

The Trauma Response: Fight, Flight, or Freeze

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When we have a frightening experience, our bodies have an automatic response, designed by God, that allows us to react quickly and without much thought. It is like a fire alarm going off in a burning building. For example, if we are standing in the middle of a road and a car is coming toward us, we do not take the time to think, "I wonder what I should do?" Our minds and bodies respond instantly. We move, and we move fast, because we know without thinking that is what we must do to remain safe.

There are 3 automatic responses that keep us safe:

Fight: "I will take on this challenge."

Flight: "I am getting out of here."

Freeze: "I cannot run or fight, so I will be still" (physically or mentally).

What Is Normal?

All of us experience frightening things from time to time. Once the experience is over, we calm down. We begin to think about our situation instead of simply responding. We know we are now safe. For example, "I got out of the way of the car. I am no longer in danger."

What Is Not Normal?

When a child is exposed to a traumatic experience that leaves her feeling overwhelmed and helpless, she may have trouble shutting off that automatic response, or she may be more likely to move immediately to the automatic response instead of using reason to consider her response. There are a number of reasons this may happen:

- The child still feels like she is in danger, even when she is safe.
- The child has an overactive automatic response to fear or anxiety, so he may misinterpret experiences. For example, when an adult approaches him, he thinks the adult means to hurt him. He may try to protect himself by fighting, fleeing, or freezing.
- The child quickly moves into the fight, flight, or freeze response. For example, when it is time to clean up the kitchen and everyone is talking loudly at the same time, she may hide under a table or run from the room.
- Because the part of the brain that controls the automatic response is overactive, the ability of the child to think clearly is weakened.

What Does Fight, Flight, or Freeze Look Like?

Children often display behaviours that cause them to look like they are trying to get attention or trying to get out of doing something they do not want to do. But children who have a traumatic history may actually be having a traumatic response.

Fight: This may look like hyperactive behaviour. The child may use angry words or be aggressive. The child may refuse to follow adult directions or may defy an adult. Even behaving in an overly silly manner is a fight response.

Flight: The child may run and hide. He might separate himself from the group and avoid activities.

Freeze: The child may daydream, become mentally remote, or completely stop responding. The child may be forgetful or distracted.

Understanding the trauma response can help you to provide safety and support to help children to respond in healthy ways. Reassuring them that they are safe, being consistent, and setting clear limits are helpful tools.