

YOUR BODY'S STRESS RESPONSE

FLIGHT

- Physically retreating
- Increased heart rate
- Restlessness and fidgeting
- Avoiding situations
- Quick, purposeful movements
- Heightened awareness
- Breathing, rapid and shallow
- Difficulty concentrating

FREEZE

- Staying still
- Tensing up muscles
- Avoiding eye contact
- Difficulty in speaking
- Distant or vacant gaze
- Inability to take action
- Shallow breathing
- Emotionally numb

FIGHT

- Aggressive posture
- Verbal aggression
- Tensed muscles
- Raised voice
- Facial expressions of anger
- Inability to stay still
- Readiness to confront
- Refusal to back down

FAWN

- Agreeing with others excessively
- Over-apologising
- People-pleasing behaviour
- Avoiding disagreement
- Excessive complimenting
- Sacrificing personal well-being
- Intense fear of rejection
- Difficulty setting boundaries

Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Fawn

The flight, freeze, fight, and fawn responses are part of the body's natural stress response and are triggered by the release of stress hormones, primarily adrenaline and cortisol, in response to a perceived threat. These responses are evolutionarily adaptive, designed to help individuals survive in the face of immediate threats. However, in modern life, the same responses can be triggered by non-life-threatening stressors, leading to chronic stress and potential health issues if the stress response is frequently activated without proper resolution.

FIGHT

The fight response prepares the body for combat. Adrenaline and cortisol levels rise, leading to increased heart rate, heightened alertness, and a surge in energy. Blood is redirected to the muscles, and the body is ready for physical confrontation.

FLIGHT

When the brain perceives a threat, the sympathetic nervous system is activated. This leads to an increase in heart rate, rapid breathing, and the redirection of blood flow to the muscles, preparing the body to either run away.

