You might have heard about the **Fight or Flight Response** before. When we are confronted with a threatening or feared situation, our bodies respond immediately (like a reflex) to protect us from danger. It is part of our biological protection mechanism to protect us from harm. Anxiety is a very helpful emotion that is “adaptive” in these feared situations. As human beings we have evolved to adapt in this way. Anxiety serves this very important function around safety and self-protection. It is a very helpful emotion and most of the time, it is good for us.

While Fight or Flight has been well known as a response mechanism, more recently anxiety and stress researchers have also identified **Freeze** - a third, very common, response to dangerous or traumatic situations. It is also an adaptive mechanism that is there for our protection.

**Activation of Fight | Flight | Freeze**

Imagine that something very dangerous is about to happen to you, without warning. It might be that you are crossing the street and a sports car starts speeding and swerving toward you (or, in the case of our ancestors, a predator animal such as a bear). You would want your brain to make a very immediate calculation of danger, and activate a behaviour reflex that will get you out of that situation. Perhaps you will exhibit one of the below responses…

**Fight mode:** Yelling, waving, screaming, swearing, trying to make yourself as big and threatening as possible. The dangerous person or animal might be deterred.

**Flight mode:** Run, as fast as possible, in a direction of safety. You will avoid the danger and outrun it or wait until it passes.

**Freeze mode:** Stop, startled, do nothing, wait for the danger to pass. To move might further jeopardise your safety and the danger may be able to avoid you.

To not become anxious and activate the fight | flight | freeze response would put you in increased peril. You do not want to take precious time to think about your response, you want your body and brain to quickly take over for you in the interests of your self-protection.

**Unhelpful Anxiety**

Anxiety is good for us (as are all of our feelings, they all serve a purpose and are essential to life as a social human being). However, psychological conditions can develop where the fight | flight | freeze response starts to become activated in non-life threatening situations. Our complex “human” qualities — the very same ones that separate us from the animal world, like abstract thinking, philosophy, societal mechanisms, the appreciation of art, the pursuit of truth and knowledge, spirituality, meaning making — are also responsible for us experiencing unhelpful anxiety. The very *idea* that a situation is threatening, the anticipation of threat, the linking events with meaning, beliefs, philosophies, biases and pre-conceptions, these qualities make us vulnerable to debilitating “clinical” anxiety. Our biological emotional system overwhelms us and we feel out of control. Understanding that these responses are healthy, normal — just a little misplaced — is important to learning how to cope with anxiety.
A Biological Response Mechanism

The behavioural reflex made possible in fight | flight | freeze is a result of a complex biological mechanisms, involving the input of sensory information, specific brain regions, chemical and hormonal releases, and electrical firing in our nervous system. It is important to understand a bit about this biology if you find that your struggle with anxiety. Accepting that these responses are ok, that they will pass, that you will not die from anxiety, and learning how to directly impact our biological systems to aid the calming response, is central to your overcoming anxiety.

Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The fight or flight response is an automatic survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

Thoughts racing
Quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be very difficult to concentrate on anything apart from the danger (or escape routes) when the fight or flight response is active

Breathing becomes quicker and shallower
Quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles.

Heart beats faster
A faster heart beat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to run away or fight

Adrenal glands release adrenaline
The adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger

Changes to vision
Vision can become acute so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice ‘tunnel vision’, or vision becoming ‘sharper’

Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or ‘butterflies’

Hands get cold
Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

Muscles tense
Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of staying ‘ready for action’

Nausea and ‘butterflies’ in the stomach
Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or ‘butterflies’

Bladder urgency
Muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress

Hands get cold
Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

Muscles tense
Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of staying ‘ready for action’

PSYCHOLOGY

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The Biological Fight | Flight | Freeze Response:

- Sensory input
- Automatic thoughts
- Amygdala “alarm” activated
- Autonomic Nervous System (Sympathetic branch)
  - (Release of adrenalin, cortisol)
    - Heart beats faster
    - Increased blood flow to body
    - Decreased blood flow to the brain
    - Breathing constricts, rate increases
    - Muscles tense
    - Eyes dilate
    - Mucous membranes dry up
    - Skin flushes, temperate change

- Anxiety Symptoms
  - Dizziness, faintness
  - Feeling of dissociation, disconnection, derealisation
  - Poor memory & concentration, can’t focus
  - Shaking
  - Weakness
  - Nausea
  - Dry mouth
  - Tightness in chest

The release of adrenalin (along with other biochemical processes) is responsible for much of the autonomic nervous system response. It is a jolt to your nervous system that ignites the fight | flight | freeze behaviours, and it has pretty noteable physical effects. You might think about times in your life that you have experienced scared, surprised, and thrilled, when you are hit you with a bodily response that is beyond your control. Maybe going on a rollercoaster, running in a race, or seeing a scary movie. You scream involuntarily, you get “butterflies”, and your “hair stands on end”. But after a certain time, these physical responses die down. This is because, once your brain registers that the threat has passed, another biological system is activated (the parasympathetic nervous system), which triggers a relaxation response.
Stress and Fight | Flight | Freeze

Stress is not an emotion *per se*. Stress is a word used to describe our experiences of life events and their impacts upon us. We may say that we feel “stressed” and this term encapsulates any number of overwhelming emotional states (anxiety, sadness, anger, or a complex blend of feelings). In life, it is not so much what happens to us (what “stressors” we experience), but how we interpret these events, and how our body responds both biologically and behaviourally, that we would term “stressful”. When we are faced with increased stress, our bodies respond in a similar fashion to that described in intense trauma situations, just on a lesser scale. Below is a table describing some of the common fight | flight | freeze responses that we can demonstrate when we are stressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fight</th>
<th>Flight</th>
<th>Freeze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easily angered</td>
<td>Avoid situations</td>
<td>Tense up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yell, punch, throw</td>
<td>Stay home</td>
<td>Go quiet, non-responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame others</td>
<td>Decline invitations</td>
<td>Daydream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Distract ourselves</td>
<td>Fantasise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>Procrastinate</td>
<td>Numbness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive-Aggressive</td>
<td>Use of drugs/alcohol</td>
<td>Distraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harbouring resentments</td>
<td>Self-harm</td>
<td>Self-harm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-harm</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

We tend to have our own preferences toward fight, flight or freeze, which are not so much in our overt control (although, for example, we might tend toward flight or freeze because we are socialized not to become angry), but dictated by our own biological makeup and personality, or by the circumstances of the stressful or traumatic events themselves. A child who is bullied might be able to “stand up to” their attacker, physically or verbally, and if this works they might use **Fight** as a default response to stress. Another person might experience chronically stressful situations for which there is no option for self-defence or escape, and they might revert to the **Freeze** response as a general habit.

Knowing about Fight | Flight | Freeze is important to overcoming anxiety, as therapy is designed to directly impact upon thoughts and threat perception, activating relaxation through the parasympathetic nervous system, and practicing helpful coping behaviours.