

a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s

the mindfulness workbook for teen self-harm

skills to help you
overcome cutting & self-harming
behaviors, thoughts & feelings

*** develop positive coping skills**

*** learn to respond, not react**

*** cultivate your inner strengths**

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responding to stress: the fight-flight-or-freeze response

5

for you to know

Way, way back in the day, our ancestors had to be ready at a moment's notice to either confront or flee from predators like saber-toothed tigers. The fight-or-flight response was essential to their survival!

In the same way, your body's stress response prepares you to immediately deal with threatening situations. Say you are camping and hear a bear roar in the distance. A small almond-shaped part of your brain called the *amygdala*, considered the emotional center of your brain, fires up. It detects fear and responds to anything perceived as an emergency or a threat. Your amygdala then communicates this perception to your nervous system (the part called the *sympathetic nervous system*, or SNS for short, which helps you react to stress and danger) and triggers a host of reactions throughout your body: your pupils may dilate to help you see more sharply, your heartbeat may speed up to prepare you to fight or flee, your breath might become quick and shallow.

In addition to fight-or-flight, there is another type of response that has been talked about more recently—kind of like a deer in headlights—the freeze response. Your brain is hardwired to keep you safe, and the fight-flight-or-freeze response can be helpful in a variety of situations, but it can also cause or exacerbate physical and emotional pain. In turn, you might experience the fight-flight-or-freeze response and automatically turn to a self-harming behavior. It is imperative if you are in one of these response states to first recognize it, then take a brief pause if you feel like you are going to engage in self-harm. This brief pause may stop you from reacting with a self-harming behavior.

To learn more about the fight-flight-or-freeze response, go to *Fight-Flight-or-Freeze Response in Your Body* in the online resources section at <http://www.newharbinger.com/43676>.

assess your response to stress

This table lists many common physical and emotional symptoms that arise when the fight-flight-or-freeze response is engaged. Circle any that apply or have applied to you in a stressful or painful situation. Now star any that may have triggered you to engage in self-harming behaviors.

Note: You might experience these symptoms during responses other than the one they are listed under.

Fight response	Flight response	Freeze response
<p>PHYSICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling hot, warm, or sweaty • Clenched jaw or fists • Knotted or upset stomach <p>EMOTIONAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings of anger or rage • Desire to punch, kick, stomp, or break something • Crying • Homicidal or suicidal thoughts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restlessness • Shallow, rapid breathing • Feeling trapped • Crying • Fidgety • Rapid, darting eye movement • Anxiety • Butterflies in stomach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling cold, frozen, or numb • Tightness in chest • Difficulty breathing • Crying • Paralysis or difficulty moving • Sense of dread • Pounding heart

Which of the physical symptoms listed have you experienced? Write them here, and add any others you've experienced that are similar.

Which of the emotional symptoms listed have you experienced? Write them here, and add any others you've experienced.

Now that you know that the symptoms you starred are triggered by the fight-flight-or-freeze response, you can remind yourself that you don't have to engage in a self-harming behavior because you feel one or more of these symptoms.

mindful takeaway in the moment The fight-flight-or-freeze response provides red flags that can help you protect yourself in stressful or dangerous situations. When you are in one of these states, you don't have to self-harm; just notice the physical and emotional symptoms and know that *they will pass*.

when the fight-flight-or-freeze response doesn't help you

The fight-flight-or-freeze response gets activated in many situations where it isn't needed or helpful. Your body reacts to most stressful moments in your life, ranging from things like a picture posted on social media to a loud bang on your door, with the same fight-flight-or-freeze response as if you were encountering a tiger. The problem arises when the amygdala is in overdrive or not working properly. People may perceive situations or other people as threats to their safety—often due to past traumas—when they may not be unsafe or in danger at all.

activity 5 * responding to stress: the fight-flight-or-freeze response

Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson has described this phenomenon as *paper tiger paranoia*, meaning that people often react to a “paper” tiger as though it were a real tiger. Your body responds to life stressors, these paper tigers, all the time, and you feel the effects mentally and physically as if you were encountering a real tiger every day, perhaps even many times a day. Once you tune into your body and learn to identify these paper tigers, you can determine whether there is, in fact, a real threat and take the time to mindfully reflect on how you can best avoid self-harm.

Write about a time when your body's fight-flight-or-freeze response to a stressful situation or threat was helpful in the moment. Describe what happened, how you felt in your body, and how it helped you cope.

Write about a time when your body's fight-flight-or-freeze response was *not* helpful in the moment. Describe what happened, how you felt in your body, and how it did *not* help you cope.

When you are in a fight-flight-or-freeze response, the activities that follow can help you with healthy ways to cope with and manage your symptoms.