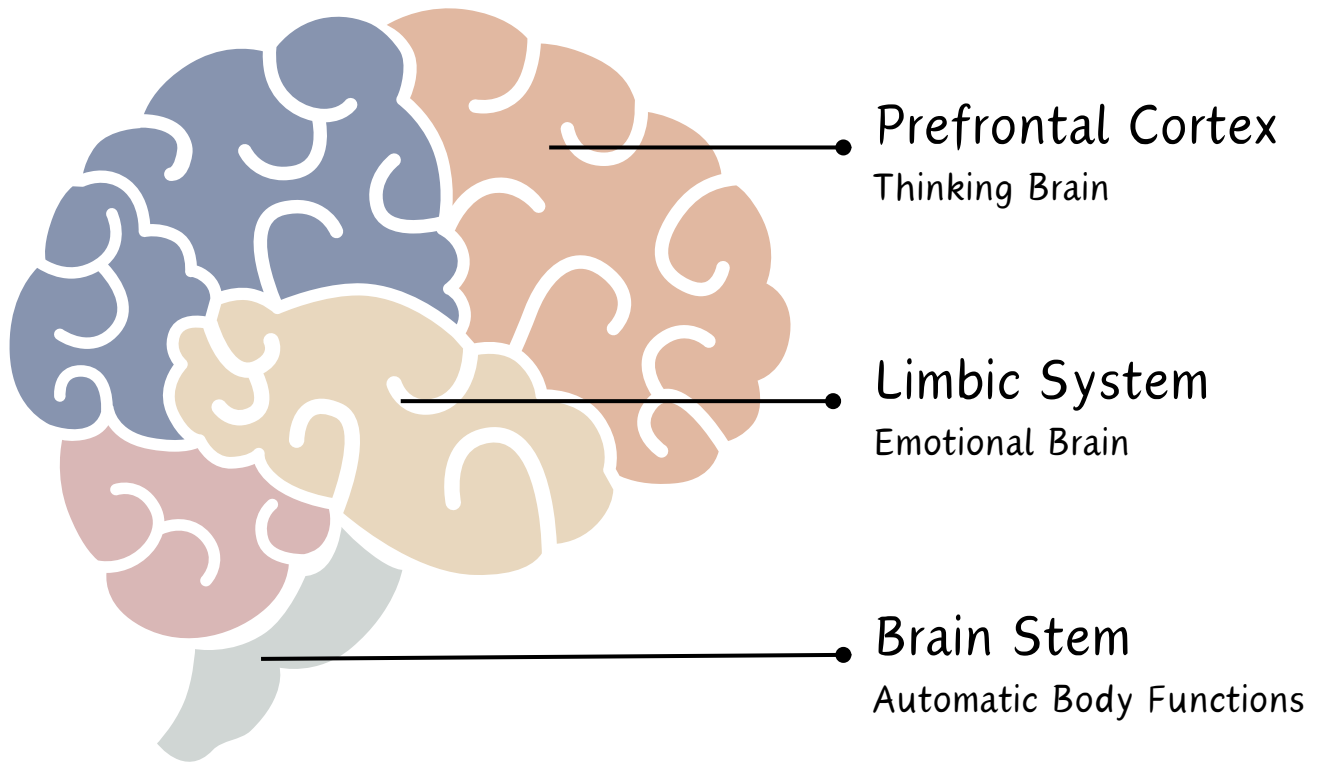
FREEZE

This involves a temporary state of immobilisation. Physiologically, there may be a sudden stop in movement, a decrease in heart rate, and a tense stillness as the body prepares for potential danger.

FAWN

The fawn response is characterised by attempting to appease the perceived threat in order to avoid harm. The individual may exhibit submissive behaviour and seek to avoid conflict.

The Brain and the Stress Response



Brain Stem

This is the oldest part of the brain and controls bodily functions automatically.

Limbic System

This is the emotional centre of the brain and is home to the amygdala, which governs the fight, flight, freeze, fawn stress response.

