

# Responses To Threat: Freeze, Appease, Flight, Fight

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

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

## Freeze



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

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

### What happens in the body and mind?



(Early on) Thinking becomes quicker.



(Early on) Attention is focused on escape routes.



(Later on) Dissociation:

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

## Appease



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

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

### What happens in the body and mind?



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



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



Adopt a submissive body posture:

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

## Flight



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

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

### What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

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



Thinking becomes quicker.



Attention is focused on escape routes.

## Fight



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

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

### What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

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



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