

# Fawning: The 4th Element of Stress Response

**With:** victoria, Velvetine\_Rabbit, Dragonfly, Olliefox and Verziik!

**Content Warning:** Personal stories, potential non-con situations

## Brief Definitions

What are the “traditional” 4 stress responses and why might they be a helpful way to respond to stressful or life-threatening situations?

1. Fight: attack the danger to subdue it or scare it away. Helpful if the danger is likely to respond by fleeing. Somewhat less helpful for stress in relationships.
2. Flight: run / hide to escape the danger. Good when the danger is clear and obvious, and if one can make a clean escape. Somewhat less helpful if escape is complicated.
3. Freeze: hold still, hoping the danger will decide to leave. Not so good for interpersonal stress, but if you can snap out of the mental freeze, the moment it buys you to think could be useful.
4. Fawn: cozy up to the danger to turn it friendly. Reassure the dangerous person that they are good/funny/mean well, so they will allow you to escape.

## Trauma:

The Fawn response often leaves the fawner with feelings of complicity and guilt, despite the fawning being a natural automatic reaction.

## What can a fawn response look like?

Please/appease, people-pleasing, tolerating, allowing, giving in, accepting, saying yes when we want to say no, keeping our feelings/wants/needs to ourselves so as not to upset others, prone & exposing the belly, controlling behavior, hypervigilance around emotions of others, etc)

## Why/when do we fawn?

- Why might our brains not opt to Fight, Flee, or Freeze instead?
- How can we understand the implications of fawning behaviour?
- Co-dependency, survival mechanism/ coping mechanism for avoiding conflict and protecting self
- How do we feel about ourselves because we fawned in the past or have a tendency to fawn?

- We are not weak, powerless, or helpless (unless we consent to be)
- There are work-related interpersonal situations where sounding assertive (especially if perceived as female) can be taken as aggression, which it's easy to be fired for.
- Being physically weaker, if one "provokes" a fight, one is likely to be in physical danger.
- Commonality of experience, especially present for oppressed/marginalized groups
- One might be approached by a dangerous or abusive person when unable to leave. And because a lot of harmful/abusive behaviors feel familiar to many of us from our upbringing, we don't necessarily realize right away that something is wrong, and we might seek to appease the person because that's what we were conditioned in childhood to do. We often feel guilty that we failed to stand up against abuse, even if fawning protected us in some way at the time (let us keep a job with an abusive boss, for example, but also let her continue to abuse employees).

### **What steps can we take to prevent a fawn response before it actually happens?**

Evaluate past experiences, evaluate feelings, discuss/communicate w partners, make various preparations. Working on establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries. distinguishing our voice/will vs other. Therapy. Reconnect with our bodies. Grounding, self-soothing. Build Trust (in self and others). Create the safety/space needed to be vulnerable and to say NO. Take a breath (or three) and then decide, try to avoid agreeing to plans/decisions in the moment.

### **What can we do if we notice that we or someone else is having a fawn response?**

Learn to recognize less obvious signs of distress, and practice checking in with one another. Grounding, self-soothing practices.

### **How can we support the people we care about if they have a tendency to fawn?**

- What are the factors that can make it easier for people to avoid needing to use this response? Sandbox negotiation, Come find me later if you want to (reduces pressure)

- Encourage them to the limit they can stand for using their safewords, stating their boundaries, giving negative feedback, etc. Make sure they know it's safe and welcome to have limits. Express our appreciation to them for honesty and openness at every opportunity.

### Using fawn response in kink:

- Establishing clear boundaries
- Reclamation- fawning as empowerment after trauma
- Fawning vs caretaking, using it in scenes/ eliciting that feeling
- Fear play to elicit fawn response can be super hot
- Feels like (consensually) forcing someone into emotional intimacy, even feelings of love
- If you're prone to fawning this can be one of the quickest ways into subspace and into a very close connection between dom\*me and sub.
- Fear play as such can be arousing due to [excitation transfer](#)
- Fear play that leads to fawning adds an extra layer of sexiness since nervousness and limerence are closely related
- Lots of different ways to create such scenes: from physical threats and actual risk of physical harm to mere suggestion (role play and/or hypnosis)
- Framing and verbal suggestion are great ways to lead the sub into the desired response ("well there is a way out, all you need to do is to be very, very pleasing ... now try to bribe me ..."), otherwise you might randomly get one of the other Fs. Especially freeze often happens accidentally in scenes that get overwhelming.
- Obviously RACK applies - take it slow and communicate a lot. E.g. develop a fear scale together, from 1 slight nervousness to 10 terror, with real life examples, and negotiate how far you'd like to go in any given scene.
- You're playing with recreating trauma responses. Be aware that actual trauma responses might happen, e.g. the submissive losing the ability to safeword, and talk beforehand about how to deal with that (aftercare, possible consequences for the relationship between the participants in case things go too far).
- Deliberately using fawning in play can be a way to become more aware and gain more control of it happening unintentionally. Kink isn't therapy

obviously, but if you enjoy that kind of play then personal growth can be a welcome added benefit.

### **Resources:**

- Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn - Katie Morton YouTube  
[https://youtu.be/OP6SXMr-6\\_g](https://youtu.be/OP6SXMr-6_g)
- The 4Fs: A Trauma Typology in Complex PTSD - Pete Walker  
[http://www.pete-walker.com/fourFs\\_TraumaTypologyComplexPTSD.htm](http://www.pete-walker.com/fourFs_TraumaTypologyComplexPTSD.htm)
- Codependency, Trauma and the Fawn Response - Pete Walker  
<http://www.pete-walker.com/codependencyFawnResponse.htm>
- Grounding Techniques for Anxiety Playlist - Therapy in a Nutshell YouTube  
<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLiUrriqidTVghUckAJjCZMYO84ahohMv>
- People-Pleaser? Here Are 5 Ways to Unlearn Your 'Fawn' Response  
<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/unlearn-fawn-response#3.-lve-gotten-in-touch-with-my-personal-values>