

# What is 'fawning'? How is it related to trauma and the 'fight or flight' response?

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Fawning is seen more in people who have had emotionally abusive caregivers.  
Credit: Annie Spratt/Unsplash

You have probably heard of "fight or flight" responses to distressing situations. You may also be familiar with the tendency to "freeze." But there is another defense or survival strategy a person can have: "fawn."

When our brain perceives a threat in our environment, our [sympathetic nervous system](#) takes over and a person can experience any one or combination of the [four F](#) responses.

## What are the four Fs?

- The fawn response usually occurs when a person is being attacked in some way, and they try to appease or placate their attacker to protect themselves.
- A fight response is when someone reacts to a threat with aggression.
- Flight is when a person responds by fleeing—either literally by leaving the situation, or symbolically, by distracting or avoiding a distressing situation.
- A freeze response occurs when a person realizes (consciously or not) that they cannot resist the threat, and they detach themselves or become immobile. They may "space out" and not pay attention, feel disconnected to their body, or have difficulty speaking after they feel threatened.

## What does fawning look like?

Previously known as appeasement or "people pleasing," the term "fawning" was coined by psychotherapist [Pete Walker](#) in his 2013 book "[Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving](#)."

A fawn response can look like:

- people-pleasing (doing things for others to gain their approval or to make others like you)
- being overly reliant on others (difficulty making decisions without other people's input)
- prioritizing the needs of others and ignoring your own
- being overly agreeable
- having trouble saying no
- in more severe cases, [dissociating](#) (disconnecting from your mind and/or body).

While there isn't yet much research on this response, the fawn response is seen more in people who have experienced [complex trauma](#) in their childhood, including among children who grew up with emotionally or physically abusive caregivers.

Fawning is also observed in people who are in situations of [interpersonal violence](#) (such as [domestic violence](#), assault or kidnappings), when the person needs to appease or calm a perpetrator to survive.

Fawning is also different to the other F responses, in that it seems to be a uniquely human response.

## Why do people fawn?

[Research](#) suggests people fawn for two reasons:

1. to protect themselves or others from physical or emotional harm (such as [childhood trauma](#))
2. to create or improve the emotional connection to the perpetrator of harm (for example, a caregiver).

This type of response is adaptive at the time of the traumatic event(s): by appeasing an attacker or perpetrator, it helps the person avoid harm.

However, if a person continues to use this type of response in the long term, as an automatic response to everyday stressors (such difficult interactions with your boss or neighbor), it can have negative consequences.

If a person is continually trying to appease others, they may experience issues with boundaries, forming a cohesive identity, and may not feel safe in relationships with others.

## **What can I do if I 'fawn'?**

Because fawning is typically a response to interpersonal or complex [trauma](#), using it in response to everyday stressors may indicate a need for healing.

If this is you, and you have a history of complex trauma, seek psychological support from a professional who is trained in trauma-informed practice. Trauma-informed means the psychological care is holistic, empowering, strengths-focused, collaborative and reflective.

Evidence-based therapies that are helpful following trauma include:

- [eye movement desensitization therapy](#), which focuses on processing traumatic memories
- [exposure therapy](#) to help expose people to things they fear and avoid
- [trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy](#) that aims to alleviate trauma symptoms by overcoming unhelpful thoughts and behaviors.

Depending on where you live, [free counseling services](#) may be available for people who have experienced childhood abuse.

Setting healthy boundaries is also a common focus when working with the fawn response, which you can do by yourself or alongside a therapist.

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