

WELL-BEING SNAPSHOTS K-7

COPING WITH STRESS



Most of us are familiar with the “fight/flight” response to startling or scary situations. Maybe you have also heard about the “freeze” response in an effort to stay safe from perceived danger. But have you heard about our body’s “fawn” response?

When under significant stress or feeling intense fear or anxiety, our body automatically releases cortisol and adrenaline to help our bodies do what they need to in order to get to safety. Our nervous systems take over and we can go into a “stress response.”

When in “fight” mode, we get ready to combat the perceived threat – we yell, hit, kick, and become defiant or stubborn. We double down, refuse to concede, kick up a fuss, and look threatening. If we’re in “flight” mode, we run, hide, and seek safety by becoming small. “Freeze” mode puts us in a state of “play dead” and hope we are not noticed while waiting for the danger to pass. Our legs stop working; we feel stuck in position.

“Fawning” is another method our nervous system uses to help us stay safe but is lesser known and perhaps harder to detect. When we fawn, we are using people-pleasing measures to convince the person who seems dangerous that we are compliant. There is no need to scare us into submission. We aban-

don ourselves, our values, our boundaries in order to appease and avoid feeling rejected. It’s an attempt to keep people attached to us when we think they are leaving us in some way, either because their anger seems rejecting or we worry they are abandoning us.

When you feel pushed into a corner, overloaded, or anxious, what stress response does your nervous system default to? What stress responses have you noticed in your kids? How can you bring a sense of safety to the moment when you notice they are in fight/flight/freeze or fawn mode? If they are in fight mode, they need to know you can help them feel defended and protected. If in flight or freeze mode, they need your gentle reassurance and comfort and some help facing the situation. If in fawning mode, they need to know that their relationship is safe, that they will not be abandoned or rejected and that they are allowed to feel differently from the person who seems dangerous to them. Be aware, however, that you only want to reassure them where the relationship is ACTUALLY safe - otherwise you are ignoring true warning signs that require a different form of protection.

Our stress responses are natural and required for staying safe in the world. Our goal is for those to be used only when needed in the present situation with the skills to come back to a sense of safety and calm. ●

RESOURCE LINKS:

[Parenting in the Trenches Podcast, Series 1&5](#)

[Anxiety Canada](#)

[When Anxiety Presents as Anger, FamilySmart ItK](#)

[CBT for the Family: home based learning to reduce anxiety](#)

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