clenching, and your instinct is to move toward the threat.When the fight response is triggered, you might feel all these feelings again. You might be more irritable, tense, and argumentative than usual.The Flight ResponseIf the answer to can I overpower this threat? is no, then your brains next calculation is: can I outrun this threat?When your brain decides to outrun the threat, you enter the flight response. In the flight response, you are still preparing for action, so your physical responses are similar to the fight response. However, you direct this energy away from the threat, instead of towards it.When the flight response is triggered, you might feel exceptionally restless, fidgety, and tense. You might also take excessive measures to avoid thoughts and feelings about the traumatic event, such as an intense focus on a new skill or project, to the detriment of other aspects of your life.The Freeze ResponseWhen you cannot overpower or outrun the threat, your brain now has to divert to its next best survival technique: the freeze response.The freeze response is thought to emulate playing dead, or staying so still that perhaps the danger wont notice you.During a traumatic event, the freeze response can feel like your body has gone rigid and youre stuck in place. Your heart rate may slow down as your body preserves energy, slowing your breathing too. You may feel physically numb, which helps your body to survive by stopping you from experiencing the full impact of the threat.When the freeze response is triggered, you may feel physically incapable of moving even though you want to. You may feel dissociated, like youre not completely present or youre separated from yourself. The people around you might notice that you seem spaced out, distracted, or depressed.Its not uncommon for trauma survivors to feel shame following the freeze response, with many wondering why they didnt do anything but the fact is that you did. Your body responded to help you survive in the best way it knew how to.The Faint ResponseDuring the freeze response, your heart rate and blood pressure can become so low that you faint. This can protect your brain from having to experience the event at all.The faint response can also persist after the event there is a documented correlation between traumatic experiences and susceptibility to fainting. You may also feel lightheaded, weak, or dizzy.The Fawn ResponseThe fawn response usually occurs when all other options are unavailable and the threat is long-term and relational. This is often an aggressive or abusive person close to the survivor, like a partner or family member.During the fawn response, you try to appease the threat to make it less likely to pose a risk to your safety, even though this is often at your own expense. For example, you might spend hours tidying the house to avoid conflict, even if you need to be somewhere else during this time.When the fawn response persists outside of the context of the threat, you might have difficulty with people pleasing, avoiding conflict, and sacrificing your own needs to benefit others. It might be difficult to say no and set boundaries, which can create a vicious cycle of abuse.The Fine ResponseThe fine response is unlike the others weve discussed, as it is not something we do during a traumatic experience, but something we might engage in in the aftermath.In the fine response, you might experience denial about your trauma. You might play it down, question whether it happened, or pretend it didnt. This often happens because the trauma is too big for your brain to process, or because of social pressure to appear to be okay.Even though you might seem happy and calm on the outside, you might be experiencing anger, frustration, and anxiety. You might avoid situations that could bring up your traumatic experience, which could lead to isolation.Its important to know that its perfectly understandable, even normal, to not be fine after a traumatic experience. Even though it can feel insurmountable at times, try to approach your thoughts and feelings with self compassion, and know that these difficulties can and do get better with time.EXPLORE YOUR EMOTIONAL REGULATIONTrauma Responses in PTSDPTSD first became a recognized diagnosis in 1980, but its symptoms had been known and somewhat understood for a long time.Famously, World War I veterans were known to return with shell shock, which loosely described abnormal behavior such as hypervigilance, tinnitus, tremors, or insomnia. Upon finding that some of these soldiers had no physical damage, doctors started to wonder whether the cause was emotional.However, the first descriptions of PTSD-like symptoms go all the way back to ancient Mesopotamia, as far as 1300BC, where symptoms such as flashbacks, disturbed sleep, and low mood were thought to be caused by the spirits of those a person had killed in conflict.Any of the trauma responses can be present in PTSD, but experiencing a trauma response post-trauma does not necessarily mean PTSD is present. Within the first month after the traumatic experience, any PTSD-like symptoms can be attributed to an acute stress response. If these symptoms persist for longer than a month, no matter when they started, then PTSD may be diagnosed.According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders V (DSM-V; often used by professionals to assist in diagnoses), symptoms of PTSD can be categorized into 4 different clusters, and each one must be met to form a diagnosis.To diagnose PTSD, these symptoms must also follow exposure to a traumatic event (including learning about a traumatic event which happened to somebody close to you or repeated exposure to details of a traumatic event due to occupation), must cause significant difficulty in daily life, and must not be potentially caused by another medical condition or substance.You may notice that many of these diagnostic criteria relate to one of the trauma responses we saw avoidance in the flight response, and irritability in the fight response. This goes to show how these responses can overlap, often with little predictability.After prolonged relational trauma, an individual could develop Complex PTSD (C-PTSD). C-PTSD is recognized in the World Health Organizations International Classification of Diseases 11 (ICD-11), and includes the previous diagnostic criteria for PTSD as well as difficulties with emotional regulation, negative self-evaluation, and difficulties sustaining and forming close relationships with others. This is often where the fawn response and people-pleasing behavior comes in.The Role of Attachment in Trauma ResponsesPeople with insecure attachment styles can also experience difficulty sustaining and forming close relationships with others is this the same as C-PTSD?Not necessarily C-PTSD still requires all the criteria for PTSD, but the two can overlap. In fact, scientists have found that insecure attachment styles are associated with more intense symptoms of PTSD, particularly where the traumatic event occurred in early life.A disorganized attachment style, which forms where the infant learns to fear the caregiver they also rely on, is particularly closely associated with symptoms of PTSD.While insecure attachment styles can resemble trauma responses, such as avoidance seen in the flight response and the avoidant attachment style or people-pleasing sometimes seen in the anxious attachment style, this behavior isnt necessarily a response to trauma even though both are the result of survival mechanisms.Remember how the signs of different trauma responses overlap in PTSD diagnostic criteria? Someone who experiences one trauma response is likely to experience others, whereas your attachment style can be a more stable pattern of behaviors that arent usually triggered outside of the context of relationships.Recovery from trauma is a 3 stage process: stabilization of symptoms and regaining a sense of safety, processing and re-integrating traumatic memories, and reconnecting and rebuilding trust with others.Having a secure attachment style can help with all of these stages, but it becomes particularly important in the final stage when we try to reconnect.To help you learn about your attachment style and move toward a secure attachment type, take our course on developing a secure attachment.SECURE ATTACHMENT COURSEFinal Words on the 6 Trauma ResponsesAny extremely frightening experience can become traumatic, and how your brain reacts when survival mode kicks in is not a conscious decision. When the effects of trauma continue for a long time, people often feel frustration, confusion, and shame understanding common trauma responses is the first step towards self-compassion, managing trauma symptoms, and eventually recovering from traumatic experiences.Your attachment style plays into your trauma responses too, and a secure attachment can make it easier (though still not easy) to deal with the symptoms of trauma. If you dont think you have a secure attachment style, dont worry, as this is something that can be changed with time and intentional action.Recovering from trauma is no easy feat, but it is possible. Remember to approach your difficulties with compassion and curiosity, and talk to a qualified clinician for personalized advice. Fight or flight is a well-known stress response that occurs when hormones are released in your body, prompting you to stay and fight or run and flee danger. If your body perceives itself to be in trouble, your system will work to keep you alive.Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are a broader collection of natural bodily reactions to stressful, frightening, or dangerous events. This sympathetic nervous system response dates back to our ancestors coming face-to-face with dangerous animals.Fight, flight or freeze are the three most basic stress responses. They reflect how your body will react to danger. Fawn is the fourth stress response that was identified later.The fight response is your bodys way of facing any perceived threat aggressively. Flight means your body urges you to run from danger. Freeze is your bodys inability to move or act against a threat. Fawn is your bodys stress response to try to please someone to avoid conflict.The goal of the fight, flight, freeze, and fawn response is to decrease, end, or evade danger and return to a calm, relaxed state.In fight or flight mode, your brain is preparing for a physical response.Fight.When your body feels that it is in danger and believes you can overpower the threat, youll respond in fight mode. Your brain releases signals to your body, preparing it for the physical demands of fighting.Signs of a fight response include:Tight jawGrinding your teethUrge to punch something or someoneA feeling of intense angerNeed to stomp or kickCrying in angerA burning or knotted sensation in your stomachAttacking the source of dangerFlight.If your body believes you cannot overcome the danger but can avoid it by running away, youll respond in flight mode. A surge of hormones, like adrenaline, give your body the stamina to run from danger longer than you typically could.Signs of a flight response include:Excessive exercisingFeeling fidgety, tense, or trappedConstantly moving your legs, feet, and armsRestless bodyFeeling of numbness in your arms and legsDilated, darting eyesFreeze and fawn are also stress responses that dont involve decisive actions.Freeze.This stress response causes you to feel stuck in place. This response happens when your body doesnt think you can fight or flight.Signs of the freeze response include:Sense of dreadPale skinFeeling stiff, heavy, cold, and numbLoud, pounding heartDecreasing heart rateFawn.This response is used after an unsuccessful fight, flight, or freeze attempt. The fawn response occurs primarily in people who grew up in abusive families or situations.Signs of a fawn response include:Over-agreementTrying to be overly helpfulPrimary concern with making someone else happyThe fawn response often covers up distress and damage youre feeling inside due to trauma. Fawning is a common reaction to childhood abuse. The fawn response is your bodys emotional reaction that involves becoming highly agreeable to the person abusing you.The fawn response can cause confusion and guilt if you have PTSD. Even if youre being treated poorly, your instinct drives you to soothe your abuser instead of resorting to the flight or fight response. Signs of fawning behavior include:Overdependence on the opinions of othersLittle to no boundariesVulnerability to narcissistsBeing easily controlled and manipulatedThe fawn response is believed to occur in people who grew up with narcissistic parents. You may have been neglected or rejected constantly as a child. Being helpful and agreeable was the only means of survival.The problem with the fawn response is that it can cause codependent adults and make you lose your sense of identity.Many different reactions are happening in your body during an acute stress response. Some of these