

THE BEHAVIOUR INSTITUTE
Diploma in Trauma-Informed Psychotherapy

UNIT 2 • CORE READING 1 OF 6

01

The Body's Alarm System

Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn — four responses, one underlying system

What This Document Covers

This document introduces the four responses that make up the body's basic threat-response system, and the branch of the nervous system that drives all of them. Everything covered later in this unit builds on this foundation, so it is worth reading closely rather than skimming.

The Autonomic Nervous System, Briefly

The autonomic nervous system operates largely outside conscious control, regulating functions like heart rate, digestion, and breathing. It has two main branches that work in constant, dynamic balance with one another. The sympathetic branch is the accelerator — it increases alertness, heart rate, and readiness for action. The parasympathetic branch is the brake — it slows things down, supports digestion and rest, and returns the body to a calm baseline once a threat has passed.

A healthy nervous system moves fluidly between these two states as circumstances demand — activating under genuine stress, then settling back down once the stress resolves. Trauma, as this unit will show across several documents, is closely tied to what happens when that fluid movement gets disrupted.

Four Responses, Not Two

Most people are familiar with “fight or flight” as a phrase, but the full picture is more complete, and clinically more useful, with four recognised responses.

Fight

An active, confrontational response to threat — anger, aggression, or a strong urge to push back against whatever is perceived as dangerous. In a therapeutic context, this can show up as irritability, defensiveness, or a client who becomes suddenly confrontational in response to a seemingly minor comment.

Flight

An urge to escape the threat physically or situationally — leaving the room, avoiding a topic, changing the subject abruptly, or in less literal forms, restlessness, or a persistent urge to be anywhere other than where one currently is.

Freeze

A state of immobilisation — the body becomes still, sometimes rigid, sometimes go limp, often accompanied by a sense of being unable to think, speak, or move. Freeze is frequently misunderstood, including by well-meaning professionals, as passivity or even consent, when it is in fact an involuntary survival response, not a choice.

Fawn

A less widely known but clinically significant response, involving appeasement — an automatic drive to please, comply, or de-escalate a threatening person or situation, often at real cost to one's own needs or

boundaries. Fawn responses are particularly common in people whose trauma occurred within relationships, especially in childhood, where appeasing a caregiver may genuinely have been the safest available option.

Pause and Consider

Which of these four responses do you notice most readily in yourself under stress? Many people have a dominant, default response, though it is not necessarily the same one in every situation. What might it mean, clinically, for a client's dominant response to differ from your own?

Why the Body Chooses One Over Another

The nervous system selects among these four responses extremely quickly, generally before any conscious, deliberate thought is involved. Several factors influence which response gets triggered in a given moment: the nature of the threat itself, whether escape or confrontation appears viable, and critically, learned patterns from past experience. Someone whose earlier experience of danger was best survived by staying very still and quiet may default to freeze even in situations where fighting or fleeing would, in the present moment, be entirely possible.

This is a genuinely important clinical point, and one this unit will return to repeatedly: the nervous system is not making a conscious, reasoned assessment of the current situation. It is running a pattern shaped substantially by history, applied automatically to a present-day situation that may or may not actually resemble the original threat.

A Story to Make This Real

Consider a composite scenario drawn from patterns seen repeatedly in trauma-focused practice. A client, “Marcus,” 29, sought therapy after a pattern of conflict at work: whenever a manager raised concerns about his performance, even mildly and constructively, Marcus would go almost entirely silent, unable to respond, sometimes for the remainder of the meeting. Colleagues, and eventually Marcus himself, had come to interpret this as sullenness or a lack of engagement.

In session, exploring Marcus's history revealed a childhood marked by a parent whose criticism could escalate unpredictably and severely. As a child, Marcus had learned, entirely outside conscious awareness, that going quiet and still during a critical moment was the safest available strategy — it reduced the target he presented, and sometimes shortened the encounter. Decades later, a mild, constructive comment from a manager — who posed no actual threat whatsoever — was enough to trigger the same freeze response his nervous system had learned was protective.

Understanding this pattern didn't immediately resolve it — that work continued over a considerable period, using approaches covered later in this course. But it changed how Marcus, and eventually his manager, understood what was happening in those meetings: not disengagement or sullenness, but an old, learned survival response firing in a context that no longer required it.

What's Next

This document introduced the four responses and the nervous system branch that drives them. The next document goes a layer deeper, into the specific biological machinery — the HPA axis — that turns a perceived threat into the cascade of physical changes behind all four responses.

A Few Things to Take With You

- The autonomic nervous system has two branches in constant balance: sympathetic (activating) and parasympathetic (calming)

- There are four recognised trauma responses: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn — not only the commonly known “fight or flight”
- Freeze is an involuntary survival response, not passivity or consent
- Fawn involves automatic appeasement, often rooted in relational trauma where pleasing a threatening person was genuinely the safest option
- Which response fires is shaped substantially by learned history, not a conscious, reasoned assessment of the present moment

Before You Move On

- Thinking about Marcus's story, can you identify a moment in your own life where your response to a present-day situation seemed disproportionate, and might trace back to an earlier pattern?
- Why do you think fawn is less widely recognised publicly than fight, flight, or freeze?
- How might understanding these four responses change how you interpret a client's behaviour in a session, in real time?