

## FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE, AND FAWN: RELIGION AND TRAUMA RESPONSES

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 245 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, I want to talk about the four common responses people have when they have experienced or are experiencing something that is threatening or traumatic. And in particular, I want to focus on the fawning response and how that relates to our view of and our relationship with God. Now, I got inspired to talk about this from someone I follow on Facebook. His name is Shane Moe, and he is a licensed therapist in the Twin Cities area who specializes in EMDR, DBT, and IFS therapies. And you can follow him, and I recommend you do because he has really good posts every day, by going to [facebook.com/shanepmoe](https://facebook.com/shanepmoe).

Now, I did reach out to him to see if he would have some time to talk about today's topic with me here on the podcast with me, but he declined. However, he did give me permission to use a post he wrote as a springboard to create this episode.

So in his post, he included an image from Skye Jethani of the Holy Post, and I'm going to describe the picture here since we are here in audio format — I'm going to describe it as best I can so that you can see it in your imagination. So imagine a circle on a piece of paper, and at the top of the circle is this little family — a mom, a dad, and two kids. And this family perceives that they are being threatened in some way. Maybe they believe that the government is out to get them and take away their rights. Maybe they believe the devil is going to destroy their family. Maybe they think God is going to torture their relatives in hell. Maybe they think everyone needs to believe a certain way or do things a certain way, or else something will happen in their own life that will fall apart. But the bottom line is that they are afraid. They have these beliefs, and then when they think these types of thoughts or have these types of beliefs, they feel fear in their bodies.

So this brings us to the four typical trauma responses that we see in humans when they are being threatened in some way. It doesn't matter if the threat is real or if it's only perceived — that's not the issue. The issue is that when a human believes that they are being threatened, real or not, they will tend to have one of four responses: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. They all start with the letter "F," so it's easy to remember. Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

So one response is to fight. Now, in the picture, down one side of the circle, is a list of the things that we do when we fight. We're afraid, so if we go into fight mode, what might we do? Well, we might attack our enemies or those that we believe to be unlike us. We might dehumanize non-Christians. We have to, otherwise, we might have compassion and love for them, and then we can't fight them. I know when I grew up, I heard people in my family say that they were "Satan's children." That's what they were called, the non-Christians. That is dehumanizing them. We can't see them as precious human beings when we think of them as just being Satan spawn, right?

We compromise our own morality in order to gain power. We see this on the political scene more and more. We weaponize the Bible. This is when we take Bible verses and we use them to spiritually control and abuse others. And we reject the Sermon on the Mount and the things that Jesus taught us in favor of our battle cry. And we think that we're doing all of this for the glory of God — we're in a fight for the glory of God. But we're really fighting because we are scared. We are scared to lose power. We are scared to be victimized. We are scared to no longer have control, and so we have to fight to take back control. So that's one side of the circle.

Now, down the other side of the circle is the flight response, and this is when we run away out of fear, okay? So fear is the problem here, and the one side we might fight to deal with our fear, and then the other side we will flight, or run away. So the list going down the other side of the circle is the things that we might do if we're running away. So we might avoid our enemies, try to stay away from them. We only spend time in our own homogenous religious community. We exclude anyone who does not conform to our group-think. And this can be between churches, too, and denominations. "Well, we don't do that, and so we can't do a social function with them because they believe in infant baptism and we don't," or what have you. Another thing we do is we create a safe imitation or replica of pop culture. So you see this with Christian pop music or the Christian dating sites or whatever.

So when people outside of Christianity look at Christians, they often see us doing one of these two things, either fighting in fear, trying to take back control over the world, or running away in fear and trying to just pull up in our own little circle. And fear is the opposite of faith. The Bible says that perfect love casts out fear, so where you have perfect love, you're not going to also see fear. And this is a problem because Christianity is supposedly a world religion that follows the teachings of Jesus Christ, and that emphasizes this idea of faith in what we cannot see, which is a God who is both powerful and loving. And by the way, too, the Bible says that people who aren't followers of Christ will know that we are followers of Christ by how much power we have in the world? Nope. By our love. That's how they'll know that we are followers of

Jesus Christ.

And I don't even believe Jesus Christ came to establish a world religion. He came to actually redirect us to something different from world religions that were on the scene back then. And what people did is they just took His teachings and then turned it into another world religion, and that's why we have such a mess today.

But anyway, instead, what people outside of the world religion of Christianity see is just another world religion where its followers, they're fighting the world in fear by trying to take over control, or they're just running away from the world in fear by playing the victim. So basically Christians are either playing the abuser role or they're playing the victim role.

So it's really odd, though, because that's not at all what Jesus did. Jesus Christ's proclaimed followers aren't following Him at all. He didn't fight the world and He also didn't run away from it. So why are His followers doing that? Jesus was about love and total trust in the Creator of the universe. And we are about control and survival and trusting in ourselves. It's just fascinating, isn't it?

Okay, so that was the picture that was on this post, and it focused on the two trauma responses of fight and flight. But Shane Moe wanted to expand on this picture by talking about what lies beneath these two responses that we have as humans of tending to run away or fighting, and that is the fawn response that we have toward God. Shane Moe is addressing Christians in this post, okay?

