

A Beginner's Guide to Trauma Responses

What happens when we get triggered, and how to rightsize our reactions.

By Jennifer King Lindley Published: Feb 21, 2024

THE LIFE YOU WANT: **RESILIENCE**



From the outside, Alle C. Hall's childhood seemed privileged. She lived in a friendly town where her family had plenty of money for extras like nice clothes, frequent vacations, and summer camps. "I was president of my third-grade class, I sang in the chorus, I had lots of friends," she recalls. But this veneer masked a darker truth. "I suffered years of physical and emotional abuse."

To survive, Hall, today a writer in Seattle, says she lived emotionally "half frozen." "I remember one moment when I was about 5 and in the middle of experiencing horrendous abuse. I did what I did so often: I found myself looking down at myself from a distance," she recalls. As she got older, Hall found new ways to flee the pain. "I escaped through binge-eating sugary foods and gained a lot of weight, then progressed to bulimia. I slept with a lot of guys who were not capable of love—but then, neither was I."

Hall's experience of finding ways to survive an overwhelming situation is known as a trauma response. In moments of perceived danger, our mammalian body and brain automatically take over to keep us safe, if not happy. (Think of a field mouse instinctively fleeing from a cat.) This self-protection mode is a natural response to ensure your survival. But as Hall's experience makes clear, these responses can get baked in and determine how you react to threats, real and perceived, for years to come.

Of course, we are humans, not field mice. A trauma response may take more subtle forms of escape, like daydreaming during an important exam or zoning out during an argument with your spouse. “You may not realize that you are repeating trauma response patterns. You are bringing the past into your present, carrying it around,” says Victoria Ranade, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist and director of the counseling practice Hope+Wellness.

On TikTok, trauma response is, strange as it sounds, trending, with life coaches and influencers citing everything from oversharing to cleaning jags to Netflix binges as examples. There *is* a danger of overgeneralizing, says Julia Childs Heyl, a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in treating trauma. “Not everyone who loves reruns of *This is Us* is experiencing a trauma response. Some people may be left feeling their everyday emotions are indicative of a greater issue, which isn’t always the case.” We asked experts to separate the reality from the social media hype.

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YOUR EMOTIONAL BRAIN
HIJACKS YOUR THINKING
BRAIN.

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How trauma lives in us

Traditionally, psychologists believed trauma was a consequence of only certain extreme events—war, rape, natural disasters. Today, experts believe that trauma is as much about how an event changes your brain and body as it is about the event itself. “Trauma is defined as any experience that has been perceived by the individual to be dangerous or life-threatening,” explains Sabina Mauro, a clinical psychologist who specializes in treating trauma survivors. “There is a disconnect between the brain and body. A nervous system has malfunctioned, and a brain has become rewired. Traumatic experiences are unique to all of us. Two individuals in the same car who experience a severe motor vehicle accident are going to develop different trauma responses.”

There is also a growing understanding that the slings and arrows so many of us experience in childhood—being raised by an alcoholic parent, living with the day-to-day insecurity of poverty or racism—can give rise to trauma responses that cast a long shadow into the future. “If you learned in childhood that being silent protected you from more abuse, that can become a survival mechanism for life,” says Mauro.

Similarly, you may go through life primed for the other shoe to drop. “After you experience trauma, your alarm system can get stuck where it doesn’t take much to get you into a survival or a trauma response,” says Patrice Berry, a clinical psychologist and founder of Four Rivers Psychological Services. “Your emotional brain hijacks your thinking brain. Even minor situations can trigger one of those responses.” In other words, your boss yelling at you can feel like a life-or-death emergency, not an issue to discuss with HR after you take a beat.

The four main trauma responses

Remember: “Traumatic experiences are unique and individual,” says Mauro. Nonetheless, many psychologists consider it helpful to think about trauma responses as falling into general categories that correspond with basic survival strategies found throughout the animal kingdom: fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. Here are some uniquely human ways this self-protection impulse might manifest. You might have behaviors from several categories depending on the situation or respond in your own unique ways.

Fight: *Using strength to fight off the threat.* “This can look like yelling, screaming, or cursing as a form of self-protection,” says Heyl.

Flight: *Running away from the threat.* “Flight can include all kinds of strategies for avoidance: sleeping too much,

procrastinating, workaholism,” says Berry. “You might also experience what is known as dissociation and feel floaty or out of touch with what’s going on around you as your brain seeks to escape the here and now,” adds Heyl.

Freeze: *Playing dead to avoid being harmed.* “Freezing can be ‘analysis paralysis’—you feel unable to make decisions. Or you can freeze physically—find yourself unable to move,” says Berry. You might feel absolutely furious on the inside, but your words come out in a whisper as you sit quietly, she says. Or during an argument you might stonewall, says Heyl. “That is when you completely shut down and refuse to engage.”

Fawn: *Appeasing an aggressor.* “You might be unable to set boundaries with others. Saying no makes you feel guilt or shame,” says Berry. Or you might act “clingy,” says Heyl: “You say, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re right. I’m so sorry. Do you love me? Are we okay? Am I in trouble?’”

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DO YOU ESCAPE INTO WORK
TO NUMB YOUR PAIN? THAT
MIGHT BE YOUR FLIGHT
RESPONSE KICKING IN.

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Paths to healing

Again, these are general categories. But it can be helpful to consider them as you reflect on your own experience. Look for patterns in your behavior when stressed, suggests Berry, as they might suggest your go-to trauma responses. Do you tend to apologize profusely at the first whiff of conflict? You might have learned fawning could keep you safe. Do you escape into work to numb your pain? That might be your flight response kicking in.

Seeing your actions as trauma responses can help relieve you of long-held shame. “I work with a lot of people who feel guilt over how they react in certain situations,” says Berry. “They don't *want* to be that way. They don't understand *why* they act in these ways. Self-awareness allows us to make different decisions. You can choose to do things that are more in line with your character and your beliefs rather than simply reacting.”

Understanding that trauma can become hardwired into the brain *and* body also suggests that a holistic mind-body approach can be effective, says Berry. “If I'm arguing with my partner, taking a series of slow, calming breaths before I respond can help me reengage my thinking brain and not do something automatically that I might regret.”

Seeking treatment can also be crucial. “Trauma responses may have helped us stay safe. It can take time to let go of these long-held patterns,” says Berry. Trauma-informed therapy approaches that work with both mind and body include somatic therapy, talk therapy, and EMDR. “Ultimately, we want folks to not only feel safe in their body but to feel like they have agency,” Berry says. “Their trauma isn’t ruling their life.”

For her part, Hall has tapped a variety of approaches on her journey to healing. “In my 20s, I joined a 12-step program, the beginning of a spiritual path for me that has been life-saving,” she says. “I entered therapy. And I discovered tai chi. The physical movements calmed my energy. It grounded me in my body again. Tai chi cleared the way for me to come to terms with everything I had experienced. I’m no longer frozen. I am all kinds of hopeful.”

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