



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
discovery college
KELOWNA

STRESS AND BURNOUT

Participant Workbook



OBJECTIVES

This section explains how stress impacts first responders, how to recognize signs of excessive stress, and ways to support recovery and build resilience. It covers topics like PTSD, burnout, and trauma response, offering tools and resources tailored to frontline workers.

Understanding Stress in First Responders

- The unique stressors of first responder work—exposure to trauma, shift work, organizational challenges, and the cumulative effects of stress.
- The difference between everyday stress and stress that may lead to PTSD or burnout.

Recognizing PTSD

- How PTSD shows up mentally, emotionally, physically, and behaviorally—and when it might be time to reach out for support.
- Access to screening tools and protocols.

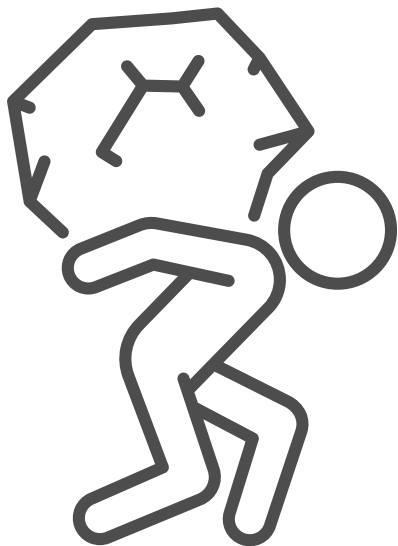
The 4 Trauma Responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze & Fawn

- Learn coping tools matched to each response style—helping you identify your pattern and move toward regulation and healing.



BURNOUT VS. PTSD

- Burnout is caused by chronic, unrelieved stress, particularly in the workplace, and often overlaps with feelings of helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism.
- Common symptoms include exhaustion, reduced performance, disconnection from work, and a sense of hopelessness.
- Prolonged responsibilities, lack of control, and minimal support can all contribute to burnout.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD IN FIRST RESPONDERS

Intrusive Thoughts and Memories

- Flashbacks: re-living the traumatic event, often triggered by sights, sounds or smells
- Nightmares: recurring, disturbing dreams about the traumatic event

Hypervigilance and Arousal

- Being Easily Startled: reacting strongly to unexpected noises or movements
- Feeling on Edge: being constantly tense or anxious
- Irritability and Anger: experiencing increased frustration, anger or outbursts
- Sleep Disturbances: difficulty falling or staying asleep.

Physical Symptoms

- Headaches, stomach-aches, or other physical complaints
- Sweating, jitteriness, rapid breathing, fast heartbeat

Avoidance

- Steering clear of reminders of the trauma, such as places, people or conversations
- Avoiding thinking about or talking about the traumatic event

Negative Changes in Mood and Thinking

- Emotional numbness: feeling detached or having difficulty experiencing emotions
- Persistent Negative Thoughts: having negative beliefs about oneself or the world
- Difficulty Concentrating: trouble focusing or making decisions
- Memory Problems: difficulty remembering details of the traumatic event or other important information

Other Potential Symptoms

- Reckless or self-destructive behaviour
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities

THE 4 TYPES OF TRAUMA RESPONSES

FIGHT

The fight response is characterized by an aggressive reaction to threat. Individuals may become confrontational, angry or irritable. They may experience an adrenaline rush, increased heart rate and a surge in energy, all of which prepare the body to confront the danger head on.

FLIGHT

The flight response involves an urge to escape or run away from the traumatic situation. Individuals may feel anxious, panicked or an overwhelming need to flee. They might engage in avoidance behaviours, such as withdrawing from social situations, to distance themselves from reminders of the trauma.

FREEZE

The freeze response is often described as a state of paralysis in the face of trauma. Individuals may feel stuck, numb or disconnected from their surroundings and themselves. This response is akin to “playing dead”, a survival mechanism seen in the animal kingdom.

FAWN

The fawn response is less commonly discussed but equally important. It involves a tendency to please or appease others to avoid conflict or further trauma. Individuals may struggle with setting boundaries, saying no or prioritizing their own needs.

COPING WITH TRAUMA RESPONSES

Fight Response:

- Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation, to help manage anger and aggression
- Engage in physical activities to channel excess energy in a healthy way
- Seek therapy or support groups to work through aggressive tendencies and underlying trauma

Flight Response:

- Grounding exercises can help individuals stay present and reduce feelings of panic
- Establishing a safe space where one can retreat to when feeling overwhelmed can provide a sense of security
- Therapy, particularly cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), can be effective in addressing avoidance patterns

Freeze Response:

- Engage in gentle movement, such as stretching or yoga, to reconnect with the body
- Mindfulness practices can help individuals re-establish a connection with their environment
- Professional support, including trauma-focused therapies, can aid in overcoming feelings of disconnection

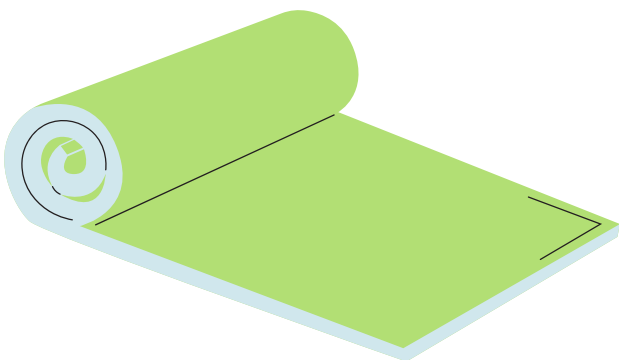
Fawn Response:

- Learning assertiveness skills can help individuals express their needs and establish boundaries
- Therapy can provide a space to explore patterns of people-pleasing behaviour and develop healthier coping strategies
- Building a support network with trusted individuals can empower those with fawn response to advocate for themselves

PRACTICAL TIPS TO MANAGE STRESS

Everyday strategies to help regulate your nervous system and reduce the impact of stress:

- Get active through physical movement
- Eat nourishing meals and avoid unhealthy coping habits
- Try meditation, guided imagery, and deep breathing
- Laugh more and connect with others
- Set boundaries and assert your needs
- Practice yoga or stretching
- Prioritize quality sleep and recovery time



TRAINING & SUPPORT RESOURCES FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Access evidence-based and peer-informed training such as:

- Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- Before Operational Stress (BOS)
- Resilient Minds
- Self-guided wellness courses through PSPNET

Explore tools that support recovery, early intervention, and wellness planning—on your own or with your team.

Stress is a normal response to the demanding work first responders do, but untreated stress is not something to carry alone. With the right knowledge, tools, and support, you can navigate stress, prevent burnout, and protect your long-term well-being.