When Christians believe that God is threatening and scary because "He stands at the ready to judge and condemn and torment us and our loved ones for all of eternity if we have the wrong beliefs or we have the wrong attitude toward Him..." That could even just be by having some doubts or questions, which is a very human thing, by the way. Or that God is going to bring sickness or death or financial ruin to teach us lessons or discipline us for our sin, or to make us an example for others or something. Or that He's going to withhold His love or care if we don't pray the right way, or pray with enough faith, or spend time in the Bible and spend enough time in the Bible. All of these beliefs about God cause us to show up with a fawn response.

You know, I should probably explain. The fawn response is basically like, "Oh, what would you like me to do? I will do anything that you say. Just please don't hurt me." That's a fawn response, okay? Because under this belief about God, God demands a fawn response. He demands obedience and attention and glory. And if we do not give Him these things, then He will have His own fight or flight reaction to us. Seriously, what

this whole thing is setting up, it's setting God up to be like, almost like an abuser and a victim playing both of those roles. And if we don't give Him what He wants and needs, either He will fight us by tormenting and punishing us, which is the fight response, or He will flight — He will abandon us.

This makes God out to be like us, like a human being, who has basically no power or control, and no love either. So in other words, God in this paradigm is the ultimate wounded abuser. He's unable to manage His own self, and He has now put His glory and His needs in the hands of His victims. The only problem is, He's also the ultimate powerful entity, so our fear of Him and our subsequent trauma responses to Him are astronomical and have lifelong implications as far as our ability to relate well in this world that we live in.

Do you see this? Underlying all of our relationships with other humans and our relationship with ourself is this massively abusive relationship with this abusive god. And so if you go back to the circle illustration, we either have to fight the world in an attempt to fawn and please this abuser god or we have to run away from the world in an attempt to fawn and please this abuser god. And it's all rooted not in love, but in utter and profound terror. We fawn in the hope that perhaps this terrifying god will have mercy on us and our loved ones and not pour out his wrath on us.

So these fight and flight reactions are about fear and shame, and they create a Christian culture that is all about kicking out — that's fighting — or ignoring — fleeing — people who don't conform. This creates a culture of anxious and fear-based codependency and abusive control.

Now, Shane Moe draws some conclusions about this, and I'm going to actually read what he wrote now verbatim, okay? So here we go. This is Shane talking now: "And here's what I find most interesting as a mental and relational health professional specializing in the treatment of trauma and working daily with both victims and perpetrators of abuse. The dynamics I've described above are essentially the same dynamics you find in narcissistic, toxic, or otherwise extremely unhealthy family systems that are dependent upon and organized around abusive, neglectful, and/or invalidating parents, who, of course, often use shame and fear to maintain their power.

In such families, children hyper-vigilantly live under the chronic threat of physical or emotional abuse or attack, neglect, or abandonment, and painful invalidation or shaming should their values, thoughts, feelings, words, actions, needs, and so on prove upsetting or insufficiently pleasing to their parent.

As a result, they have to fawn to the unsafe parent in order to be or feel safe and to get their needs met. And they also have to engage in fight, flight, and/or fawn responses towards others, whether the other parent, siblings, or people outside of the family, in order to protect themselves, that other parent, or their siblings from that parent who holds the supreme power and control.

In such circumstances, there are naturally strong urges to fight towards, or flight from, the unsafe parent. But this is often impossible, to say nothing of dangerous, given the child's dependence upon that parent and the attending power differential. And when it's unsafe to direct those natural fight-and-flight energies or responses towards the toxic parent themselves, the arguably appropriate recipient of such responses, children naturally have to suppress, dissociate, and displace these fight-and-flight responses and energies, whether directing them outwards, towards others — meaning, the safer parent, siblings, peers, teachers, other authorities, and so on — or inward towards themselves through self-alienating shame, self-harm, suicide, obsessive-compulsive self-control measures, and so on, all of which arguably parallels what we have been seeing over the years in evangelical Christianity's increasingly implosive relationship with itself and its outgroups.”

Wow, those are powerful insights. I'm finishing up a book that I'm writing. It chronicles my own journey through a version of Christianity that was just like this: rooted in terror. And I've seen all of this up close and personal in the lives of hundreds of Christians firsthand. I've also seen the fruit of this kind of Christianity. This does not lead people to Jesus Christ and a life of faith and love and inner healing. It leads people to just one more world religion that seeks to power over and control people through its tenets. That version of Christianity is nothing new under the sun. It's just another decoy to distract us from the real thing.

Now, if I were an adversary and I wanted to thwart someone's efforts to give something good to others, that's exactly what I would do. I would come up with something that looked just like the good thing, a fake, a fraud, an imitation, and then I would convince people to chase after that.

Now, here's why this is important for you. You are someone who is aching for the real thing. You've tried the fraudulent version of Christianity, and you've been utterly decimated by it. The issue is that our brains got wired to believe that that's the real thing, much like abuse survivors have been wired to believe that their abuser's love is the real thing. That he loves them, and that when he pays them a little kindness here and there, that's what love is. That's what feels normal to us. A religion has taught us that abuse and misogyny and perfection and impossible standards are right and good

and godly, and autonomy and freedom of choice and making mistakes and being a human being is wrong and bad, and it makes God mad.

