

## Trauma Informed Care Series

### Trauma-Informed De-Escalation Strategies

#### Trauma Responses

Trauma responses are automatic, instinctive reactions that the human body initiates when faced with overwhelming stress or threat. These reactions are adaptive mechanisms aimed at ensuring survival in the face of danger. Although most people think of the classic "fight or flight" response, there are more reactions that have been identified in recent years. The fight, flight, freeze, fawn, and flock responses represent a broader spectrum of human reactions to trauma and shedding light on the complex ways individuals cope with overwhelming situations.

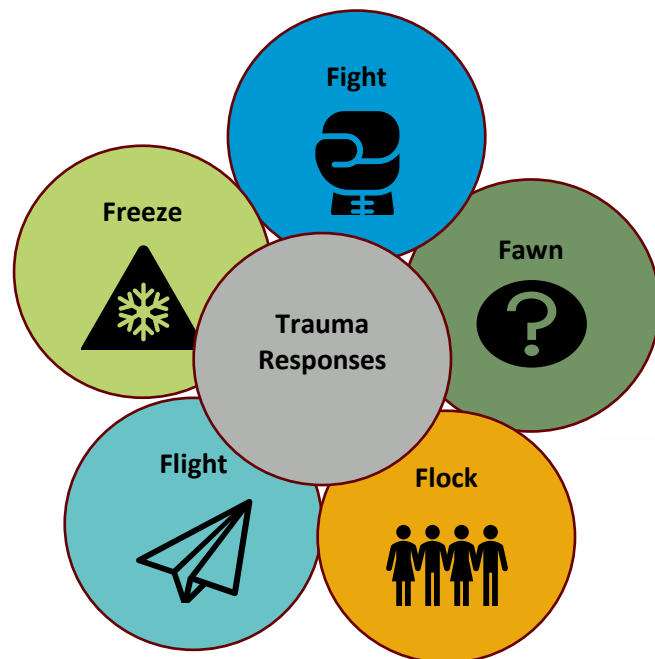
**Fight** -The brain perceives danger, and a person chooses to try and fight off the threat; tries to ward off danger by defeating it; this can manifest as physical or verbal altercations and intense anger.

**Flight** - If the brain does not feel that it can successfully fight off danger, a person may decide to try and escape; this response involves trying to get as far away from the dangerous situation as quickly as possible.

**Freeze** – The brain attempts to avoid “detection” by the threat and a person tries to be very still until the danger passes.

**Fawn** – The brain decides to try and “please” whoever or whatever is triggering the fear to prevent them from causing harm

**Flock** – The brain decides that there is safety in being with others, or part of a group, rather than trying to face a threat alone, even if that means joining the wrong group.



Traumatic stress reactions vary widely; people engage in behaviors to manage the aftereffects, the intensity of emotions, or the distressing aspects of the traumatic experience. Some people reduce tension or stress through avoidant, self-medicating (e.g., alcohol abuse), compulsive (e.g., overeating), impulsive (e.g., high-risk behaviors), and/or self-injurious behaviors. Others may try to gain control over their experiences by being aggressive or subconsciously reenacting aspects of the trauma.

Behavioral reactions are the consequences of traumatic experiences. For example, some people act like they can't control their current environment, thus failing to act or make decisions long after the trauma (learned helplessness). Others associate elements of the trauma with current activities, such as interpreting an intimate moment in a significant relationship as dangerous or unsafe years after an act of sexual violence. The following sections discuss behavioral consequences of trauma and traumatic stress reactions.

A variety of reactions are often reported and/or observed after trauma. Most survivors exhibit immediate reactions, yet these typically resolve without severe long-term consequences. This is because most trauma survivors are highly resilient and develop appropriate coping strategies, including the use of social supports, to deal with the aftermath and effects of trauma. Most recover with time, show minimal distress, and function effectively across major life areas and developmental stages.

Whether you work in residential care, healthcare, human or social services, business, or any field, you might engage with angry, hostile, or noncompliant behavior every day. Your response to defensive behavior is often the key to avoiding a physical confrontation with someone who has lost control of their behavior.

