

# Understanding Trauma Responses

One of the most misunderstood aspects of trauma is the way survivors respond to danger. Survivors of sexual violence will often hear, “*Why didn’t you fight back?*” or “*Why didn’t you leave?*” In hindsight, trauma affects the brain’s survival instincts leading to four primary responses: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn.

When someone experiences trauma, their brain detects danger and reacts automatically to protect them. The amygdala, also known as the brain’s alarm system, activates the body’s survival response. Fight occurs when adrenaline surges, preparing the body to push back or defend itself. Flight happens when the brain signals a need to escape. Freeze is when the nervous system becomes overwhelmed, making it nearly impossible to move or speak. Fawn is where someone appeases the threat to avoid further harm. People experience different trauma responses due to several reasons: brain chemistry, genetics, past experiences, learned behaviors, etc.

These reactions stem from the brain’s instinct to assure survival, not from conscious decision-making and problem solving, which the prefrontal cortex is responsible for.

Trauma responses can also linger long after the danger has passed, affecting emotions, memory, relationships with self and others, reactions, etc. Survivors may struggle with guilt and shame from how they reacted to trauma, so understanding these responses helps combat these effects. By increasing awareness of these survival responses, we can create a more compassionate and informed society that empowers and supports survivors in their healing journeys.