

What is the Freeze Response?

Freeze is one of several [defense responses to trauma](#).

You see, if a person can't flee or if fighting is ineffective, then they may go into a state of paralysis.

Many times, we see freeze in response to [childhood trauma](#).

As a child, she would seek comfort and closeness from an [attachment figure](#), like her mother. But the physical abuse she experienced at the hand of her mother would also trigger a fight or flight defensive response in her.

Because these two systems – the attachment system and the defensive system – are at odds with each other, the child doesn't know what to do. And so instead, she might go into freeze.

Now in talking or reading about freeze, you may encounter a number of other terms – like tonic immobility and orienting phase, just to name a few.

Those terms describe several experiences that are similar to or related to freeze, each with their own nuance.

Now these terms are often interpreted differently across experts in the field. But here's one way you might conceptualize them, according to [Ruth Lanius, MD, PhD](#):

- **Orienting Freeze** – This is the state a person might go into when they're first faced with a threat and simply trying to detect it. You might think of this orienting freeze as your initial response when you hear brakes squeal or a siren blaring, when you're thinking, "Where's this sound coming from, and am I in its path?"
- **Tonic immobility** – This refers to the rigidity of specific muscles, particularly ones that help us maintain our posture and help us breathe. From an evolutionary standpoint, this response can aid in survival by helping an animal blend in with its surroundings and hide from a predator. It's one of several signs that a person is in freeze.

So keeping all this in mind, let's focus on what many experts simply refer to as the freeze response . . .

What Are the Key Signs of the Freeze Response?

These are a few signs of freeze that can be important to look out for in a session:

- **Hyper-Alertness**
- **Increased heart rate**
- **Tension in the body and muscles (tonic immobility)**
- **Energy seems built up, but can't be released**
- **Some, but [minimal verbal cues](#)** – like “I feel stuck,” “I can't move,” or “I'm paralyzed.” Or, no speech at all.
- **Shallow and rapid breath**

Now these signs may seem clear, but in practice they might not be so straightforward. That's because the freeze response can look awfully similar to another type of trauma response: collapse, also known as shutdown.

But here's the thing: there are several [key differences between collapse/shutdown and freeze](#).

Collapse/shutdown occurs when a person leaves their [window of tolerance](#) and goes into hypoarousal. It's characterized by flaccid and loose muscles, a blank stare, and decreased heart rate.

On the other hand, something very different is happening in the nervous system when a person goes into freeze . . .

What's Happening in the Nervous System When a Person Goes into Freeze?

Just like fight and flight, the freeze response is a form of **hyperarousal**.

Now when we're dysregulated – whether that be in hyper or hypoarousal – our prefrontal cortex – which allows us to think critically – goes offline, while

our limbic system – which drives survival behavior by responding to threat with vehement emotion – takes over.

What this means is that any information going into the brain – sensations, words, movements – can't be processed in a logical, cognitive way.

At first glance, this may seem maladaptive, but think about it this way: If a person is experiencing a threat – whether real, or just perceived – immobilization can help them stay safe.^[2] The limbic system is screaming, “Don't move – or else you'll die!”

So in many ways, freeze is actually a rather ingenious survival strategy.

Many times, when a client goes into freeze, they might look back at the event and think, “I should've fought back.” They might ruminate on what they could've done differently and ultimately blame themselves for what happened.

But by providing psychoeducation about the nervous system and how it reacts to trauma, you can help your client understand that, like all trauma responses, **freeze is an involuntary response.**

It's not a conscious choice – it's something that the body instinctively does to protect itself.

By sharing this with your client, you can help shift their attention away from wondering, “Why did this happen to me?” to being curious about, “Why did my body go into freeze?”

Through this exploration, they can discover that freeze – just like all trauma responses – is a normal, evolutionary response. It can help them gain awareness of the fact that freezing helped them survive in the face of trauma.

And this can help dissolve any [shame and self-blame](#) that might come with having responded to a traumatic event with freeze.

<https://www.nicabm.com/topic/freeze/>