

What Happens When You Are Scared?

What to Know

Your body and mind respond automatically to threatening things, just like how animals respond to danger. You can think of this as your body's "programming" because it's a built-in response designed to protect you from harm. These reactions occur quickly and automatically. Thinking and making choices can be slow, while reacting quickly can save your life.

Your body sensations prepare you for action, and they can include:

- your body cringing or "shrinking" to seem smaller
- your heart beating faster to move blood (fuel, energy) to your muscles to run away or fight if you need to
- an increase in your breathing rate to move oxygen through your body
- your eye pupils dilating to let in more light and improve your vision to see better
- your body moving blood to the muscles and away from the digestive system, so you might notice "butterflies" in your tummy
- quicker thinking as you focus on a way to escape
- an inability to move, or "freezing" in place
- tight or tense muscles
- shaky legs
- dizziness
- feeling hot or sweaty
- emotional numbness or feeling like you're outside your body

There are four ways you might respond when you're scared or in danger.

1. Fight. Sometimes acting or looking aggressive can be enough to scare someone away, and winning a fight increases your chance of surviving the threat. But fighting comes with risks of injury or other bad consequences. You may not want to choose to fight!

2. Flight. If you run away or escape a dangerous situation, you're more likely to survive and there are fewer risks than other options.

3. Freeze. This gives you time to evaluate a situation. If you can't escape or win a fight, becoming unresponsive can sometimes help.

4. Appease. This means giving another person what they want or doing something to reduce the danger. You're just trying to focus on options that decrease the threat.

It's not your fault if you respond in any of these ways when you are being threatened and you're trying to make the best of a bad situation. Sometimes one way of responding is better than the others - depending on the situation.

What to Do

In a scary or dangerous situation your body and mind react to help you get ready to fight or run away. You might also react by freezing or appeasing.

Write about a scary or dangerous situation you were in. _____

What were you thinking about?

What did you notice and focus on?

If you were in a situation where you are in real danger would you want your brain to think slowly or quickly? Why?

What body sensations or feelings did you notice when you were scared? Write them on the lines below.