reactions occur during any type of stress response, and some are specific to the type of response. The following can be parts of a stress response:Heart rate and blood pressure increasePale or flushed skinTemporary loss of blunt pain responseDilated pupilsFeeling of being on edgeDistorted memories of the eventTenseness or tremblingInvoluntary control of your bowels or bladder Whether youre in physical danger or psychological danger, your body will start triggering a stress response. This reaction starts in your amygdala, which is the section of your brain responsible for fear.The amygdala transmits signals to your hypothalamus, stimulating the autonomic nervous system. Then, your sympathetic system stimulates your adrenal glands to trigger adrenaline and noradrenaline hormones.Anxiety disorders can trigger your fight or flight response even during situations that dont put you in danger. Unfortunately, there are detrimental effects of this chronic stress. The problem that triggers a stress response varies from person to person. However, some environmental or health conditions can be associated with the response.Stress management is an integral part of improving your overall health. Identifying your physical, emotional, and behavioral signs of stress can help you analyze and work to overcome them. This will help you determine if youre truly facing a threat or if your nervous system is overreacting. If stress impacts your quality of life, you can talk to your doctor. They may recommend therapy, medication, or other stress management techniques. Managing stress is a daily struggle that cannot be solved with a quick fix.There are three techniques you can use to ground you to the present and help you overcome your stress response.Mental grounding techniques include:Focusing on your environmentReciting songs, poetry, or affirmationsPlaying the alphabet gameReminding yourself youre safe with safety statementsDoing mental calculationsVisualizing overcoming your fearsPhysical grounding techniques include:Breathing and focusing on your speed and steadinessTouching or holding onto an object tightlyPutting weight on your heels and physically connecting with the groundTensing your body and focusing on slowly releasing it from your forehead to your toesSoothing grounding techniques include:Thinking about your happy place and relaxing thereTreating yourself to something comforting or joyfulRepeating coping statementsSpeaking positive affirmationsThe basicsYour responseFightFlightFreezeFawnLong-term effectsTakeawayShare on PinterestJustin Pumfrey/Getty ImagesTrauma, whether its momentary or long term, affects people in different ways. This probably isnt news to you. But did you know four distinct responses can help explain how your experiences show up in your reactions and behavior? First, theres fight-or-flight, the one youre probably most familiar with. In basic terms, when you encounter a threat, you either resist or retaliate, or simply flee. Maybe youve also heard this called fight, flight, or freeze. You can think of the freeze response as something akin to stalling, a temporary pause that gives your mind and body a chance to plan and prepare for your next steps.But your response to trauma can go beyond fight, flight, or freeze. The fawn response, a term coined by therapist Pete Walker, describes (often unconscious) behavior that aims to please, appease, and pacify the threat in an effort to keep yourself safe from further harm. Well explain these four trauma responses in depth below, plus offer some background on why they show up and guidance on recognizing (and navigating) your own response. As you might already know, trauma responses happen naturally.When your body recognizes a threat, your brain and autonomic nervous system (ANS) react quickly, releasing hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones trigger physical changes that help prepare you to handle a threat, whether it involves actual physical or emotional danger, or perceived harm.argue with a co-worker treating you unfairlyflee from the path of a car running a red lightfreeze when you hear an unexpected noise in the darkkeep quiet about how you really feel to avoid starting a fightIts also possible to have an overactive trauma response. In a nutshell, this means day-to-day occurrences and events most people dont find threatening can trigger your go-to stress response, whether thats fight, flight, freeze, fawn, or a hybrid. Overactive trauma responses are pretty common among survivors of trauma, particularly those who experienced long-term abuse or neglect. If your caregiver generally took care of your needs and you could count on them for physical and emotional support, you probably grew up with the confidence to trust others and build healthy relationships with friends and partners. Youll also, as Walkers theory suggests, find it mostly possible to weather stress, challenges, and other threats by reaching for the trauma response that works best in a given situation. Living through repeated abuse, neglect, or other traumatic circumstances in childhood can make it harder to use these responses effectively. Instead, you might find yourself stuck in one mode, coping with conflict and challenges just as you coped in childhood: favoring the response that best served your needs by helping you escape further harm. When youve experienced emotional abuse or physical neglect, a number of factors can affect the way you respond: the type of trauma the specific pattern of neglect and abuse your role in the family and relationships with other family membersgenetics, including personality traitsNow, heres a closer look at the four main reactions.This response tends to stem from the unconscious belief that maintaining power and control over others will lead to the acceptance, love, and safety you need but didnt get in childhood, according to Walker. This response tends to show up more commonly when your caregivers: didnt provide reasonable and healthy limitsgave you whatever you asked forshamed youdemonstrated narcissistic rage, bullying, or disgustWhile fight often refers to actual physical or verbal aggression, it can encompass any action you take to stand up to a threat or negate it, like:making a public social media post after your partner cheats to let everyone know what they didshouting at your friend when they accidentally mention something you wanted to keep privatespreading a rumor about a co-worker who criticized your workrefusing to speak with your partner for a week when they lose your favorite sunglassesWalker also notes that a fixed fight response can underlie narcissistic defenses. Indeed, experts recognize childhood abuse as a potential cause of narcissistic personality disorder, though other factors also play a part. In your relationships, you might tend more toward ambivalent or avoidant attachment styles. A flight response, in short, is characterized by the desire to escape or deny pain, emotional turmoil, and other distress. You might find yourself trapped in flight mode if, as a child, escaping your parents helped you dodge most of their unkindness and ease the impact of the abuse you experienced. Escape might take a literal form: staying longer hours at school and friends houseswandering the neighborhoodOr a more figurative one:throwing yourself into your studies to occupy yourselfcreating endless plans for escape drowning out arguments with musicAs an adult, you might continue to flee challenging or difficult situations by: working toward perfection in all aspects of life so no one can criticize or challenge youending relationships when you feel threatened, before the other person can break up with youavoiding conflict, or any situation that brings up difficult or painful emotionsusing work, hobbies, or even alcohol and substances to fend off feelings of fear, anxiety, or panicThe freeze response serves as a stalling tactic. You brain presses the pause button but remains hypervigilant, waiting and watching carefully until it can determine whether fleeing or fighting offers a better route to safety.Some experts have pointed out this response actually takes place first, before you decide to flee or fight. And when either action seems less than feasible? You might then flop in response to your fright. A long-term freeze response can come to resemble a mask you use to protect yourself when you cant identify any means of fighting back or escaping. Behind the mask, you might:use fantasy or imagination to escape day-to-day distressprefer solitude and avoid close relationshipshide emotions and feelingsphysically detach from the world through sleep, or by staying in your room or housementally check out from situations that feel painful or stressfulWalker identified a fourth trauma response through his experiences helping survivors of childhood abuse and trauma.This response, which he termed fawning, offers an alternate path to safety. You escape harm, in short, by learning to please the person threatening you and keep them happy. In childhood, this might involve:ignoring your own needs to take care of a parentmaking yourself as useful and helpful as possibleneglecting or failing to develop your own self-identityoffering praise and admiration, even when they criticize youYou might learn to fawn, for example, to please a narcissistically defended parent, or one whose behavior you couldnt predict. Giving up your personal boundaries and limits in childhood may have helped minimize abuse, but this response tends to linger into adulthood, where it often drives codependency or people-pleasing tendencies. agree to whatever your partner asks of you, even if youd rather notconstantly praise a manager in hope of avoiding criticism or negative feedbackfeel as if you know very little about what you like or enjoyavoid sharing your own thoughts or feelings in close relationships for fear of making others angryhave few, if any, boundaries around your own needsLearn more about the fawn response.Trauma doesnt just affect you in the moment. More often, it has long lasting effects that can disrupt well-being for years to come.Just one instance of abuse can cause deep pain and trauma. Repeated abuse can take an even more devastating toll, damaging your ability to form healthy friendships and relationships, not to mention your physical and mental health. But you can work through trauma and minimize its impact on your life. Recognizing your trauma response is a great place to start. Just keep in mind, though, that your response may not fall neatly into one of these four categories. As Walkers theory explains, most people navigating long-term trauma drift toward more of a hybrid response, such as fawn-flight or flight-freeze.While help from loved ones can always make a difference for trauma and abuse recovery, most people need a little more support. In fact, PTSD and C-PTSD are recognized mental health conditions that generally dont improve without professional support. With guidance from a mental health professional, you can:challenge and break out of a fixed trauma responselearn to access more effective responses when facing actual threatsbegin healing emotional painlearn to establish healthy boundariesreconnect with your sense of selfLearn more about finding the right therapist.Your trauma response may be a relic of a painful childhood, but its not set in stone. Support from a trained therapist can go a long way toward helping you address deep-seated effects of past trauma, along with any mental health symptoms you experience as a result.Crystal Raypole writes for Healthline and Psych Central. Her fields of interest include Japanese translation, cooking, natural sciences, sex positivity, and mental health, along with books, books, and more books. In particular, shes committed to helping decrease stigma around mental health issues. She lives in Washington with her son and a lovably recalcitrant cat.Healthline has strict sourcing guidelines and relies on peer-reviewed studies, academic research institutions, and medical journals and associations. We only use quality, credible sources to ensure content accuracy and integrity. You can learn more about how we ensure our content is accurate and current by reading our editorial policy.Bracha HS. (2004). Freeze, flight, fight, fright, faint: Adaptationist perspectives on the acute stress response spectrum. RA. (2016). Social attachments and traumatic stress. CN, et al. (2015). Narcissists' social pain seen only in the brain. K, et al. (2015). Fear and the defense cascade: Clinical implications and management. A, et al. (2017). Dissociation and alterations in brain function and structure: Implications for borderline personality disorder. T, et al. (2019). Psychobiology of attachment and trauma some general remarks from a clinical perspective. E, et al. (2018). Genetics, personality and wellbeing. A twin study of traits, facets and life satisfaction. NB, et al. (2007). Exploring human freeze responses to a threat stressor. Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). Chapter 3: Understanding the impact of trauma. Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services. P. (n.d.). The 4Fs: A trauma typology in complex PTSD. P. (2003). Codependency, trauma, and the fawn response. with someone who's a narcissist is challenging. Narcissists are highly self-absorbed and often see their kids as extensions of themselves. And when it's a parent, their children often feel "unheard, unknown, and used by their narcissistic parent, says Kimberly Perlin, a licensed clinical social worker in Towson, MD.Anju Chandy was 18 years old when she left her Bakersfield, CA, home for a college far away. After years of frustration and arguments, the more miles she could put between her and her narcissistic mother, the better.I knew I didnt want to be anywhere near my mother," says Chandy, a musician in Indianapolis. " I needed to forge a path of my own away from her influence and control."If narcissism is affecting your relationship with your mother, you have options to help manage its impact on you.A mom who is a narcissist may seem self-sacrificing: always doing things for her kids and never thinking of herself. Sher may be a class parent, PTO president, or soccer coach. But that involvement is self-serving. She does it because she wants attention and needs to be involved in every decision. Even when you're an adult, she may be too involved in your life. She might interpret what you do as being more about her than you, Perlin says. For instance, when you talk, she always shifts the focus back to herself. If you have children, she may try to eclipse the other parent.If your mother is a narcissist, she may be emotionally manipulative and coercive, says Mark Ettensohn, PsyD, author of Unmasking Narcissism: A Guide to Understanding the Narcissist in Your Life. Narcissistic parents may give unrealistically positive feedback which can suddenly turn into overly harsh or punitive criticism, he says.Your mother may not see you for who you truly are, aside from being an extension of her. She could have trouble understanding and accepting your feelings and get anxious or angry when she feels rejected or criticized. And although Chandy's experience was with her mother, narcissism is a trait that any person -- parent or not, and of any gender -- can have.Narcissistic traits run along a continuum, Perlin says. Your mother may have a few hallmarks, like self-absorption and entitlement. Or she may have narcissistic personality disorder, which includes signs such as grandiosity, arrogance, lack of empathy, and an excessive need to be admired. People often call others "narcissists" casually, but the disorder is more severe.If you think your mother may be a narcissist, Perlin suggests asking yourself these questions:Can she handle negative feedback?Does she seem overly concerned about how she looks to others?Does she need you to prop her up with compliments and positive feedback?Does she need others to know shes the most overworked, underappreciated, or giving mother?Does she make it clear you owe her?Do you feel you need to be a certain way or achieve something for her love and approval?Does she feed off attention in ways that feel uncomfortable or over the top?If you answer many of the questions with a yes and her behavior is consistent over time, you can consider narcissism, Perlin says.If your mother shows signs of narcissism, take these steps to manage your relationship:Set boundaries. Create and maintain healthy boundaries. Be clear about whats OK and what isnt.Stay calm. Try not to react emotionally to what she says, even if its an insult. The narcissist wants a reaction from you because it means they have control and can shift the mood as they please, Chandy says. Your calm is your power.Plan your responses. Have a respectful exit strategy when conversations go off the rails, Perlin says. Prepare and practice statements like I have to get going, Mom, or Well have to just agree to disagree.Let go. You may feel pressure to keep your mother happy and be a perfect daughter or son. Let go of these thoughts. Remember, it isnt your job to make your mother feel special, needed, or relevant.Get help. Talk to a counselor. They can help you understand how a parent's narcissism affects you and learn how to break the cycle.Step away. It may be best to limit or stop with your mother, especially if shes abusive or violent. Instead, focus on the things you can control. I currently have no contact with my family, Chandy says. For her, that helped her prioritize her own growth and happiness.If your mother is a narcissist, avoid these things:Dont expect an apology. Narcissists are unlikely to accept critical feedback. They often have excuses and justifications for their behavior. Your mother may not see herself as wrong or her behavior as bad. She probably thinks shes the victim.Dont try to fix or heal her. You cant change someone's personality. Narcissists often grew up with narcissistic parents and were used and hurt by them. It may help to build compassion for her struggles and recognize that she may not realize her impact.Dont compare her to others. Try to have the best relationship you can with the mother you have, Perlin says. Think about when the two of you shine. Do you share a talent or interest? Try to bond on that.Someone cut you off on the highway and you had to swerve and narrowly avoided a collision.While out for a morning run, an angry dog jumps out onto your path and starts growling and barking at you.In the second before you turned on the lights in your empty house, your coat rack looked like it was a person standing right next to you.All three of these scenarios can trigger your bodys natural fight-or-flight response which is driven by your sympathetic nervous system. Depending on your past experiences, your response to threats may manifest in different ways.Along with fight-or-flight, you may have also heard of freeze, fawn or a hybrid of several versions. These all can be your bodys reaction to danger and were designed to help you survive stressful and life-threatening situations.Just a note that you may have heard of this type of reaction also referred to as trauma response, but trauma response can have different meanings, including the triggering of a response to a post-traumatic event. So, in this space, were referencing the fight, flight, freeze or fawn as a stress response.Registered psychotherapist Natacha Duke, MA, RP, helps us understand the different types of stress responses, how they manifest and how you can best manage them.What is a stress response?A stress response is your bodys reaction to a threat, whether its real, imagined or perceived. And it can

mechanism causes a biological and psychological reaction thats meant to help you respond to various threats in the most effective way. Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are all common stress responses. Past experiences, your personality, and the type of threat affect how your body gets triggered and responds to a stressful or frightening situation. For short-term stressors, your stress response goes away when the threat is gone. But, long-term stress or trauma can cause these stress responses to become over-activated. For example, you may become quickly angry if you have an overactive fight response or immediately shut down during any sign of conflict if you freeze. When your fight response becomes activated, your instinct is to cope with the perceived threat aggressively. This response physically affects your body by causing:Increased heart rateHigher blood pressureRush of adrenalineTightened jaw Other signs of being in fight mode include:Intense feelings of angerUrge to physically lash outWanting to yell or raise your voiceHypervigilance or feeling jumpyFeeling easily agitated Someone who is easily triggered into a fight response might find themselves frequently getting into physical fights or verbal altercations. A flight response triggers the urge to run away from the threat to try and save yourself. Similar to "fight" mode, a flight response can lead to a rush of adrenaline and increased heart rate as your body prepares to "run" away. Common signs of a flight response include:The urge to flee a situationFidgeting or having trouble being stillFeeling trapped or as if the room is closing in on youAvoiding perceived or real threatsPanicking For people who often engage in a flight response, this can look like physically leaving stressful situations. For example, during an interpersonal conflict, someone in "flight" mode might walk away from the conversation instead of engaging and trying to fix the problem. While flight and fight are both active stress responses that increase the biological activity in your body, freezing is your bodys way of shutting down. Like an animal might play dead while being hunted, people turn to freeze when it feels like fighting or fleeing isnt an option. The freeze response affects your body by causing the following symptoms:Decreased heart rateDissociation, or feeling detached from yourself and your environmentNumbness in your bodyImmobility, or feeling like you cant move your arms or legs Other signs of being in freeze mode include: Holding your breathFeeling emotionally numb or confusedHaving trouble speaking or becoming non-verbalNot being able to take action or make a decisionLacking focus or having trouble concentrating The freeze response is linked to high levels of anxiety and trauma. People who have experienced sexual assault and domestic violence commonly report resorting to the freeze response during a stressor. When it feels safer to be submissive and obedient than fight or flee, people may turn to the fawn stress response. Most similar to the freeze response, "fawning" causes someone to please and appease the needs of someone else, instead of prioritizing their own well-being. This response is common in abusive situations. For example, a child with an emotionally abusive parent might find that being agreeable is safer than fighting back. Other signs that a fawn response has been activated include: Having a hard time saying noBeing a people-pleaserPretending to agree with someoneDoing what youre told no matter whatPutting others needs before your ownNot being able to set boundaries Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are all responses to fear, trauma, and stress. Short-term and long-term stressors both set off the sympathetic nervous systemthe part of your body that activates your trauma and stress responses. When this happens, your body releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. When your sympathetic nervous system becomes activated, your body prepares first for either fight or flight. This causes your heart rate to go up and prepares your body for movement. But, your nervous system can shift to a freeze or fawn response if your body determines that fight or flight wont be effective in managing the stressor at hand. Common everyday stressors that can trigger your bodys fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses include: Running late to an appointmentGetting feedback at workConflict with a loved one or strangerFacing an unexpected stressor (e.g., hitting traffic on a familiar commute)Losing something important Traumatic events can also trigger any of the four responses. These include:Responding to an emergency situationExperiencing or witnessing domestic violence, sexual assault, police brutality, or warBeing physically, emotionally, or sexually abused during childhood Experiencing some level of stress is normaland stress responses like fight or flight can sharpen your focus, increase your reaction time, and help you prioritize. In most cases, the stress response will diminish once the threat is gone. However, sometimes your body remains in a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn state even after the stressor resolves. The following tips can help your body relax after experiencing any of the four stress responses:Exercise and movement (e.g., walking, running, dancing, yoga, lifting weights, and playing sports)Talking about the stressful event with a trusted loved oneReducing your caffeine and alcohol intakeEngaging in hobbies that you enjoy (e.g., crafting, knitting, gardening, reading, playing video games, hiking)Practicing mindfulness, meditation, muscle relaxation, or breathing techniquesWriting in a journal People who have chronic (long-term) stressors, a trauma history, or underlying mental health conditions like anxiety disorders or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may also have difficulty relaxing after a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response.In these cases, you might find it helpful to contact a mental health professional to get additional support. Mental health treatments that can support an overactive stress or trauma response include:Psychodynamic therapy: A talk-based therapy that explores the unconscious forces and childhood experiences