

Attach/Cry for help/Fawn Response

Children who are abused are faced with a conflict between their need to flee a dangerous environment and their need to attach to caregivers. We are biologically driven to form an attachment to a parent or caregiver even when they also a source of critical, shaming, neglectful, or abusive behaviors. Since children have no way to escape an abusive household, they need to make the dangerous environment tolerable. This requires a profound dissociative split between the part of the self that upholds the attachment to the caregiver and the part that holds the reality of the abuse. Often that latter part has to be cut off in order for the child to survive.

When relying upon a fawn/attach response, children “take care” of a parent by restricting expressions of anger or distress in the hope that doing so will reduce the likelihood of further neglect or abuse. In many cases, children will then turn their negative feelings toward themselves. As a result, the anger fuels self-criticism, self-loathing, or self-harming behaviors. In adulthood, this process can evolve into depression or somatic symptoms of pain or illness.

Healing a Fawn/attach Response

The process of healing from the fawn/attach response involves recognizing when you are engaging in people-pleasing or co-dependent behaviors. However, be kind to yourself! This process can take time. This means that it is hard to identify when you are doing it. Remember, when you were a childhood, you may have needed these behaviors to survive; but, now can be different from then. Now, you can learn to take better care of yourself and set healthier boundaries with others. You can learn and practice new and...it will get easier over time.

1. Access your Inner Wisdom:

A fawn/attach response can lead you to disconnect from your own emotions, sensations, and needs. Therefore, it is important to practice listening to your body as a way to come back home to yourself. Accessing your inner wisdom involves connecting with your embodied knowing.

Take a moment to reflect upon a current challenge that you are facing in your life. As you do so, listen for and sense the subtle changes in your belly, chest, or throat. Do you notice small changes in how you are breathing? Rather than overriding these signals, ask yourself, What does my body want me to know? Continue to experiment with this practice. Over time, see if you can discover how your body, mind, and emotions work together to help you access your inner wisdom.

2. Speak your Truth:

A fawn/attach response can make it difficult to hear your own truth. Journaling can help you hear your voice so that you can access your inner wisdom. Now as an adult, you can give yourself permission to express your truth. Explore incomplete conversations or unfinished business from your childhood by journaling about the following prompts. Take the time to reflect upon what you wished you had said in a difficult situation. These prompts not only address the painful impact of trauma but also invite you to reflect upon your strengths. Remember, you can pace yourself with any healing strategy!

- When you hurt me I felt ...
- The worst thing that you said or did was ...
- What I was most afraid of was ...
- What I wish I had said to you then, but never told you was ...
- What you could never take from me is ...

- I know that I am strong because ...
- What I want you to know about me now is ...

3. Validate your experiences and feelings

People experiencing the fawn/attach response to trauma may have grown up having their feelings invalidated by their caregivers. To help reverse this experience and reprogram your thoughts, it can help to know how to validate your thoughts and experiences.

Here are some examples of validating yourself:

- “Despite what my harsh critics say, I know I do valuable work.”
- “I’m going to be patient with myself as I grow and heal.”
- “What happened to me was really hard. I acknowledge the challenges I face.”
- “I’m being brave by trying something new.”

4. Become aware of your actions

Noticing your patterns of fawn/attach is a valuable step toward overcoming them. When you suspect you’re fawn/attach, try asking yourself:

- Am I saying/doing this to please someone else? And is it at my own expense?
- Do my actions right now align with my personal values?
- Am I being authentic, or am I taking actions for someone else’s benefit?

When you notice that you’re falling into a pattern of people-pleasing, try gently nudging yourself to think about what your authentic words/actions would be.

5. Neurovascular Hold

Neurovascular points are one of the keys to calming the nervous system; touching these points is communicating directly with your nervous system. It is important to counteract and dismantle the stress response loop as soon as possible. When it starts, it may be a small loop at the beginning of a crisis. If this stress response loop has been going for a long time, it will take more work to rewind. These exercises are available to us 24/7. They give us the capacity to think more clearly, balancing our emotional response and training our body to meet stress without triggering the freeze, fight or flight response.

First, sit or lie down and then focus on a stress you already feel or on a stressful thought, memory, or situation.

Next, place the palm of one hand on your forehead and the palm of the other hand on the back of your head.

Hold softly for up to three minutes, breathing deeply.

On the inhalation, raise your head up. On the exhalation tuck your chin to your chest.

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