



Ascension

Ascension EAP

The Fight or Flight Response

Most people have heard the term “fight or flight,” but many people aren’t really sure what that really means. **The “fight or flight” response is the way that your body works to keep you safe in dangerous situations.** This response, also known as the “stress response,” or more technically, the “sympathetic nervous system” includes physical, mental and emotional reactions. When the fight or flight response is turned on, your body releases biochemicals like adrenaline and cortisol to help you deal with danger. Here are some symptoms you may experience while your body is in fight or flight:

- Increased heart rate
- Fast, shallow breathing
- Muscle tension
- Pupil dilation
- Decreased digestion--nausea, low appetite
- Decreased immune function
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering details
- Increased sensory perception
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Urge to fight, flee, or feeling frozen in place

Consider this: Which of these symptoms do you experience when your fight or flight system is activated?

The fight or flight response is crucial in dangerous or life-threatening situations, but sometimes it overreacts and kicks in even when we are not in danger. For example, if you hear something tragic on the news, you realize money is missing from your wallet, or your neighbor gives you a mean look--though these situations may be stressful, none of them are dangerous.

Consider this: When is the last time you noticed that your stress response was activated? What was the activating event, or trigger? Was the situation truly dangerous, or just stressful? How did you respond?

People who have experienced severe or chronic stress may have an overactive fight or flight system that reacts to almost everything! Over time this will take a toll, as chronic stress leads to many physical and mental health problems. The good news is that you can learn to de-escalate your fight or flight system, and improve coping skills to better regulate these reactions!

The opposite of the sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight) response is the parasympathetic nervous system, also called the “rest and digest” response. The rest and digest response releases neurotransmitters like acetylcholine, epinephrine and norepinephrine throughout your body. When released, these biochemicals turn on your body’s relaxation response so that muscles relax, heart rate slows down, breathing returns to normal, and you can think clearly again. It is important for our physical and mental health to be in this regulated state most of the time.

Consider this: Do you think you might have an overactive fight or flight response, or are you able to stay emotionally and physically regulated most of the time? Think of some examples to support your answer.

Your behaviors and thinking can either enhance your body’s natural relaxation response, or keep it from operating at its best. Practicing

relaxation skills regularly can help decrease your fight or flight responses. Learning to relax your body, through breathing and relaxation exercises as well as by minimizing stressful thinking, can help your body’s natural relaxation system be more effective.

Consider this: Do you have effective breathing and relaxation techniques that help you maintain a rest & digest state, even when circumstances are stressful? What strategies work best for you?

For help in learning and enhancing skills to stay healthy and well, call your EAP. They offer free and confidential counseling to help you be your best!

Consider this: Do you think you could benefit from improving your skills to regulate your fight or flight system and manage stress? If so, what steps could you take?