that affect your emotions and behaviorsCognitive behavioral therapy (CBT): A common type of therapy that focuses on the relationship between your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and challenges negative thought patterns and feelings to help improve overall well-beingDialectical behavioral therapy (DBT): A behavioral therapy that teaches mindfulness, radical acceptance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skillsEye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR): A form of trauma therapy that helps you process traumatic memories and reduce emotional distress Trauma, chronic stress, and underlying mental health conditions can make you feel like you're "stuck" in a stress response even after the stressor has passed. Overactivated stress responses can have negative physical and mental health consequences. Signs it may be time to contact a healthcare provider include:Anger management concerns (e.g., constantly getting into arguments with others)Getting into physical altercationsReactions that are bigger than the situation seems to warrant (e.g., snapping at a friend for being a few minutes later or leaving the room if someone disagrees with you)Shutting down during small signs of conflictFeeling disconnected from your feelings and needsTrouble remembering important life events or past traumasPeople-pleasing to your own detrimentPhysical symptoms (like stomach aches or chronic pain) Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are built-in defense mechanisms that are meant to help people respond to stressful and traumatic situations. While these responses can help you respond to various stressors or stay safe when faced with danger, they can also become overactivated, resulting in negative physical and mental health consequences. Some ways to help your body return to baseline after your body triggers a stress response include exercising, talking to a loved one, and practicing breathing techniques. For trauma survivors or people experiencing chronic stress, it may be helpful to seek additional support, such as therapy from a mental health provider. Thanks for your feedback! Physiological reaction to a perceived threat or harmful event"Fight or flight" redirects here. For other uses, see Fight or flight (disambiguation).A dog and a cat expressing the fight (top) and flight (bottom) response simultaneouslyThe fight-or-flight or the fight-flight-freeze-or-fawn[1] (also called hyperarousal or the acute stress response) is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival.[2] It was first described by Walter Bradford Cannon in 1915.[a][3] His theory states that animals react to threats with a general discharge of the sympathetic nervous system, preparing the animal for fighting or fleeing.[4] More specifically, the adrenal medulla produces a hormonal cascade that results in the secretion of catecholamines, especially norepinephrine and epinephrine.[5] The hormones estrogen, testosterone, and cortisol, as well as the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, also affect how organisms react to stress.[6] The hormone osteocalcin might also play a part.[7][8]This response is recognised as the first stage of the general adaptation syndrome that regulates stress responses among vertebrates and other organisms.[9]Originally understood as the "fight-or-flight" response in Cannon's research,[3] the state of hyperarousal results in several responses beyond fighting or fleeing. This has led people to calling it the "fight, flight, freeze" response, "fight-flight-freeze-fawn"[1][10] or "fight-flight-faint-or-freeze", among other variants.[11] The wider array of responses, such as freezing, flop, faint, flee and fright,[12] has led researchers to use more neutral or accommodating terminology such as "hyperarousal" or the "acute stress response".See also: Autonomic nervous systemThe autonomic nervous system is a control system that acts largely unconsciously and regulates heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal. This system is the primary mechanism in control of the fight-or-flight response and its role is mediated by two different components: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.[13]Comparison of Sympathetic and Parasympathetic nervous systemsSee also: Sympathetic nervous systemThe sympathetic nervous system originates in the spinal cord and its main function is to activate the arousal responses that occur during the fight-or-flight response.[14] The sympathetic nervous system transfers signals from the dorsal hypothalamus, which activates the heart, increases vascular resistance, and increases blood flow, especially to the muscle, heart, and brain tissues.[15] It activates the adrenal medulla, releasing catecholamines that amplify the sympathetic response. Additionally, this component of the autonomic nervous system utilizes and activates the release of norepinephrine by the adrenal glands in the reaction.[16]See also: Parasympathetic nervous systemThe parasympathetic nervous system originates in the sacral spinal cord and medulla, physically surrounding the sympathetic origin, and works in concert with the sympathetic nervous system. It is known as the calming portion of the autonomic nervous system.[17] While the sympathetic nervous system is activated, the parasympathetic nervous system decreases its response. Efferent vagal fibers originating from the nucleus ambiguous fire in parallel to the respiratory system, decreasing the vagal cardiac parasympathetic tone.[18] After the fight or flight response, the parasympathetic system's main function is to activate the "rest and digest" response and return the body to homeostasis. This system utilizes and activates the release of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine.[19]The reaction begins in the amygdala, which triggers a neural response in the hypothalamus. The initial reaction is followed by activation of the pituitary gland and secretion of the hormone ACTH.[20] The adrenal gland is activated almost simultaneously, via the sympathetic nervous system, and releases the hormone epinephrine. The release of chemical messengers results in the production of the hormone cortisol, which increases blood pressure, blood sugar, and suppresses the immune system.[21]The initial response and subsequent reactions are triggered in an effort to create a boost of energy. This boost of energy is activated by epinephrine binding to liver cells and the subsequent production of glucose.[22] Additionally, the circulation of cortisol functions to turn fatty acids into available energy, which prepares muscles throughout the body for response.[23]Catecholamine hormones, such as adrenaline (epinephrine) or noradrenaline (norepinephrine), facilitate immediate physical reactions associated with a preparation for violent muscular action.[24]The physiological changes that occur during the fight or flight response are activated to give the body increased strength and speed in anticipation of fighting or running. Some of the specific physiological changes and their functions include:[25][26][27]Increased blood flow to the muscles activated by diverting blood flow from other parts of the body to make taking quick action easier.Increased blood pressure and heart rate enhance cardiac output in order to supply the body with more energy.The liver secretes increased amounts of glucose (through adrenaline-induced glycogenolysis)[28] and fats into the blood to provide the body with a fuel source to meet energy demands.The respiratory rate increases to supply the oxygen necessary to help burn the extra glucose.The blood clotting function of the body speeds up in order to reduce bleeding and prevent excessive blood loss in the event of an injury sustained during the response.Increased muscle tension in order to provide the body with extra speed and strength, which can result in trembling or shaking until the tension is released.The pupils dilate to let in more light, allowing for better vision of the body's surroundings.See also: Emotional self-regulationIn the context of the fight or flight response, emotional regulation is used proactively to avoid threats of stress or to control the level of emotional arousal. Emotional socialization can develop someone's ability to successfully regulate their emotions. Faced with a perceived threat (in the context of a fight or flight situation) those raised with supportive parental behaviors are far more likely to easily self-regulate their emotions.[29][30]During the reaction, the intensity of emotion that is brought on by the stimulus will also determine the nature and intensity of the behavioral response.[31] In a experiment conducted by Clayton, Lang, Leshner and Quick (2019), they viewed the responses of 49 participants to antitobacco messages.[32] Participants reacted in two orders of fashion after seeing the message with the individual smoker and their effects on those surrounding them.[33] The first reaction was participants who had higher defense mechanisms, who decided to ignore the messages, while the other participants who had lower defense mechanisms, ended up arguing and becoming frustrated after viewing the antitobacco messages.[34][35] Individuals with higher levels of emotional reactivity (Such as an anxiety disorder) may be prone to anxiety and aggression, which illustrates the implications of appropriate emotional reaction in the fight or flight response.[36][37]The specific components of cognitions in the fight or flight response seem to be largely negative. These negative cognitions may be characterised by: attention to negative stimuli, the perception of ambiguous situations as negative, and the recurrence of recalling negative words.[38] There also may be specific negative thoughts associated with emotions commonly seen in the reaction.[39]See also: Control (psychology)Perceived control relates to an individual's thoughts about control over situations and events.[40] Perceived control should be differentiated from actual control because an individual's beliefs about their abilities may not reflect their actual abilities. Therefore, overestimation or underestimation of perceived control can lead to anxiety and aggression.[41]See also: Social information processing (cognition)The social information processing model proposes a variety of factors that determine behavior in the context of social situations and preexisting thoughts.[42] The attribution of hostility, especially in ambiguous situations, seems to be one of the most important cognitive factors associated with the fight or flight response because of its implications towards aggression.[43]An evolutionary psychology explanation is that early animals had to react to threatening stimuli quickly and did not have time to psychologically and physically prepare themselves.[44] The fight or flight response provided them with the mechanisms to rapidly respond to threats against survival.[45][46]A typical example of the stress response is a grazing zebra. If the zebra sees a lion closing in for the kill, the stress response is activated as a means to escape its predator. The escape requires intense muscular effort, supported by all of the body's systems. The sympathetic nervous system's activation provides for these needs. A similar example involving fight is of a cat about to be attacked by a dog. The cat shows accelerated heartbeat, piloerection (hair standing on end), and pupil dilation, all signs of sympathetic arousal.[24] Note that the zebra and cat still maintain homeostasis in all states.In July 1992, Behavioral Ecology published experimental research conducted by biologist Lee A. Dugatkin where guppies were sorted into "bold", "ordinary", and "timid" groups based upon their reactions when confronted by a smallmouth bass (i.e. inspecting the predator, hiding, or swimming away) after which the guppies were left in a tank with the bass. After 60 hours, 40 percent of the timid guppies and 15 percent of the ordinary guppies survived while none of the bold guppies did.[47][48]This section needs additional citations for verification. Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources in this section. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed.Find sources:"Fight-or-flight response"news newspapers books scholar JSTOR (October 2016) (Learn how and when to remove this message)Bison hunted by dogsAnimals respond to threats in many complex ways.[49] Rats, for instance, try to escape when threatened but will fight when cornered. Some animals stand perfectly still so that predators will not see them.[50] Many animals freeze or play dead when touched in the hope that the predator will lose interest.[51][52][53]Other animals have alternative self-protection methods. Some species of cold-blooded animals change color swiftly to camouflage themselves.[54] These responses are triggered by the sympathetic nervous system, but, in order to fit the model of fight or flight, the idea of flight must be broadened to include escaping capture either in a physical or sensory way.