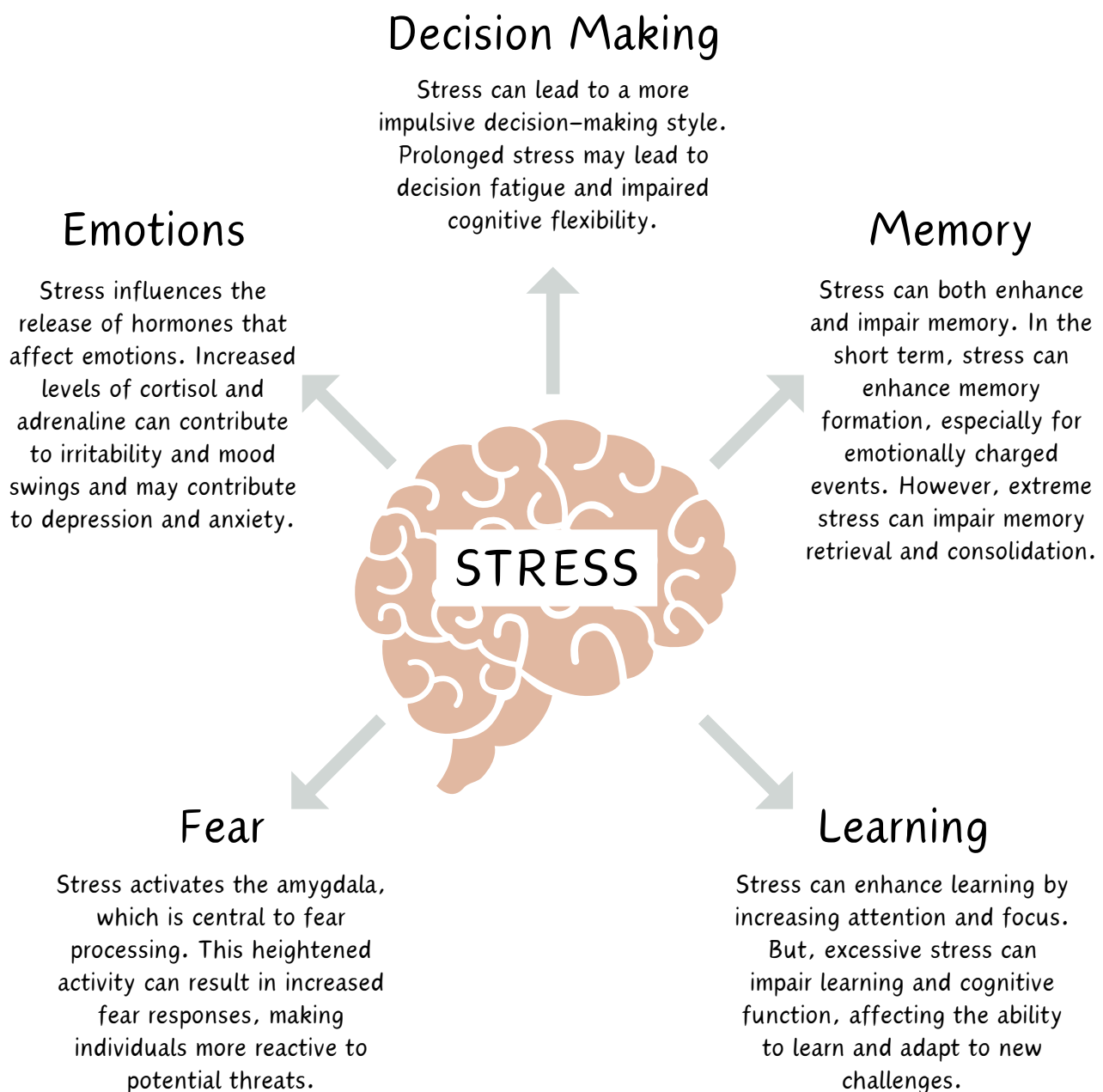
Prefrontal Cortex

This is the thinking brain and is where thinking, planning, and learning takes place.

When there is too much stress, the emotionally-driven amygdala takes over from the prefrontal cortex and initiates a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn state. The emotional brain takes over from the thinking brain.

How Stress Impacts Cognitive Function

Stress can have profound effects on various cognitive functions, including decision-making, fear processing, emotions, memory, and learning. These effects are mediated by complex interactions between different brain regions and neurochemical systems. Here's how stress can impact each of these cognitive functions:



How to Overcome the Stress Response

Overcoming the stress response involves adopting various strategies that target both the physiological and psychological aspects of stress. Here are several effective ways to manage and reduce stress:

Practice Relaxation Techniques

Deep Breathing: Engage in deep, diaphragmatic breathing to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting relaxation.
Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): Systematically tense and then release different muscle groups to reduce overall tension.

Mindfulness and Meditation:

Mindfulness Meditation: Cultivate mindfulness through meditation to bring attention to the present moment, reducing anxiety.
Guided Imagery: Visualise calming scenes or experiences to promote relaxation and shift focus away from stressors.

Physical Activity

Regular Exercise: Engage in regular physical activity to release endorphins, reduce stress hormones, and improve overall well-being.
Yoga or Tai Chi: These practices combine physical movement with mindfulness, promoting relaxation and stress reduction.

Social Support

Connect with Others: Share your feelings with friends, family, or a support network. Social connections can provide emotional support.
Seek Professional Help: If stress becomes overwhelming, consider consulting a mental health professional for guidance and support.

Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques

Challenge Negative Thoughts: Identify negative thought patterns contributing to stress. Replace them with more positive perspectives.
Problem-Solving: Develop effective problem-solving skills to address stressors and find practical solutions.

Healthy Lifestyle Choices

Balanced Diet: Eat a well-balanced diet with nutrient-rich foods to support physical and mental health.
Adequate Sleep: Ensure you get enough restorative sleep, as sleep plays a crucial role in stress recovery and overall well-being.

Coping With the Flight Response

Here are 5 reflective questions to help cope with the flight stress response:

What specific situations or triggers make me want to avoid or withdraw? Identify the particular scenarios or circumstances that evoke the flight response so you can develop targeted coping strategies.

What emotions am I experiencing when I feel the urge to escape? Explore the emotions associated with the flight response. Understanding the emotional component can guide effective coping mechanisms.

Have I experienced similar situations in the past, and how did I handle them? Reflect on past experiences where you felt the need to escape. Consider how you coped with those situations and whether those strategies were effective.

What are the potential consequences of consistently avoiding challenges? Examine the possible long-term consequences of choosing flight as a coping mechanism. Consider how avoidance may impact personal well-being.

Are there patterns in my flight response? Identify patterns or recurring themes in your flight response. Recognising patterns can help you proactively address them and develop more adaptive coping strategies.

