



Fight or Flight

"Storms make the oak grow deeper roots"

- George Herbert

T Snapshot

he fight-or-flight response is our reaction to danger. It helps us to react to life-threatening scenarios quickly, effectively and 1. In the Panic 7 without thought. As explained in 'Understanding the Stress Response' by Harvard Health Publishing, 'when someone experiences a stressful event, the amygdala, an area of the brain that contributes to emotional processing, sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus. This area of the brain functions like a command center, communicating with the rest of the body through the nervous system so that the person has the energy to fight or flee.' This means that our brain reacts on its own accord to situations and triggers a response in us, essentially to protect us. Our early ancestors were often faced with genuine threats, such as sabre-toothed tigers. They had two immediate responses – to either stand their ground and put up a fight, or flee the scene and run to safety, hence fight or flight. This reaction evolved to protect us so we can either attack the danger in front of us or get out of harm's way. However, in today's world, we need to update our minds to realise that most of the time, there is no immediate threat in front of us – no sabre-toothed tigers patrol the streets! Although GP'ers are incredibly unlikely to be faced with a huge man eating animal, our bodies are still reacting to perceived 'threats' by going into fight-or-flight mode. We feel as though we need protection, despite there being no actual imminent danger or physical attack in front of us. In times of panic, we believe that there is a risk present, and our body reacts. That's because the fight-or-flight response can also be triggered by our internal threats, such as a memory or an upcoming worry. Our panic can therefore be rooted in the past, here in the present or even focused on the future. On sensing danger, our brains automatically release a concoction of hormones, including adrenaline, to ensure that we are ready to jump into action. In these moments, our body prioritises the survival response and

shuts down non-essential functions, so that we lose our clarity, perspective and confidence. Nothing rational or logical whatsoever seems to run through our heads! Generation Panic 8 Many sensations can happen in our body once the fight-or flight response has been triggered. It is different for everyone, but here are some common symptoms:

- Our breath quickens and becomes shallow, usually in our upper chest.
- Our palms begin to sweat.
- Our tummies do somersaults.
- Our vision narrows.
- Surges of energy push us into action.
- Our blood starts pumping faster.

It is often disconcerting to have this rush of power coursing through our body; we are unable to think clearly or rationally. This head-to-toe reaction enhances our panic, as there is often no clear reason in front of us for feeling that way. If there is a reason, it can appear insignificant or unworthy; the cause does not warrant the response. What is happening inside our body can feel like unfamiliar territory, so we become confused as we try to work out what the perceived threat is. Our emotional response can also go through the roof, which can make us feel sensitive, exhausted or even completely blank.

Importance to GP'ers

It is important to know that our body can jump into fight-orflight mode. If there is a perceived threat to us – whatever it may be – we can guarantee that we will respond in some way. This can be reacting in body and mind, to varying levels, dependent on the situation and the individual. However, knowledge is power. By tracking our triggers and trying to read the signals, we can develop an improved, and far more helpful, response. In other words, by understanding how our body is going to react, we can deal with it faster and better. On top of this, awareness that our body and mind is reacting to a perceived threat is useful. In that moment we can calm ourselves by understanding that there is not a sabre-toothed tiger in front of us. Instead, we may be faced with a deadline from a demanding boss or arriving at a party where we don't know anyone. We could be dealing with an unhappy customer or running late for an appointment. Any of these everyday occurrences can trigger the fight-or-flight response.

Jump into action

The first time you experience this fight-or-flight response, you might feel bizarre and unsure of what is happening to you. It's all right – it will pass. Remember, you will be okay. Here are a few tips to help you manage your response.

+ Write in a journal

The most productive way to handle these stressful situations is to write down the emotions you are feeling and the physical reactions you are having. Imagine you are an outsider, looking at yourself from a distance, and notice how you are reacting.

It is helpful to pop these reactions in columns, like I've done here.

Date	Trigger	Emotional response	Physical response	What I am proud of	What I want to remind myself of next time
8th May	Important phone call	Tearful, on edge	Felt sick, sweaty palms; slightly short of breath	Calmed instantly when using some of the techniques I've learnt – specifically breathing deep	It is not permanent; I will get through it

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By being aware of your physical sensations, you can easily and Generation Panic 10 quickly spot these issues in the future and thus calm yourself before your anxiety escalates. By knowing your triggers, you can take control earlier. Also ask yourself: What is the valid reason for feeling as you do? The point of asking is to find out how rational and reasonable your anxiety is. It can also give you clarity on what is actually causing your reactions; perhaps it is something other than the 'surface' problem.