[55][56] Thus, flight can be disappearing to another location or just disappearing in place, and fight and flight are often combined in a given situation.[57]The fight or flight actions also have polarity the individual can either fight against or flee from something that is threatening, such as a hungry lion, or fight for or fly towards something that is needed, such as the safety of the shore from a raging river.[49]A threat from another animal does not always result in immediate fight or flight. There may be a period of heightened awareness, during which each animal interprets behavioral signals from the other. Signs such as paling, piloerection, immobility, sounds, and body language communicate the status and intentions of each animal. There may be a sort of negotiation, after which fight or flight may ensue, but which might also result in playing, mating, or nothing at all. An example of this is kittens playing: each kitten shows the signs of sympathetic arousal, but they never inflict real damage.[58][59]Acute stress response is a common issue in self-defense criminal cases. Expert opinions are usually required if the defender's fault becomes the focus of the case.[60]Acute stress reactionAnxietyAnxiety disorderApparent deathBody reactivityCoping (psychology)Defense physiologyDomestication of the dogEmotional dysregulationFearFreezing behaviorGeneralized anxiety disorderEscape distanceHypothalamicpituitaryadrenal axisPanic attackPhobiaRest and digestSocial anxietySocial anxiety disorderTend and befriendThe Relaxation ResponseVasoconstrictionYerkesDodson lawReflex syncopeHypervigilance^ Cannon referred to "the necessities of fighting or flight." in the first edition of Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage (1915), p. 211. Some references say he first described the response in 1914 in The American Journal of Physiology.^ a b Walker, Peter (2013). Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: a Guide and Map for Recovering from Childhood Trauma. An Azure Coyote Book. ISBN978-1-4928-7184-2.^ Cannon, Walter (April 17, 1963). The Wisdom Of The Body. 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Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, 25(3), 200-207.Katz, Carmit., Tsur, Noga., Talmon, Anat., and Nicolet, Racheli, (2021). Beyond fight, flight, and freeze: Towards a new conceptualization of peritraumatic responses to child sexual abuse based on retrospective accounts of adult survivors. Child Abuse and Neglect, 112(1), 1-12ODea, Connor., Castro Bueno, Angelica M., and Saucier, Donald A, (2017). Fight or flight: Perceptions of men who confront versus ignore threats to themselves and others. Personality and Individual Differences, 104(1), 345-351. Media related to Fight-or-Flight Response at Wikimedia CommonsRetrieved from " say that youre in a work meeting and one of your coworkers says something that makes you highly uncomfortable. You go over your options for how to respond: You could interject and risk having an altercation, leave the meeting, say nothing, or do something to feel like part of the in-group. Each of these respective behaviors reflects one of the four common stress responses, fight, flight, freeze, and fawn.A stress response describes how someone reacts to a stressor, which can be an actual or perceived threat. Under stress, your executive functioningyour logical abilitiesis reduced, because your sympathetic nervous system is activated, says psychotherapist Aimee Daramus, PsyD. So, in the aforementioned example, if you perceived the work meeting to be an unsafe place following what your coworker said, the way you respond might be a matter of instinct rather than one of measured thought.Consider an activated sympathetic nervous system as your survival instincts kicked into high gear. When youre in survival mode (whether thats running from a tiger or feeling attacked in that work meetingtwo situations between which your sympathetic nervous system may not be able to differentiate), your ability to exert control over how you feel and respond is compromised, so you may instinctually defer to one of the stress responses, says Dr. Daramus.Knowing what the different stress responses are, then, might help you identify your own style of facing threats or stressorswhich may, in turn, enable you to make tweaks in the moment as necessary. Even though we cant control the frequency of stressors or even what the stressors are, we can work to control our stress responses in certain situationsespecially with a dash of self-awareness and introspection.When you understand that were wired a certain way, its easier to accept that thats your natural inclinationand that you shouldnt feel defeated by it, says Sanam Hafeez, PsyD, a New York City-based neuropsychologist and director of therapy practice Comprehend the Mind. You can just say, Okay, I can honor who I am as a person, but what can I do to make this response style more effective or more amenable to my life?Keep reading for a full breakdown of the main four stress responses, as well as how people might develop them, according to Dr. Hafeez and Dr. Daramus.The 4 stress responses: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn1. FightAccording to Dr. Daramus, fight is an aggressive response that moves toward the challenge. It might come out in a literal sensefighting in a verbal or physical way. It also might mean getting angry, competitive, or irritable when faced with a stressor; essentially, there is an oppositional relationships between the stressor and your reaction.Lets say someone bumps you at a bar; a fight stress response might look like approaching that person and getting into a physical altercation. It could also mean having words with them, having a generally angry reaction, or challenging them in some way, says Dr. Daramus.2. FlightAlso commonly referred to as flee, Dr. Daramus says this stress response is to avoid the threat and essentially means leaving a situation when its not working for youin whatever way is available to you You sense a threat of some kind and just want to get away from it.Related ContentSponsoredbyTakeda Pharmaceuticals*]:w-full [&_*_iframe]:w-full flex h-full justify-center items-center static max-h-[400px] data-testid=ad-inline1-1 data-ad-slot-name=inline1-1 data-page-index=1 data-ad-unit-name=inline data-ad-target-screen=desktop data-ad-refresh=true style=min-width:970px;min-height:250px;top:0>In a literal sense, this stress response means running away if youre being chased by something or someone dangerous. But, there are also other, less on-the-nose applications of the flight stress response. Lets say you have a really difficult job, and your first instinct is to quit and go get a new job, Dr. Daramus says. In this case, the flight response is activated due to the perceived threat that is the stress of your job.If you cant physically remove yourself from the situation, Dr. Daramus adds its also possible for a flight response to take the form of daydreaming to at least take your mind off it.3. FreezeThe freeze response is sort of being paralyzed, not being able to move, says Dr. Hafeez. It is inaction to dispel the threat.Folks who experience the freeze response neither fight nor run away, says Dr. Daramus. Rather, their goal is to not draw attention to themselves, she adds: In a less dangerous situation, like work conflict, this might be not speaking up in a meetingor taking a trip to the bathroom or taking the day off so you dont have to deal with it. Essentially, freezing is an urge to hide from the problem.4. FawnFawning is when you try to make yourself agreeable to the threat, says Dr. Daramus, adding that the fawn response is more learned and less biological than the preceding three stress responses. You try to get the threat on your side. In an effort to reduce the perceived threat level through a fawning stress response, you might flatter someone in order to deflect. You might also take the blame, even though its not completely (or at all) your fault.Even still, its possible to over-explain your trauma if you fall into the fawn stress response. For instance, you might feel like someones just not seeing where youre coming from. If thats the case, then youd explain to them what youve been through in an attempt to people-please and avoid confrontation.*]:w-full [&_*_iframe]:w-full flex h-full justify-center items-center static max-h-[400px] data-testid=ad-inline1-2 data-ad-slot-name=inline1-2 data-page-index=1 data-ad-unit-name=inline data-ad-target-screen=desktop data-ad-refresh=true style=min-width:970px;min-height:250px;top:0>Related ContentHow do we develop stress responsesand then work to change them?Someones natural anxiety levels can come into play in terms of determining stress responses. Someone with high anxiety might be prone to a flight or freeze response, while someone with lower anxiety might lean toward a fight response, says Dr. Daramus. But, there is some wiggle room as far as amending those responses, since both nature and nurture are at play in determining them.Some of it is familiarity, meaning that you might have had self-defense classes as a kid, so you might make a fight response more common, says Dr. Daramus. If, on the other hand, you were taught to go to your room when there was a heated conversation at home, you might be conditioned to a flight response, because thats what you were taught in an emergency.Furthermore, just because you have a fight response in one situation doesnt mean that youll have the same response across the board. Some people do things in different situations, and a lot of it can be reflected by how competent you feel in that situation, says Dr. Daramus. While someone who feels confident to defend themselves might choose the fight response, if a person doesnt feel particularly powerful or competent in that situation, they might choose an unconscious flight response, she adds.But, again, mindful awareness of your instincts can grant you the power to take control of them and improve the health of many relationships in your life. For every scenario, you have a response styleand uncovering that pattern can be so critical to your well-being and your relationships, says Dr. Hafeez, who suggests keeping a diary where you write down your stress responses to certain behaviors.From there, ask yourself questions like: Were you happy with the outcome? How would you change that style? What would you do differently if you were in that same situation again? This way, the next time you notice one of your stress responses activating, you can consider how you might change your behavior so that you are happy with it long-term.Oh hi! You look like someone who loves free workouts, discounts for cutting-edge wellness brands, and exclusive Well+Good content. Sign up for Well+, our online community of wellness insiders, and unlock your rewards instantly. Got it, you've been added to our email list. Fight, flight, freeze is common to experience. Freezing is the same response put on hold, as you get ready to protect yourself by staying still and preparing for the next move.We all experience the fight-or-flight response in a variety of life situations: When driving, if the next car stops abruptly; When were scared by someone else; When feeling watched or unsafe when walking outside; When coming across a growling dog or another animal.Is Fight-or-Flight Response Good or Bad?Source: pexels.comWithout our fight-or-flight response, we would not be ready for threats. It is a critical aspect of how we deal with danger. When this response is triggered, we are ready to perform under intense pressure, which means that we are more likely to survive the danger.The fight-or-flight response is a normal way for our body to keep us safe so it occurs automatically. However, what if we are not actually in danger when it happens? The response can be triggered by both real and imaginary situations. For instance, have you ever walked into your home at night and realized that a piece of furniture looked like a person standing in the dark?People may perceive different situations as dangerous. Someone who is afraid of dogs, for instance, will most likely experience the fight-or-flight response when seeing a growling dog on the street.Another person who is scared of heights will most likely feel the same if they have to go for an interview on the top floor of a skyscraper. Phobias, in general, are examples of how the fight-or-flight response can be triggered by imaginary situations. In some cases, it can lead to panic attacks.What to Do About the Fight-or-Flight Response?Source: pexels.comThere are several ways to deal with an uncontrollable stress response. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, although an individual combination of treatment methods will definitely work for anyone experiencing this.Relaxation techniquesPractice relaxation techniques whenever your fight-or-flight response is triggered. Relaxation can help you calm down and overcome the fight-or-flight symptoms.Here are some simple yet effective relaxation techniques: Breathing deeply; Relaxing your muscles; Repeating a positive and calming word; Thinking about a peaceful scenery; Practicing yoga.

