



FaithWorks Counseling

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SURVIVAL RESPONSES

Survival responses are automatic physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions the brain and body use to protect a person in the face of **threat, danger, or trauma**. These responses are rooted in the **nervous system's survival mechanisms**, and although they are meant to keep us safe, they can persist even when the danger is no longer present—especially in individuals with trauma histories.

Primary Survival Responses (The 5 Fs)

1. **Fight** – Confronting the threat directly (verbally or physically).
 - Examples: yelling, hitting, arguing, defiance, controlling behavior.
 - May show up later as irritability, anger, or perfectionism.
2. **Flight** – Escaping or avoiding the threat.
 - Examples: running away, fidgeting, leaving a room suddenly.
 - May show up as anxiety, overworking, busyness, or restlessness.
3. **Freeze** – Becoming immobile or dissociating in the face of threat.
 - Examples: feeling paralyzed, spacing out, going numb, shutting down.
 - May show up as indecisiveness, feeling stuck, or emotional detachment.
4. **Fawn** – Appeasing or pleasing others to avoid conflict or harm.
 - Examples: people-pleasing, codependency, avoiding disagreement.
 - May show up as loss of self-identity or difficulty setting boundaries.
5. **Fix** – Trying to relieve or escape inner pain, stress, or trauma through external means that provide temporary relief or distraction.
 - Examples: self-medicating with drugs, alcohol, food, gambling, sex, etc.
 - May show up as feeling overwhelmed, helpless, empty.
6. **Submit** (sometimes grouped with Freeze or Fawn) – A state of helpless surrender.
 - Examples: going limp, passive compliance, "giving in" to the abuser.
 - May show up as hopelessness, learned helplessness, or depression.

Purpose of Survival Responses

- Protect physical and emotional safety.
- Activate instantly via the autonomic nervous system (sympathetic or parasympathetic).
- Become **conditioned responses** in trauma survivors, often triggering without conscious awareness.
- Can interfere with present-day functioning (e.g., relationships, work, emotional regulation) when not processed or integrated.

In Therapy

Understanding and naming survival responses helps to:

- Normalize reactions ("It makes sense you responded this way").
- Develop self-compassion ("You were protecting yourself").
- Shift from **reactive** to **intentional** behaviors through regulation, healing, and choice.