## 10 De-Escalation TIPS<sup>1</sup>

The issue of preventing violence in residential and behavioral health settings has never been as hot a topic as it is right now. How do we balance outstanding care, meet regulatory requirements, and provide for client/youth and staff safety—all in a fast-paced and constantly changing environment? Creating a culture of nonviolence is no small task, but it is certainly necessary for providing quality care for patients and employees.

The Crisis Prevention Institute Inc. (CPI) is a leader in evidence-based de-escalation and crisis prevention training and dementia care services. These Top 10 De-Escalation Tips will help you respond to difficult behavior in the safest, most effective way possible.

Tip 1	Be Empathetic and Nonjudgmental	When someone says or does something you perceive as weird or irrational, <i>try not to judge or discount their feelings</i> . Whether or not you think those feelings are justified, <i>they're real to the other person</i> . Pay attention to them.
Tip 2	Respect Personal Space	If possible, <i>stand 1.5 to three feet away</i> from a person who's escalating. Allowing personal space tends to <i>decrease a person's anxiety</i> and can help you <i>prevent acting-out behavior</i> .

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<sup>1</sup> 2016 Crisis Prevention Institute, Inc. (<http://crisisprevention.com>)

Tip 3	Use Nonthreatening Nonverbals	The more a person loses control, <i>the less they hear your words</i> —and the more they react to your nonverbal communication. Be mindful of your <i>gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice</i> .
Tip 4	Avoid Overreacting	Remain <i>calm, rational, and professional</i> . While you can't control the person's behavior, <i>how you respond to their behavior</i> will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or defuses.
Tip 5	Focus on Feelings	Facts are important, but <i>how a person feels is the heart of the matter</i> . Be aware that some people have trouble identifying how they feel about what's happening to them.
Tip 6	Ignore Challenging Questions	Answering challenging questions often results in a power struggle. When a person challenges your authority, <i>redirect their attention to the issue at hand</i> .
Tip 7	Set Limits	If a person's behavior is belligerent, defensive, or disruptive, give them <i>clear, simple, and enforceable limits</i> . Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences.
Tip 8	Choose Wisely What You Insist Upon	It's important to be thoughtful in deciding <i>which rules are negotiable and which are not</i> . For example, if a person doesn't want to shower in the morning, can you <i>allow them to choose</i> the time of day that feels best for them?
Tip 9	Allow Silence for Reflection	We've all experienced awkward silences. While it may seem counterintuitive to let moments of silence occur, sometimes it's the best choice. It can <i>give a person a chance to reflect on what's happening</i> , and how he or she needs to proceed.
Tip 10	Allow Time for Decisions	When a person is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them a few moments to <i>think through what you've said</i> .

## RESOURCES

### 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Ohioans who are experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and their family members can call, chat or text 988 to reach a trained counselor who can offer help and support.

### Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services

- Crisis Text Line – Text 4Hope to 741 741 for free, confidential conversation  
[Crisis Text Line | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)
- Ohio Careline (1-800-720-9616) for free, confidential connection to licensed provider  
[Ohio CareLine | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#)
- OhioMHAS Get Help for a variety of resources on control, connection, and meaning  
[Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services | Ohio.gov](#)
- Resources  
[Resources | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)

### Crisis Prevention Institute

[Crisis Prevention Institute Inc. \(CPI\)](#) is a leader in evidence-based de-escalation and crisis prevention training and dementia care services. They are dedicated to changing behaviors and reducing conflict for the Care, Welfare, Safety, and Security of everyone. They believe the power of empathy, meaningful connections, personal safety, and security are the antidotes to fear and anxiety. It's a philosophy that is central to everything they do and traces back to their beginning.

### National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children's Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events. This unique network of frontline providers, family members, researchers, and national partners is committed to changing the course of children's lives by improving their care and moving scientific gains quickly into practice across the U.S. NCTSN recognizes that the development of [secondary traumatic stress](#) is a common occupational hazard for professionals working with traumatized children and provides resources on secondary traumatic stress supervision.

### The Wellness Project

[The Wellness Project](#) is a collection of resources to support and enhance your wellness and resilience. The purpose of this website is to discover a variety of ways for supporting helping professionals, so they can show up as the "best version of themselves." It includes a holistic

system of wellness activities such as reading, listening, watching, cooking, connecting, moving, breathing, and resting.

Goals are to give our workforce tools to practice self-care, build resilience, enhance caregiving and, ultimately improve the services and supports we provide.