So once we know that our brain has been programmed like this to believe that this fake Christianity is actually real, this traumatic god is the real God, once we're aware of that, we can take steps to remedy the problem. Just like we wake up to the abuse that our husband has perpetrated on us, so we wake up to the abuse that our belief in this petulant, childish, needy, abuser god has perpetrated on us. Once we get rid of that belief in that kind of god, then we can replace it with faith in the Creator of the universe, a much bigger God who embodies what Christ showed us: love, forgiveness, second, third, and all the way to infinity, chances. A God who already conquered death, so we don't have to be afraid of it anymore. And a God who's setting up a very different type of kingdom than the one that controlling humans like to set up.

When we have faith in this kind of a God, then we no longer have to have a trauma response of fighting God or fighting other people, including ourselves, or running away from God or others or ourselves, or fawning to God and others, or freezing. Now, we didn't talk about freezing in this episode, but that's another trauma response that we have. It just means that we're unable to think clearly or move forward. And I see this whenever Christians have a choice to make. They come to a fork in the road and they can't decide which way to go. They think, "Well, if I go left, then I might experience some bad things and some good things, but also some bad things. And if I go right, then I might experience some good things and some bad things." And everyone is telling them something different, and they aren't sure what God wants. And if they make a mistake and choose the path God doesn't want, God forbid, then they're going to suffer. God's going to punish them. He's a scary God, right?

I'm going to give you an example here. In my book, I talk about how I lost my first child. And when I had my second child, I had this opportunity to take a job as a college professor, But I was told that God wants women to stay home with their children and raise their children at home. So I believed that if I became a college professor, I took that job, God would kill my second child. He would think that I didn't appreciate my child enough or that I was selfish for wanting to be a college professor, and then He would just make my child die. When I think back on that, I think... I was not a dumb person. I was a very intelligent person, but I had been programmed to believe these really bizarre things. And I truly believe them. I'd been programmed to believe these things from childhood. So I chose to stay home and homeschool out of utter terror.

So, anyway, that's an example of freezing. Freezing might show up as not being able to choose either option as well and just living life by default. I know people who never



choose anything, so others choose for them or life chooses for them. They're frozen in fear, and so whatever happens, happens to them, but they're not able to actually be autonomous and make their own decisions about things. That is a trauma response. We are afraid to move forward because we're afraid, "What if I do it wrong? What if I'm a bad person? What if I choose the wrong door?"

But when our faith is in a God who is good and powerful, in a God who loves us no matter what, then we can relax when we know that we are safe with our Creator. We can relax. We can take risks. We can make mistakes. We can actually live life. We can feel negative emotions and not be scared that we're going to be punished for them. We can ask questions and not be scared that we're going to be punished for asking those questions. We can love and hold space for ourselves, and in doing that, we are better able to love and hold space for other people.

We no longer have to make sure that other Christians don't smoke or have sex or get a tattoo. We decide if we're going to smoke and have sex and get a tattoo because we're in charge of ourselves. And I'm purposely putting lots of different things in that sentence just to... You could make a list. I could probably sit down and within ten minutes come up with a hundred rules that I grew up believing. But we can let others make their own choices and we don't have to run around freaked out because we're afraid that God's going to zap them or ruin their lives. We know that God loves them. It's true. I mean, they could get an STD if they sleep around, or maybe they won't, but the point is it's their life, it's their STD, and they have the right to walk their own journey and learn their own lessons at their own pace and in their own way. God is not wringing His hands in despair, and He's also not shaking His head in disgust, so why are we doing that?

So this means that we stop trying to control everyone around us in order to keep ourselves safe because we are already safe. We don't have to make our fellow Christians do what we think is best, whether that's homeschooling, private schooling, or public schooling, not getting vaccinated or getting vaccinated, eating organic or not eating organic, listening to secular music or not listening to secular music, wearing skirts or not wearing skirts, going to church or not going to church, reading certain books or not reading certain books, voting Republican or Democrat, and a million other rules, like I said before, that have come and gone throughout the 2,000-year history of this particular world religion. What a relief! God has it all in His hands and we can just let go and live life — that is, if we have faith in that kind of God. It really does boil down to the God that you believe in, the God that you worship.

Now, if you've been thinking about unpacking some of your own past programming in

order to decide what to keep and what to retire to the garbage heap, I would love to help you with that. Consider joining me and hundreds of other Christian women inside of Flying Free. It's a program for women of faith who are serious about deprogramming from destructive ways of thinking in order to heal their relationships with themselves and experience a life-giving relationship with their Creator. Are you interested? Go to [joinflyingfree.com](http://joinflyingfree.com) for more information and to complete an application.

*Hey, beautiful butterfly. Thank you so much for listening. If you liked this episode, be sure to subscribe, and then consider leaving a rating and review so others can find us. To connect with me and get a free chapter of my book, head over to [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com), and until next time, fly free.*