overwhelmed by situations that have a lot of sensory input. The exact cause of this is unknown. But some research suggests that gradually exposing children with autism to potential triggers in a controlled way can help them learn to avoid intense sensory overload.Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Studies show that nearly two-thirds of children with ADHD also have another condition, with the two most common ones being oppositional defiant disorder and anxiety. People with ADHD often have trouble focusing, and they may feel challenged when they have to notice and understand sensory input. This can trigger both sensory overload and anxiety.Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). People who have PTSD, GAD, or both may be more likely to experience sensory overload in some situations. Sometimes, it's triggered by something specific. For example, a combat veteran may be overwhelmed by the sounds and flashing lights of a fireworks show. Someone with GAD may find a crowded stadium has too much sensory input to process and become overwhelmed. Other conditions. Doctors have found that certain medical conditions can make you more vulnerable to sensory overload with anxiety. But the links are less clear and continue to be researched. Some include:Even if you don't have one of these other health issues, you may have sensory overload and anxiety. It's possible for anyone to feel overstimulated and have an intense reaction, especially to an unexpected or overwhelming situation.There are several ways you can help prevent sensory overload or manage the anxiety that it can trigger. While experiencing sensory overload with anxiety can be troubling, there are ways you can manage it and live a healthy, full life. Speak to your doctor. Your doctor can help you access mental health resources. They may suggest therapy sessions to address the issue. They can also discuss medications that may be helpful. Depending on your age, triggers, and any associated conditions, they may recommend anti-anxiety medication or an antidepressant. Choose self-care. Staying well-rested, well-fed, and hydrated may help you better manage tough or overwhelming situations. You may explore techniques such as meditation, mindfulness, and breathing to help calm down if you start feeling overwhelmed.Try therapy. Children and adults often find that therapy can help manage anxiety and learn skills for handling difficult situations.Avoid triggers. Once you're aware of what makes you feel overwhelmed, you can make efforts to manage or avoid those triggers. Being upfront with your friends and family helps them help you avoid these triggers, too. For example, instead of a birthday celebration in a busy restaurant, opt for someone's quiet backyard. Instead of visiting a crowded theater, host a movie night at home."Supporting someone through sensory overload means validating their experience, helping them recognize their unique triggers, and working together on strategies to self-regulate whether that's through mindfulness, grounding techniques, therapy, or simply creating a more calming space," Ratner says. "It's about understanding that what overwhelms the senses can also deeply affect emotional well-being, and addressing both is key to feeling safe and balanced in the world."Here are ways to help someone with sensory overload:Help them leave the situation or reduce the source of overstimulation. For example, turn down loud music.Be patient. When you're calm, it's more likely others will also calm down.Ask what they need. It could be a hug or giving them space, but remember that when someone is overloaded, they may be unable to respond.Be caring. Being concerned without being forceful can help others calm down from an overload.Sensory overload is when your senses take in more information than your brain can process. It causes a feeling of overwhelm and often also includes anxiety. But there are ways to manage or avoid sensory overload so you can live a full, healthy life. See your doctor if you often experience sensory overload. Practicing self-care, knowing triggers, getting mental health therapy, and taking prescribed medications may be part of your treatment plan.What does a sensory overload feel like?It can make you feel anxious and like you need to escape. You may have trouble talking, making decisions, and handling information.How do you calm down a sensory overload?Experts suggest deep breathing exercises, meditation, and guided imagery to manage sensory overload. One breathing exercise, called 3-3-3, involves breathing in through your nose for three counts, holding your breath for three counts, and exhaling through your mouth for three counts. The idea is to slow your breath and focus on counting, which takes your mind off the sensory overload. How do you know if you're overstimulated?Sensory overload causes symptoms that affect your mind and body. They may include feelings of stress, anxiety, confusion, and irritability, along with a lack of focus and racing thoughts. Physical symptoms may include dizziness, flushing, shaking, sweating, and chest tightness. These symptoms can also be caused by other medical conditions. See a doctor right away if you have chest pain or tightness, or if you become dizzy.The stress response occurs when the demands of the environment are greater than our perceived ability to cope with them.The stress level depends on the individuals perception of the event and their ability to cope with the event.E.g., taking an exam might not be perceived as a stressor by someone who has had good results on their test (they feel they can cope) but might be seen as a stressor by another individual who has failed all their tests (they feel they cant cope this leads to a stress response).Fight ResponseWhen you feel in danger and believe you can overpower the threat, you are in fight mode.Your brain sends signals throughout your body to rapidly prepare for the physical demands of fighting.When someone feels threatened and believes they can overpower the danger, they might react with anger, aggression, or defiance.The Physiological (Bodily) Stress ResponseEyes: the pupils dilate. Allowing your eyes to absorb more light improves your eyesight so that more attention can be dedicated to danger. You might notice a tunnel vision or realize that your vision becomes sharper.Ears: the same concept for the eyes applies to the ears. You will notice that your ears essentially perk up, and your hearing can become sharper.Heart: heart rate increases, and there is a dilation of coronary blood vessels. A faster heart can feed more blood, oxygen, and energy into the body, enhancing your power to run away or fight.Lungs: breathing quickens and becomes shallower. Again, this quicker breathing takes in more oxygen for your muscles.Skin: you become pale, and your face gets flushed. Blood vessels in the skin contract, directing more blood where it is needed the muscles, brain, legs, and arms. Your hands and feet get cold because of this too.Muscles: your muscles tense up all over the body, becoming primed for action. Because of this, your muscles might shake or tremble, particularly if you are not moving.Stomach: you may get nausea or butterflies blood is diverted away from the digestive system, which can cause these feelings.Mind: thoughts begin to race. This quicker thinking can help you evaluate your environment and make rapid decisions if necessary. Hence, it can be challenging to concentrate on anything other than the danger you perceive. You may also feel dizzy or lightheaded if one does not actually run or fight under the trigger.Pain: your perception of pain temporarily reduces while under the fight or flight or freeze or fawn trigger.Emotional and Cognitive SignsFeeling angry is common here its like your body gearing up to push back or defend yourself. Anger gives you energy to face obstacles or protect your boundaries.You might also feel fear or anxiety, which often feels very similar to excitement like your heart pounding or sweaty palms because your body is getting ready for action.Irritability is another usual sign little things might get under your skin more easily.Your attention can get really focused on the threat, sometimes so much that its hard to think about anything else.Sometimes, you might feel like youre not really in control of yourself, especially if trauma has triggered this response.Because your body is on high alert, you might find it hard to sleep at night.In moments of strong fear or anger, the part of your brain that normally helps you think things through (the prefrontal cortex) can get overridden by automatic emotional responses, making it tough to stay calm and logical.Behaviors That Show Youre in Fight ModeYou might feel more aggressive or ready to fightthis can show up as arguments, yelling, or even physical actions.Yelling or screaming can feel like a release when anger is intense.You might notice yourself or others taking on defensive body language like raising hands, lowering the chin, or curling the shoulders forward even when theres no actual threat.Sometimes you act on impulse without thinking, like shouting or reacting quickly, because your brains control center isnt fully engaged.You might feel restless or have a strong urge to move around almost like your body needs to do something to release the tension.Flight ResponseFlight means escaping or avoiding the threat.When the situation feels too dangerous to confront, the instinct is to get away as quickly as possible.For example, if youre at a loud party and start feeling overwhelmed, you might leave early to find a quiet place.The physical signs of fight and flight responses like a racing heart, rapid breathing, and muscle tension- are very similar because both prepare your body to respond quickly to danger.Emotional and Mental Signs of the Flight ResponseWhen youre in flight mode, your brain narrows its focus, and feelings tied to danger like fear and anxiety. take center stage.Interestingly, those anxious sensations, like a racing heart or sweaty palms, can feel a lot like excitement.Your nervous system goes into hypervigilance, which means youre on high alert, easily startled, and constantly scanning for threats.If youve experienced attachment anxiety, you might notice you pick up on danger signals more quickly and intensely than others.Feeling irritable is pretty common too. Your attention gets really focused on whatever feels threatening, sometimes making it hard to see the bigger picture or think clearly.This intense focus can lead to worries spiraling out of control, especially when you find uncertainty hard to handle.When fear ramps up, the part of your brain that usually helps you think things through the prefrontal cortex can temporarily shut down.That means your automatic, emotional responses take over, and it can feel like youre losing control or cant think straight.Behavioral Signs of the Flight ResponseThe most obvious behavior is the urge to run away or escape the danger.You might find yourself avoiding certain places, situations, or even thoughts that trigger those anxious feelings.Sometimes this avoidance is obvious, like steering clear of crowds, and other times its more subtle, like emotionally checking out or distracting yourself.You might hesitate or pull back when faced with a threat, feeling the strong need to retreat.Physiologically, your body gets ready for quick movementblood rushes to your legs so you can run if you need to.Freeze ResponseFreeze happens when neither fighting nor fleeing feels possible.The body shuts down or becomes immobile, often to avoid detection or minimize harm.This is often described as dissociation. It can manifest as as feeling zoned out, unable to focus, hollow, empty, or lost.For example, if youre startled by a sudden loud noise and feel stuck in place, unable to move or respond immediately.What Happens to Your Body When You FreezeWhen your body goes into freeze mode, its like hitting pause to conserve energy almost like going into a temporary shutdown to survive.You might become very still or rigid, like a deer in the headlights, and your movements can feel jerky or slow.Your heart rate can actually slow down, and your metabolism takes a break to save energy.Your gut might react too, becoming more sensitive or inflamed, and your body can go into an inflammatory state, signaling its under stress.At the same time, the part of your brain that usually helps you think clearly (the prefrontal cortex) takes a backseat, letting more basic survival instincts take over.How You Might Feel Emotionally and MentallyFreeze can leave you feeling overwhelmed or crushed, like the situation is just too much to handle.You might feel numb or