

THE 4 F'S OF TRAUMA – UNDERSTANDING OUR SURVIVAL REACTIONS



FIGHT –

“I MUST PROTECT MYSELF”

What it can feel like:

- Heart pounding
- Feeling hot or tense
- Energy surging through your body

What it might look like:

- Speaking in a loud or sharp tone
- Criticising or correcting others
- Trying to take control
- Feeling you have to “win” the situation

Helpful steps:

- Pause and take slow, deep breaths before reacting
- Step away to cool down and think
- Channel the energy into movement or sport
- Practise calm, assertive communication instead of confrontation

FLIGHT – “I NEED TO ESCAPE”

What it can feel like:

- Feeling restless or fidgety
- Racing thoughts
- Struggling to focus

What it might look like:

- Avoiding people, places, or conversations
- Always keeping busy to avoid thinking or feeling
- Over-preparing for situations
- Feeling you always need an “exit plan”

Helpful steps:

- Notice when you are avoiding something and take small, safe steps to face it
- Use grounding exercises to bring your mind back to the present
- Remind yourself that you are safe now
- Allow yourself rest without feeling guilty

FREEZE – “STAY STILL AND HOPE IT PASSES”

What it can feel like:

- Feeling numb or disconnected
- Low energy or heavy limbs
- “Blank” mind

What it might look like:

- Struggling to make decisions
- Withdrawing from others
- Daydreaming or losing time
- Avoiding tasks

Helpful steps:

- Start with gentle movement, such as stretching or walking
- Break jobs into very small, manageable steps
- Reconnect with creativity – drawing, music, writing
- Talk to someone who feels safe and will not rush you

FAWN – “KEEP THE PEACE”

What it can feel like:

- Nervous about upsetting others
- Guilt or shame for saying “no”
- Feeling responsible for other people’s moods

What it might look like:

- People-pleasing
- Agreeing to things you do not want to do
- Over-helping or over-caring for others
- Avoiding disagreements at all costs

Helpful steps:

- Practise saying “no” in small ways
- Spend time with people who respect your boundaries
- Remind yourself that your needs are important too
- Challenge unhelpful thoughts about your worth

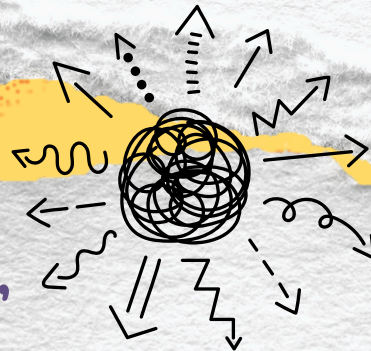
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When we go through something frightening, painful, or overwhelming, our brain treats it as a threat. It sends signals to our body to react as quickly as possible. These reactions are automatic. They are survival instincts that humans have had for thousands of years, and they can switch on in an instant.

Trauma can make the brain expect danger, even when the situation is safe. This means the same reactions that once helped us survive can start to appear in everyday situations, sometimes without us realising why.

These survival reactions are often called the 4 F's of trauma: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn.



FIGHT – “I MUST PROTECT MYSELF”

Fight is when our body prepares to face a threat directly. Adrenaline gives us strength and energy to protect ourselves.

This might appear as anger, a strong urge to argue, or a need to take control.

FREEZE – “STAY STILL AND HOPE IT PASSES”

Freeze happens when the brain decides the safest choice is to stay still and wait for danger to pass. The body can feel heavy, the mind may go blank, and we may feel disconnected from what is happening.

FLIGHT – “I NEED TO ESCAPE”

Flight is when the body tells us to get away from danger as quickly as possible. This could mean physically leaving, avoiding certain situations, or staying busy to avoid uncomfortable feelings.

FAWN – “KEEP THE PEACE”

Fawn is when we try to stay safe by pleasing others. We focus on keeping people calm or happy, often putting their needs above our own, because upsetting them feels unsafe.

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