Recognising protective responses

Your reactions are not a measure of your character.

When the brain detects possible danger, the body may prepare to protect itself before conscious thinking catches up. Earlier experiences can influence what feels threatening now. These responses can overlap, change quickly and occur without deliberate choice.

Fight	Protecting through confrontation. You may feel tense, defensive or angry; for example, responding sharply to criticism or feeling an urgent need to defend yourself.
Flight	Protecting through distance or activity. You may want to leave, avoid a conversation, stay constantly busy or feel unable to settle.
Freeze	Protecting through a reduction in movement or action. Words may disappear, thinking may slow, or making a simple decision may feel impossible.
Fawn / appeasing	Trying to reduce perceived danger through agreement, apologising or prioritising others. Fawn is a descriptive term, not a diagnosis.

You may recognise several responses, or none of these descriptions. They are not fixed personality types. Other factors, including pain, fatigue and sensory overload, can influence how you respond.

Which responses do I recognise in myself, and in what everyday situations?

What might these responses be trying to protect me from?

Understanding my patterns

Notice what happens without needing to revisit the past.

A tone of voice, sudden noise, uncertainty or a difficult interaction may act as a cue. Sometimes a response is connected to an earlier experience; sometimes it reflects a real problem happening now. You do not need to decide immediately.

Mapping a response

1. Cue	2. Body	3. Response	4. Need
What happened?	What changed?	What did I do?	What might help?

For example: an unexpected change of plan (cue) might bring tight shoulders and a racing mind (body), followed by an urge to leave (response). More information, time to adjust or a quieter space might help (need).

My cue: what was happening around me?

My early signals: thoughts, sensations, energy or changes in speech

My response and what I might have needed at that moment

Check present safety. Is there a real threat, a boundary being crossed or a need for practical protection? You do not have to calm yourself in an unsafe situation. If noticing body sensations feels uncomfortable, focus on your surroundings instead.

Responding with compassion

A personal support plan that respects your choices.

Recovery is not about forcing protective responses to disappear. It can involve recognising them earlier, increasing choice and finding support that fits your circumstances. Understanding a response does not excuse harm to yourself or others.

Small actions to explore when you are somewhere safe

Fight: create space before responding; choose a boundary or a safe way to release tension.
Flight: take a manageable break, reduce demands or ask for clear information.
Freeze: reduce pressure to speak or decide; try a small movement if comfortable.
Appeasing: give yourself time before agreeing; practise saying “I need time to think.”

My early warning signs and one manageable action I can try

People, places, adjustments or boundaries that could support me

A compassionate reminder I want to carry forward

If reactions persist or interfere with daily life, a qualified trauma-informed professional or GP can help. In immediate danger in the UK, call 999. This workbook is educational and is not a diagnostic tool or replacement for individual care.