flat, like youre on autopilot, disconnected from whats happening around you. Sometimes, people mentally check out or dissociate -like their mind goes somewhere else.You might lose your usual sense of purpose or struggle to make decisions.Negative thoughts can creep in, and procrastination or feeling stuck is common.Many people feel ashamed of freezing, not realizing its actually a natural way the body tries to protect you.What Freeze Looks Like in BehaviorYou might find yourself cowering or trying to hide, curling up protectively, slouching, or just moving very little.Simple tasks can suddenly feel really hard like grabbing something from the fridge.You might just go through the motions without really engaging.Sometimes, you might avoid places or situations that trigger these feelings, or you might emotionally numb yourself to cope.Because of feeling overwhelmed and low on energy, some people even lash out or push others away as a way to protect themselves.the freeze may deepen into whats sometimes called fright, flop or collapseThe freeze response can sometimes deepen into whats known as fright, flop, or collapse.This is an even more intense form of freeze where the body goes completely limp or shuts down, almost like a protective shutdown.Instead of just being still or tense, the person might feel physically unable to move or respond, almost like fainting or going into a state of numbness.This reaction is thought to be an extreme survival mechanism- by becoming motionless and unresponsive, the body may reduce pain or avoid attracting further harm during a situation where fighting or fleeing isnt possible.While it can help in the moment, afterward people may feel disconnected, confused, or experience difficulty recalling the event clearly.Its important to understand this isnt a choice or weakness but a natural, automatic defense reaction to overwhelming threat or trauma.Fawn ResponseFawn involves trying to please or appease the threat to avoid conflict or harm.Its common in situations where the person feels powerless and tries to keep the peace by complying.For example, if a boss is angry, you might agree with everything they say even if you disagree to avoid further conflict.Essentially, the fawn response is about creating safety through submission and appeasement, often at the expense of ones authentic self, to prevent confrontation or abandonment.Why Do We Fawn?The fawn response is an adaptive survival strategy, identified in the polyvagal theory alongside fight, flight, and freeze.Its an automatic self-protection mechanism where someone tries to appease or submit to a perceived threat in order to stay safe or maintain connection.This response is often learned early in life, especially when fighting or fleeing werent safe options. Its particularly common in people who grew up in abusive or harmful environments.For example, an abused child with narcissistic parents might realize that agreeing and being helpful is their only way to survive.Over time, this pattern can look like constantly putting others needs before your owneven when those people treat you poorly. You might find yourself more focused on making others happy than taking care of yourself.Basically, fawning helps avoid conflict and keeps important relationships intact even if those relationships arent healthy.Behavioral SignsPeople-pleasing: Individuals may exhibit a strong tendency to please others, constantly doing things for them, or agreeing with others even if it goes against their own desires.Submissiveness: There is a stepping back and submitting oneself, often to avoid conflict or harm, such as not wanting to be hit or screamed at. This can lead to a lack of expression of ones unique personality or true self.Lack of Boundaries: Difficulty in setting boundaries, saying no, or expressing ones own wants and needs, even if it leads to being in undesirable situations (e.g., being in a restaurant one dislikes but saying its cool guys, no problem).Sacrificing Self for Connection: Children (and by extension, adults) may unconsciously undermine their own needs for personal freedom and sovereignty to stay connected. This can even manifest as unconsciously getting sick to gain attention and maintain a connection.Changing Personality: Individuals may change their personality depending on who they are with because they want to be liked, leading to a feeling of being a sycophant or being taken advantage of.Why These Responses ExistThe fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses are natural adaptive behaviors that help keep us safe by preparing our bodies to react quickly to threats.These threats can be real, like physical danger, or imagined, such as worrying about something that might happen.These automatic reactions come from evolutionary biology and work to maintain homeostasis, or balance, in the body during stressful situations.Back in prehistoric times, our ancestors faced real physical dangerslike saber-toothed tigersand their survival depended on reacting instantly.Today, our tigers are more likely to be psychological stressors, like job interviews or deadlines, but the body reacts in the same way.The response is part of your sympathetic nervous system, and it happens without conscious thought; its been hardwired into us through evolution to help us survive.When triggered, the body releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, which boost energy and focus, helping us confront danger, escape, or protect ourselves effectively.The term fight-or-flight was first coined by American physiologist Walter Cannon in the early 1900s.He observed that animals, when threatened, released hormones like adrenaline that prepared them to act fast, calling it the acute stress response, a built-in survival system designed to protect us in life-threatening situations.The fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response has been with us since the beginning of time and still plays a crucial role in coping with stress and threats in our environment.When These Responses Become ProblematicPhobias are great examples of this concept and how the fight or flight response might be falsely activated.A person who is afraid of the ocean might experience acute stress if they go on a family cruise or visit the aquarium.Even though typically these things are enjoyable to most of us, the person in question will experience their body going into alarm mode, with their heartbeat and respiration rate rising.If the response is severe, it can lead to a dangerous panic attack.This kind of response is not nearly as adaptive in the modern world; in fact, we suffer negative health consequences when faced constantly with psychological threats that we can neither fight nor flee.How are these trauma responses connected to childhood experiences?Early childhood experiences, especially those involving trauma or chronic stress, play a powerful role in shaping how we respond to threats as adults.When a child grows up in an environment where safety feels uncertain such as in cases of neglect, abuse, or household dysfunction the brains survival systems become highly sensitized.This means the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses can become the brains default way of coping, even long after the original danger has passed.For example, a child who experiences unpredictable or harmful caregivers might develop a strong fawn response, learning to please others as a way to stay safe.Trauma-informed psychology recognizes that these responses are not signs of weakness or failure but rather adaptive survival strategies formed in early life.Understanding this connection helps adults develop compassion for themselves and opens the door to healing through therapies that address childhood trauma and its lasting impact.When to Seek HelpThe fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses are natural, adaptive survival mechanisms.However, there are clear indicators that these responses have become maladaptive and warrant seeking help when they significantly impact your well-being or daily functioning.Its important to remember that seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness, and that your bodys responses are often protective, even when they feel overwhelming.You should seek help if you experience:Feeling overwhelmed: Youre struggling to manage daily life, and your emotions are affecting your relationships or stopping you from reaching your goals.Long-lasting impact: Tough feelings or reactions stick around long after the stressful event and start to take over your life.Intense emotions: You often experience panic, dread, or terror so strong its hard to cope or think clearly.Emotional numbness: You feel disconnected or like youre just going through the motions, unable to feel joy, love, or excitement. Your mind might even drift away from reality.Unhealthy coping: You rely on food, alcohol, or risky behaviors to get through tough times, which may provide short-term relief but keep you stuck.Thoughts of self-harm: Having thoughts about hurting yourself or not wanting to be here anymore is a serious warning sign that needs immediate attention.Fight or Flight ResponseSensitized System: Your fight or flight response gets overly sensitive, making you overreact with anger or agitation to small things, or just feel constantly on edge and restless.Overwhelm and Crashing: Staying hyper-alert for too long can wear you out, leading to extreme fatigue or even slipping into freeze mode because your body cant keep up that high-energy state.Chronic Worry and Anxiety: Worry thats more than usual and gets in the way of your daily lifelike spending all day stuck in anxious thoughts or struggling with obsessive habits.Freeze ResponseFeeling Crushed or Flat: Experiencing a feeling of being crushed, flat, or overwhelmed, where things feel too big and you have no idea what to do.Disconnection and Inability to Think Clearly: Feeling zoned out, unable to focus, hollow, empty, lost, untethered, or finding it difficult to think clearly and make decisions.Chronic Freeze: If you find yourself in a low-energy, collapsed state that lasts for prolonged periods (e.g., days).Trauma Response: Freezing is often an adaptive survival response to inescapable threats, such as during a rape or car accident where one is stuck. However, if you feel shame about freezing after such an event, its important to understand it was a normal, adaptive response and to seek help to process it.Stonewalling: In relationships, shutting down and being unresponsive is considered a form of freeze, triggered by fear, which hinders connection and communication.Fawn ResponsePeople-Pleasing and Undermining Your Needs: The fawn response means changing who you are to keep the peace or avoid negative reactions, even if it means ignoring your own needs and freedom. This often comes from a deep need to stay connected and can lead to building a personality thats all about fitting in, which might make you feel stuck or disconnected from your true self.Lack of Authenticity: If you often cant be your real self because youre scared of conflict or rejection, it might mean the fawn response is taking over too much of your life.How to CopeThere is no doubt that the fight or flight response has a distinct purpose and function, but everyday situations like work, bills, kids, finances, and health, can be some of the largest, non-threatening stressors.Stress management is key to your overall health.It is essential to think big picture when you begin to feel yourself starting to get overwhelmed by something that you know is not a genuine threat or danger.Learning to slow down, be aware of yourself and your surroundings, and conceptualize what is truly happening to help you regain control is vital.Thoroughly understanding your bodys natural fight or flight or freeze or fawn response is a way to help cope with these kinds of situations.Building emotional intelligence and self-awareness helps you recognize your stress patterns early.How do I know which trauma response I default to?Discovering your default trauma response whether fight, flight, freeze, or fawn starts with paying close attention to how your body and mind react when you feel stressed or threatened.If you tend to get angry, confrontational, or feel the urge to push back against stress, you might default to fight.If your instinct is to avoid, escape, or withdraw from stressful situations, that points toward flight.If you find yourself feeling stuck, numb, or shutting down when overwhelmed, your response may be freeze.If you often try to please others, avoid conflict by accommodating, or seek approval even at your own expense, you might be using fawn.Reflect on past situations where you felt threatened or highly stressed and notice your automatic reactions.Journaling these experiences or discussing them with a therapist can help increase your self-awareness.Tools from mindfulness and emotional intelligence can also guide you in recognizing these patterns early, so you