Fight, Flight, Freeze & Fawn

in burnout: four ways your body tries to protect you when the tank is low

When there's more coming at you than you can handle, your nervous system shifts into protection. They're automatic, not choices or flaws. In burnout, your window is smaller, so they switch on faster and stay on longer.

Fight

the urge to push against it

IN BURNOUT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Snapping at small things
- Irritability that surprises you
- Arguing with every request

WHAT CAN HELP
Move the energy: walk, shake, press your hands together. Then cut one demand.

Flight

the urge to get away from it

IN BURNOUT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Cancelling and avoiding
- Scrolling or hyperfocus to escape
- Needing to leave right now

WHAT CAN HELP
Take a real exit, without shame. A planned break is better than a bolt.

YOUR ALARM SYSTEM

Freeze

the urge to stop in place

IN BURNOUT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Can't start, can't choose
- Staring, stuck, blank
- Words won't come

WHAT CAN HELP
Warmth, time, and one tiny physical step: wiggle your toes, sip water.

Fawn

the urge to keep everyone happy

IN BURNOUT IT CAN LOOK LIKE

- Saying yes to everything
- Masking even harder
- Smoothing it over at your cost

WHAT CAN HELP
Pause before you answer. "Let me get back to you" is a full sentence.

When it all spills over MELTDOWN & SHUTDOWN

Meltdown: the system overflows. Crying, yelling, pacing, hard stimming. Helps: less input, space, no questions yet.

Shutdown: the system goes offline. Can't speak or move, blank. Helps: quiet, time, no pressure to respond.

1 · NOTICE
"Something in me is trying to protect me."

2 · NAME
"This is freeze." Naming it without judging it.

3 · LOWER THE LOAD
Less input, fewer demands, then the next small step.

"Fawn" was named by therapist Pete Walker (*Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*, 2013). Autistic adults in burnout research described more meltdowns, shutdowns and overstimulation (Raymaker et al., 2020, *Autism in Adulthood*). For education, not diagnosis.

My Protective Patterns

Get to know your patterns on a calmer day, so they're easier to spot in the moment.

	WHAT I NOTICE	WHAT SETS IT OFF	WHAT HELPS ME
Fight			
Flight			
Freeze			
Fawn			

A note to myself for when I'm in it

Based on Walker (2013) and Raymaker et al. (2020). If you're in crisis or thinking about ending your life, please reach out now: in the US, call or text **988**; elsewhere, contact your local emergency or crisis line.