



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 which most people use:

1. **Fight** – Characterized by fighting and anger, fight back, fight with everyone, angry, chip on the shoulder.
 - Examples: yelling, hitting, arguing, defiance, controlling behavior.
 - May show up later as irritability, anger, or perfectionism.
2. **Flee** – Running away from triggers physically by disappearing or leaving, runaway internally by pretending nothing happened.
 - Examples: running away, fidgeting, leaving a room suddenly.
 - May show up as anxiety, overworking, busyness, or restlessness.
3. **Freeze** – Stuck, immobile or trying to be invisible.
 - Examples: feeling paralyzed, spacing out, going numb, shutting down.
 - May show up as indecisiveness, feeling stuck, or emotional detachment.
4. **Fix** – Trying to relieve the pain with alcohol, drugs, food, gambling, sex, etc.
 - Examples: going to work high or intoxicated, multiple one-night stands.
 - May show up as unable to stop the physical, emotional pain or reoccurring thoughts related to the abuse.

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.

Grounding & Calming Tools

Try one or two of these when you notice your trauma response showing up:

- ☐ Take slow, deep breaths (in through your nose, out through your mouth)
- ☐ Look around and name 5 things you can see
- ☐ Feel your feet on the ground and notice the pressure
- ☐ Hold something soft or textured
- ☐ Say to yourself: "This feeling will pass. I am safe right now."
- ☐ Text or call a supportive person
- ☐ Practice a short prayer, verse, or affirmation.

Reflection

When do I notice my body reacting this way?

What helps me feel calm and safe again?

Remember

You are not broken — your body is doing what it learned to do to survive. Through therapy, you'll learn how to help your body and mind work together again. You deserve to feel safe, calm and in control.