Coping With the Freeze Response

Here are 5 reflective questions to help cope with the freeze stress response:

What triggers my freeze response? Explore specific situations or stimuli that tend to induce the freeze response. Understanding triggers can be a first step in managing this reaction.

How do I physically experience the freeze response? Reflect on the physical sensations associated with the freeze response. Understanding the somatic aspects can help you recognise when you are in a freeze state.

What emotions accompany my freeze response? Identify and explore the emotions that arise during the freeze response. Understanding the emotional component can provide insights into the root causes of this reaction.

What strategies have helped me unfreeze in the past? Consider instances when you successfully moved through a freeze response. Reflect on the strategies or activities that helped you return to a more adaptive state.

How can I create a safe space for myself during the freeze response? Explore ways to create a supportive and safe environment for yourself when experiencing the freeze response.

Coping With the Fight Response

Here are 5 reflective questions to help cope with the fight stress response:

What situations or triggers elicit my fight response? Identify specific situations or stimuli that tend to provoke the fight response. Understanding triggers can aid in developing proactive coping strategies.

How do I physically experience the fight response? Reflect on the physical sensations associated with the fight response. Recognising these cues can help you become more aware of when you are entering a fight state.

What emotions are present during my fight response? Explore and acknowledge the emotions that arise when experiencing the fight response. Understanding the emotional aspect can provide insights into the causes.

In what ways can I channel the energy of the fight response positively? Consider constructive outlets for the heightened energy and focus that come with the fight response.

How can I practise assertiveness without aggression in challenging situations? Explore assertiveness as an alternative to aggression. Reflect on strategies that allow you to express yourself without escalating conflict.

Coping With the Fawn Response

Here are 5 reflective questions to help cope with the fawn stress response:

When do I notice myself engaging in fawning behaviours? Identify specific situations or interactions that tend to elicit fawning behaviours. Explore whether certain people, environments, or contexts contribute to the fawn response.

How can I become more aware of my own needs and boundaries? Consider mindfulness practices to enhance self-awareness. Reflect on physical and emotional cues that signal the neglect of personal needs or boundaries.

What self-compassionate practices support my well-being in social interactions? Explore various self-care activities that resonate with you, such as meditation, journaling, or engaging in hobbies.

In what ways can I assertively communicate my needs without compromising my values? Practise assertive communication by expressing your needs and boundaries with clarity and respect.

How can I build relationships that appreciate and respect my authentic self? Reflect on the qualities and values you seek in meaningful relationships.

The Stress Response

Amygdala

The amygdala detects threats and initiates the stress response by sending signals to activate the hypothalamus to trigger the release of stress hormones.



Hypothalamus

In response to signals from the amygdala, the hypothalamus releases a hormone, corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), which then stimulates the pituitary gland.



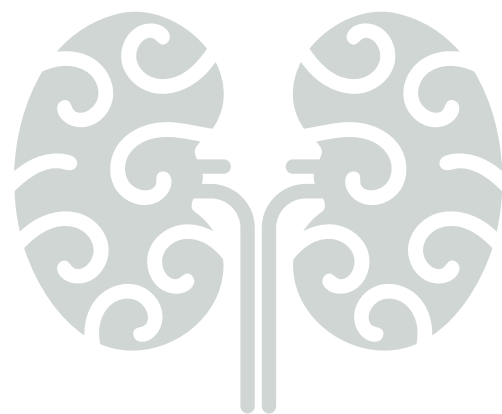
Pituitary Gland

The pituitary gland releases adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) in response to CRH. ACTH then travels to the adrenal glands.



Adrenal Glands

The adrenal glands, located on top of each kidney, release adrenaline and cortisol in response to ACTH. Adrenaline prepares the body for immediate action by increasing heart rate and alertness, while cortisol helps regulate energy metabolism.



The Nervous System

The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems are two branches of the autonomic nervous system, which controls involuntary bodily functions. Together, they play a role in the body's response to stress. The balance between these two systems is essential for overall well-being. Chronic activation of the sympathetic nervous system, without adequate parasympathetic recovery, can lead to long-term health issues such as chronic stress, anxiety, and other stress-related disorders.