can better understand and manage your responses.This allows you to pause, slow down, and better understand whats really happening, rather than reacting automatically.Emotional Regulation Skills That Can HelpDistress Tolerance: This means learning ways to get through tough, overwhelming moments without turning to things that might hurt you, like alcohol or drugs. It can include simple self-soothing tricks using your five senses like listening to your favorite music, smelling a comforting scent, sipping a warm drink, or holding something soft and cozy to help you stay grounded right now.Opposite Action: Sometimes, your first reaction might be to shut down, avoid people, or try too hard to please others. Opposite action means noticing those urges and choosing to do the opposite instead doing something healthier. Mindfulness can help you catch the urge before you act on it, giving you space to choose whats best.Labeling Emotions: Getting better at recognizing and naming exactly what youre feeling can make a big difference. When you know if youre angry, sad, frustrated, or scared, its easier to handle those emotions in a healthy way.Processing and Expressing Emotions: Instead of pushing feelings away or bottling them up, its helpful to learn how to sit with tough emotions and let yourself experience them safely. Writing about your feelings or talking them out can be great tools to make sense of whats going on inside.Distancing Tools to Manage Intrusive ThoughtsEthan Kross, author of Shift: How to Manage Your Emotions so They Dont Manage You, suggests a simple but powerful trick to handle those nonstop, overwhelming thoughts:Change the way you talk to yourself.Instead of saying, Im stressed, try using your own name or saying you like, Ethan, how are you going to handle this?This small change makes it feel like youre giving advice to someone else, helping you step back and see the situation more clearly.Another helpful tool Kross recommends is mental time travel.Imagine yourself in the future, looking back at this moment with more perspective.Both of these techniques help create distance from your thoughts so they dont control you.That said, theres no one-size-fits-all fix.Mental time travel might not work well if youre in a toxic situation that isnt going to improve anytime soon.Its important to find the strategies that fit your unique experience and environment.How Creating a New Story Can Help You Handle FearCreating a new narrative or purpose is a powerful way to negotiate the meaning of fear, rather than simply reacting to its raw physical sensations.While the physical experience of fear is a generic threat response that cannot be directly negotiated, its meaning can be.Heres how this process works:1. The Brain as a Storyteller:Your nervous system continuously sends energy and information to your brain.The brains role is to take this information and create a story to make sense of what its receiving from the body.These stories, or interpretive frameworks, are malleable.For example, if youre experiencing a rapid heartbeat, your brain might interpret it as anxiety, but with a new narrative, you can reinterpret it as excitement or determination.2. Attaching Meaning and Purpose:The prefrontal cortex, a part of your brain, has an incredible capacity to create and attach meaning and purpose to experiences that might otherwise just be reflexive physiological responses.By consciously providing a new story or narrative, you can override internal reflexes, including the threat response.This involves deliberately telling yourself, I want to do this, I should do this, or Im going to do this anyway, even if the initial feeling is fear.3. Reinterpreting Physical Sensations:Emotions like anxiety often manifest physiologically, such as a pounding heart or sweaty palms.Instead of automatically interpreting these as signs of danger, you can learn that the same physiological state can have different causes and solutions.For instance, the physical sensations of anxiety are very similar to those of excitement, allowing for a reframe where you acknowledge the sensation but attach a more positive meaning to it, like this is a great life opportunity.When you create an emotion, you are giving meaning to those affective feelings, and you have more control over this than you might think.4. Replacing Old Associations:To effectively address fear and trauma, its not enough to just diminish the old fearful experience (extinction); you also need to actively replace it with a new positive association or narrative.This relearning involves tacking a sense of reward onto what was previously a traumatic or fearful event through narrative and cognition.This transforms a terrible, upsetting story into a terrible, boring story, and eventually, a narrative that includes resilience or growth.5. Shifting Your Relationship with Emotion:Ultimately, this process is about changing your relationship with emotions like fear and anxiety.Instead of fighting or suppressing these feelings, which can actually amplify them, you can choose to approach them with curiosity and openness, understanding they are part of the human experience and provide information.By naming or labeling your emotions with more specificity, you gain greater understanding and a sense of control over them, allowing the feelings to pass more quickly or be processed more effectively.This re-narration allows you to take responsibility for how you interpret the world moving forward, fostering a sense of agency over your emotional responses.Would you like to delve deeper into specific techniques, such as cognitive reappraisal or exposure therapy, that help facilitate this process of creating new narratives around fear?Whats the Physiological Sigh, and Why Should You Care?The physiological sigh is a simple breathing trick that can quickly help you feel calmer and less stressed.Its not some fancy life hack its actually built into your bodys wiring and something your brain naturally does, even if you dont notice.Heres how it works: you take two quick breaths in through your nose, back-to-back, filling your lungs as much as possible.Then, you slowly breathe out through your mouth, emptying your lungs completely.That second quick inhale might even make your shoulders lift a little its all part of the process.Why do this? There are a few cool reasons:Better Oxygen Balance: When we breathe too fast or shallowly (which happens when were stressed), we can lose too much carbon dioxide, making us feel jittery or anxious. The physiological sigh helps fix that by letting you release the right amount of carbon dioxide on the long exhale.Refreshing Your Lungs: Those two quick inhales help pop open tiny air sacs in your lungs that sometimes collapse a bit. This means your lungs work better and you get more oxygen.Calming Your Nervous System: This breathing pattern is the fastest known way to switch your body from fight or flight mode into a calm, relaxed state. It helps balance the parts of your nervous system that ramp you up and the parts that calm you down.Powerful Muscle and Nerve Connection: By controlling your diaphragm (the big muscle under your lungs) through this breath, youre actually sending signals to your brain that help slow things downespecially your heart rate.Slowing Your Heart Rate: Breathing out slowly signals your heart to slow down, making you feel more relaxed. This up-and-down heart rate pattern is actually a sign of good health and emotional resilience.Built Into Your Brain: Your brain has special circuits that control this breathing naturally. When you do it consciously, youre tapping into a deep, automatic system that helps manage your alertness and stress.Managing the Freeze ResponseThe freeze response, also called dorsal vagal shutdown, is your bodys way of protecting you when things feel way too overwhelming to fight or flee.Instead of reacting with action, your system basically presses pause it conserves energy by slowing everything down, sometimes to the point where you feel numb, disconnected, or even completely shut down.This might look like feeling crushed, stuck, or like youre curling up to protect yourself.Why Does Freeze Happen?When you face a serious threat or extreme stress, your body goes into overdrive.Your sympathetic nervous system kicks in, speeding up your heart rate, metabolism, and blood sugar to prepare you to fight or run.This takes a ton of energy.If your body isnt able to keep up maybe because youre exhausted, your cells arent healthy, or youre just emotionally overwhelmed it switches gears and goes into freeze mode to save energy.Moving Out of Freeze Is Not a Straight LineHigh Energy Use During Trauma: When youre really stressed or scared, your body goes into overdrive heart races, blood sugar spikes, and your metabolism kicks into high gear to help you fight or run.Switching to Freeze to Save Energy: But if your body cant keep up that high energy for long maybe due to poor health, exhaustion, or lack of resources it switches into freeze mode. Everything slows down, you might feel numb, foggy, or crushed, and you might curl up or withdraw to protect yourself.Coming Out of Freeze Needs Energy: To come out of this freeze, your body has to first jump back into that high-energy fight or flight mode again. This is often surprising because you might expect to just feel calm right away, but your system needs this burst of energy to reboot.Releasing That Energy: When youre back in that alert state, you might shake, cry, or even yell- these movements help release the trapped energy from freeze and move you toward calm.Watch Out for Getting Stuck: Without the right support or energy to handle this process, some people can get stuck in freeze, feeling numb or flat for long periods. Sometimes medications can even make this worse.Knowing how this works is key in healing from trauma. It shows why treatment often focuses not just on your thoughts, but on helping your body move through these stages.How Can You Help Your Body and Mind?As Bessel van der Kolk, MD, explains, psychotherapy cant reach someone in a freeze state because their brain is shut down until that frozen state lifts.Thats why treating freeze often requires somatic, body-focused approaches rather than just talking.1. Movement and Physical ActivationDischarging Energy: Moving your body whether its shaking, dancing, or stretching helps release the tension stored in your muscles and nervous system.Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE): These exercises encourage gentle, natural shaking to help your body let go of trauma.Somatic Experiencing (SE): Developed by Peter Levine, SE guides you to safely experience and complete the bodys natural survival responses that got stuck.Yoga and Breathwork: Techniques like Sudarshan Kriya or Breath of Fire help balance your nervous system by combining movement and breath, making it easier to calm down after stress.Cold Exposure: Taking cold showers or ice baths triggers your sympathetic nervous system and floods your body with mood-boosting chemicals, helping you build resilience and stay alert.Aerobic Exercise: Activities like walking, running, or dancing get your heart pumping, help release stress, and improve brain health by encouraging growth of new brain cells.2. Emotional Processing and RegulationTitration: In therapy, this means gradually facing difficult emotions bit by bit so you dont get overwhelmed, building your capacity to handle tough feelings.Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT): Helps you safely access and process painful emotions, while teaching self-soothing through a supportive relationship with your therapist.Expressive Writing or Talking: Putting feelings into words can help you understand and move through stuck emotions like anger, sadness, or fear.Mindfulness: Being aware of your feelings as they happen helps calm your nervous system before emotions become overwhelming.Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT): Encourages accepting uncomfortable feelings and continuing to live according to your values, rather than getting stuck trying to avoid feelings.3. Taking Care of Your Physical HealthSleep and Nutrition: Getting good rest and eating well supports your bodys ability to regulate emotions and recover from stress.Reducing Inflammation: Chronic inflammation can worsen mental health; addressing it through diet, exercise, or medical care supports healing.ReferencesCannon, W. B. (1915). Bodily changes in pain, hunger, fear, and rage. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.Kirby, Stephanie. Fight Flight Freeze: How to Recognize It and What to Do Edited by Aaron Horn, Betterhelp, E. (2025). Shift: How to manage your emotions so they dont manage you. Ebury Digital.Schauer, M., & Elbert, T. (2010). Dissociation following traumatic stress. Journal of Psychology, 218, 109-127.What Happens During Fight or Flight Response. (2019, December 09). Retrieved from

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