

# The stress response system: fight, flight, freeze

When stress becomes overwhelming our body will respond in a way to promote survival. This can be in the form of fight, flight or freeze.

Bessel Van Der Kolk explains that in the brain we have a 'smoke detector' and a 'watch tower', and the balance of these is important for daily functioning.

The smoke detector scans the environment and looks for threats.

If a threat is detected, it activates our stress system and we will respond quickly for survival.

When the smoke detector is activated, it will shut down the parts of the brain we need to be able to learn, to show expected behaviour, and to problem solve.



The watch tower tries to decipher if a threat is real or if the smoke detector has sounded a false alarm.

The watch tower can then restore balance and calm, let your body know it is a false alarm and call off the stress response.

The higher order functions of the brain, such as problem solving are then able to work again.

Some people's smoke detectors will be more sensitive, perceiving a threat when one might not actually be present, for instance those who have had traumatic experiences. They may also find it difficult to stop the alarm once it has started.

For those people, we need to support them to achieve balance between the smoke detector and watchtower. This can be through practices such as mindfulness, yoga and breathing exercises, and cognitive approaches such as reframing negative thoughts.