

More about the Freeze Response

Freeze is a response to a threat and can be thought of as “playing dead” in the face of danger. If a person cannot flee or fighting is ineffective, then they can go into a state of paralysis. This manifests as the inability to communicate, react, or take action for defense or self-preservation. Many times we see this occur in response to childhood trauma. It’s not a conscious choice – it’s something that the body instinctively does to protect itself, and no one is to blame for this involuntary response.

As children we are mostly unable to protect or defend ourselves and reliant on our caregiver. We seek comfort and connection from our caregiver, but often felt unsafe or unprotected by this person. Abuse by the caregiver would trigger a fight or flight response, and this leads to our attachment system and defensive system being at odds with one another. The child does not know what to do so they panic, go numb, or become immobile, which we classify as the freeze response. When a child receives abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) and cannot defend themselves they feel helpless and unable to use fight or flight. However, freeze is a form of hyperarousal.

Signs of Freeze:

1. Hyper-alertness
2. Increases heart rate.
3. Tension in the body and muscles
4. Energy seems build up but cannot be released.
5. Shallow and rapid breath
6. Feeling stuck or unable to move.
7. Feeling cold or numb
8. Sense of dread or foreboding

How to manage the freeze response:

One of the best ways to manage the freeze response is to identify what triggers this response, and once aware using techniques that are helpful. (Think of the Somatic Awareness Log).

These may include:

1. Deep diaphragmic or belly breathing. Counted breathing, such as square breathing or the 5-5-8-2 method can be helpful.
2. Orienting to your current surroundings.
3. Grounding techniques, especially physical grounding using our senses, such as the 5-4-3-2-1 method, or using cold or warm.
4. Engaging in verbal affirmations, such as “I am safe now” or “it’s April 3, 2023 and I’m okay”, etc.
5. Using self-compassion.
6. Practice somatic skills, such as softening a muscle, lengthening your spine, rubbing your arms, practicing the self-hold, sighing, yawning, or stretching.
7. Notice sensations in your body and allow them to move through you.