

Trauma Responses : Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn?

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Most of us are already familiar with the concept of the 'fight or flight' response to perceived danger – namely that when presented with a threat our bodies physiologically respond by preparing us (eg through the release of adrenalin) to fight against it or run from it. This response served our ancestors well in the event, for example, that they came face-to-face with a dangerous predator.



However, there are two other responses to threat which are less well known – the 'freeze' response and the 'fawn' response. I will explain what these are in due course.

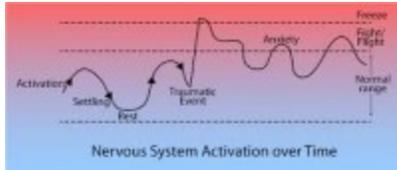
Collectively, these responses to threat are known as the 4F responses and each of them represent different responses that modern day humans can have if they have been subjected to sustained and repeated trauma during their childhood.

If we have suffered problematic relationships with our main caregiver/s during our early life, it is likely that we will grow up to be very guarded, ambivalent and suspicious about forming close relationships with others during later life (click [here](#) to read my article on this). After all (our conscious or unconscious reasoning goes), if we can't trust and rely upon our parent/s, whom can we trust and rely upon?

On top of this problem, any relationships we do form, with their inevitable ups and down, are bound, occasionally, to remind us of similar relationship problems we had in our early lives with our caregivers, and, in this way, trigger upsetting and painful flashbacks ([click here](#) to read my article on this).

NON-TRAUMATIZED CHILDHOOD VERSUS TRAUMATIZED CHILDHOOD

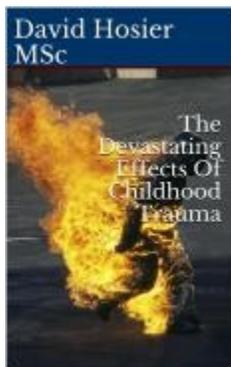
Those lucky enough not to have experienced a significantly disrupted childhood only utilize the 4F responses appropriately (ie only when they are faced with real danger). However, those who were exposed to serious, ongoing trauma during childhood frequently become FIXATED with one, or, perhaps, two, of the 4F responses (ie the response/s become DEEPLY INGRAINED and REFLEXIVE). Unlike those who did not experience a traumatic childhood, these individuals will also tend to over-rely on these responses and use them inappropriately (ie when there is no serious threat); the response/s upon which they have become fixated, learned as a defense mechanism during childhood, tend to remain on a hair-trigger and are thus easily activated.



Above graph shows that after experiencing trauma our 'fight/flight' response becomes much more easily activated than previously.

Let's look at each of the 4F responses to childhood trauma in turn:

- 1) THE FIGHT TYPE – The individual who has become fixated, due to his/her childhood experiences, on the 'fight' response avoids close relationships with others by frequently becoming enraged and often, too, by being overly demanding. It is theorized that s/he is unconsciously driven to behave in this way because s/he has a deep-rooted need to alienate others so that an intimate relationship cannot develop (as such a relationship would make him/her intolerably vulnerable in that it would carry with it the risk of rejection, similar to the rejection experienced in childhood, which would be psychologically catastrophic).
- 2) THE FLIGHT TYPE – It is theorized that this type of individual, for the same reasons as above, avoids close relationships with others by immersing him/herself in activities (eg by becoming a workaholic) which do not leave him/her the time to build deep, serious relationships with others.
- 3) THE FREEZE TYPE – This type avoids serious relationships with others by not participating with others socially; often they will become reclusive and increasingly take refuge in fantasies and day-dreams.
- 4) THE FAWN TYPE – This type will often go out of their way to help others, perhaps by performing some kind of community service, but without building up emotionally close, or intimate, relationships, due to a fear, like the other three types detailed above, of making him/herself vulnerable to painful rejection which would reawaken intense feelings of distress experienced as a result of the original, highly traumatic childhood rejection.



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