+ *Take a breath*

Bring back a sense of calm and clarity by breathing very deeply, slowly and fully. When all rational thoughts have abandoned us and our body starts to pump adrenaline faster, just breathe deeply – right into the pit of your belly (the next chapter provides in-depth guidance). If you are struggling to concentrate and slow your breathing, try closing your eyes to help you focus on your breath moving in and out of your body. This will ensure that the adrenaline will start to get under control, and your stress response will slow down. Remember as you are breathing to tell yourself, 'This is completely normal, and by breathing deeply, I know that I can calm myself down right here, right now.'

+ *Shift it*

Depending on where you are, try to expel some energy in a new environment. Go for a short walk, carry out an errand or do some form of exercise. If you are stuck in an office and cannot leave, go to the bathroom or meeting room. In this new space, stretch up tall and then flick out your hands to your sides. As you do so, imagine that the nervous energy is flicking out of your fingertips and dripping away from you. Next, run your hands down your arms, creating friction, to get rid of the energy through your fingertips. Finally, jiggle your whole body – shaking the anxiety out of your system.

I+ Go with it!

We can be scared by the power of our body when we are panicking. Rather than fight it, go with it! Try riding with the energy: match it or even attempt to raise it; shout, curl up, dance, yelp, make fists or hop around. By physically responding, it's possible that rather than resisting the energy, we actually feel a huge sense of relief in accepting it. Roll with it.

+ Change your perspective

Imagine you have a camera and you can decide if you wish to zoom in or zoom out on what's happening to you right now. Playing with distance gives you the chance to gain some perspective on the current situation. Start by 'zooming in' on something very specific, such as the colour, smell and shape of an object in front of you. It can be anything; just get present and notice what you see. What stands out to you? (We'll discuss being present more in 5.1, Meditation & Mindfulness.) Or, you can try 'zooming out' and gain a different view of the situation. For example, imagine you are soaring high in the air. Perhaps you are in a helicopter or you are a bird. Now, look down from that angle. What do you notice from up here? How does the problem look from this perspective? From this viewpoint, think about this particular moment in the bigger scale of your life. How important is it? Will you remember it in a week or a month or a year? Will it last forever? How does it sit in the timeline of your life?

+ Practise positive visualisation

Positive visualisation can change your perspective as well. Picture your thoughts as swirling objects that finally manage to settle down. For example, imagine you are in a storm when the fight-or-flight response kicks in. With practice and in time, you can get yourself to the centre, into the eye of the storm. Here Generation Panic 12 everything is quieter, calmer and clearer. Or picture a bowl in which sand has been rushing around, creating low visibility. Finally the sand settles at the bottom of the bowl, and you can see again. Or perhaps it might be a tempestuous sea, but in a moment the sea calms and becomes still – the top of it like a sheet of glass. Is there an image that works for you, such as a place in nature that makes you feel calm and safe? Perhaps it is recalling a happy moment when you felt peaceful and in control. Whatever it is, bring it to life now – draw and represent it, write down a vivid description; adding details such as texture, smell and sounds will help make the visualisations more impactful. If this doesn't work, try finding a song that represents it or tell someone about it. Play around with how you bring it to life and see what works best for you.

My Experience

I can remember clearly the first time I had a panic attack – I was terrified. I completely lost control of my body and could not think rationally. I felt sick, shook, sweated, had blurred vision and no coherent thoughts, and ultimately felt that the world was closing in on me. Initially I wanted to 'fight', but in the end I felt so horrific that I took 'flight'.

What I have since learnt about the fight-or-flight response has helped me cope. Just by having an awareness that my body was reacting has been a comfort, as I can separate the physical from the emotional. I have written down all my responses to panic and have tried all the ideas I've listed here. In different moments, different techniques work. Therefore, I constantly revisit these resources to make them stronger and keep them fresh in my mind so I can access them immediately and help bring my panic back under control. I particularly enjoy the flicking exercise. Although simple (and a little silly), it really does get rid of the excess energy when 1. In the Panic 13 I feel 'whizzy' and reduces the feelings of panic. Regardless of what techniques help you, the most important takeaway is reminding yourself that the anxiety will pass – everything does, and so too will the panic.

Go for it!

Jot down which ideas in this chapter you want to explore further. Once you have decided on a couple of things that might work for you, get practising. Try rehearsing when you feel that you are not under threat in any way. This is important, as you can familiarise yourself with the tools when you are feeling in control and strong. Then the next time you feel your body reacting, you can implement all you have learnt. Practice makes perfect. Whatever you decide, be safe in the knowledge that people go through the fight-or-flight response all the time. You are not alone, and you will get through it. It will not last forever. It will pass.

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