

Healing Trauma Part Three: The Freeze Response

The Fight, Flight and Freeze Responses

The fight, flight and freeze responses are hardwired into animals and humans. We do not get to choose which survival response will come up when we're threatened. Sometimes the fight response comes up and we're aggressive and angry. Sometimes the flight response comes up and we runaway or avoid the threat. Sometimes the freeze response comes up and we can't take action.

Nowadays threats are usually verbal and the threat almost always is not critical to our survival. Even though the threat is verbal, our system takes it as an attack and one of the three responses spontaneously begins its defense of us. The threat may be that our spouse gets mad at us for leaving the kitchen messy, and the fight, flight or freeze response becomes active.

Again, we don't get to choose which response comes up. Because the initial survival response is so strong, we usually cannot quickly take a different action than what the survival response is propelling us to do. We can have a choice of what to say or do after the survival response begins to subside.

What Is The Freeze Response?

We're very familiar when the fight response comes up, we're aggressive and angry. We know the fear that accompanies the flight response; when we want to get away, avoid or numb. When the freeze response comes up, we are frozen. We can take no action.

The most common example of the freeze response is when 'the deer is caught in the headlights.' A car is coming directly at the deer. The deer is a fast moving animal and could run away once it sees the car's headlights coming directly at it. Instead of taking a few running steps to save its life, the deer remains frozen in place and gets killed by the car.

In this example, the freeze response is a very bad survival response. Fight wouldn't be a good response for the deer; the deer running toward the car and jumping on the car in order to stop it. Flight would be the best choice, though the deer cannot access this choice because the freeze response is the survival response that came up.

There are traumatic events like being raped or standing frozen when a person could have helped a child who was in danger, and the person couldn't do anything because they were frozen (like the deer) in the freeze response. Some of these people can have self-condemnation for years. They may think again and again: "Why didn't I fight against the rapist?" or "Why didn't I run and help the child?"

When the freeze response takes over, the deer cannot (what seems very simple) scamper out of the road and continue to live another day. Each of us may find more forgiveness for ourselves as we review our life and know that the freeze response absolutely stopped us from taking action. It's not that we were weak or incapable. The deer is absolutely capable (if it's not caught by the freeze response) of scampering away, and it absolutely, at that time, cannot move.

A Recent Freeze Response

I recently had a private session with [Racquel](#). Racquel was very engaged, present and wanting to help me. I sat there frozen. I could barely speak a word. I didn't tell her that I was stuck in the freeze response because I was caught in the freeze response and I wasn't fully clear of what was going on at that time. If I had my current understanding of the freeze response, I would have been able to tell her that the freeze response was strongly active.

Luckily I didn't have to tell Racquel. She could see that I was very stuck. She was working hard to resuscitate me and bring me back to life. I saw how much energy she was using. I felt like a slug. She's working hard and the strong resistance in me was stopping me from noticeably helping to thaw the paralyzing freeze response. I felt like a failure.

The only action I could produce was to stay present to Racquel and to stay present to what was inside me. Now I understand that staying present with the internal feeling of being frozen/in resistance, staying present to the person helping me and trying to follow the person's guidance is exactly everything that I could have done.

Resistance

There is a saying that resistance is futile. The word futile means ineffective, useless or not successful. Even though resistance is futile, resistance may not go away. Many people die with resistance. Some people will resist eating healthier food and will die from cancer or diabetes. Some people will resist forgiving others and die with bitterness in their heart. Resistance may be ineffective or not successful, and yet resistance can exist for as long as a person lives.

Resistance has a strong connection to the freeze response. There is something that we could do that would help our survival (eating better) or to help our happiness (forgiving a person) and yet we won't make that change. Resistance stops us from making the change. Resistance, or inaction, is the active force when we're caught in the freeze response.

Is The Freeze Response Only Bad?

The freeze response isn't always bad. And yes, overall, the freeze response usually produces very poor results. The freeze response, almost always, is futile (ineffective, not successful) in producing an outcome that we would like.

Sometimes the freeze response could be the best option. Possibly during a robbery or during a rape the freeze response may help us to live another day. No action may save our life. If we went into fight or flight, we may have been killed.

Stuck In Freeze

There have been many times when I was talking with my teacher and I could feel how there was a solidness in me that was the opposite of open, free and flowing. There was nothing threatening to me at the time, and yet I felt stuck. There was nothing that Charles was saying or that I was talking about that I could relate to why I felt shut down, cut off and stuck.

In the work with Charles, he'd call this feeling 'being in resistance.' Now I understand that the freeze response had its grip on me. Charles helped me work through this resistance many times. Usually the resistance didn't have a story attached to it. I was plain old feeling stuck.

When resistance is there, Charles says that's the perfect time to work through the resistance. It's also a very difficult time to work through resistance because the freeze response's influence of non-action is strong. My current view is that often this resistance 'appearing out of nowhere' is stored trauma from a previous unresolved trauma coming up to the surface. When these resistant times come up, it's an opportunity to be free from an old unresolved trauma.

It doesn't matter why the stuck energy of the trauma was created. At this point there's an opportunity to melt a blockage that's inside. Every time the resistance was released while talking with my teacher, I felt so much more at ease, happy, complete and content.

The Previously Most Frustrating Aspect To Leading Group

The previously most frustrating aspect to leading group was when I was working with a person and they were in the freeze response. My view was that they were stuck in resistance and they weren't doing very much to help themselves. (Of course they weren't seeming to do much. They were stuck in the freeze response.)

As I previously wrote, I was that person stuck in resistance many times with my teacher. The recent being stuck in freeze with Racquel really taught me a lot. When I was stuck in freeze with Racquel, the thought did come that I was doing exactly what was most frustrating to me when I'm working with people in the group setting – I was stuck, lifeless, seeming to be putting forth very little or no effort to help bring myself back to wholeness.

I was doing exactly what could stress me when I worked with people in the group. And there was Racquel, working her butt off while I was stymied in the freeze response. What a teaching moment for me!

My Biggest Failure In Working With The Group

I failed last year in being able to work with a very appreciative attendee of the group meetings. She had been attending the meetings regularly for years. She was comfortable in the meetings until it became time for her to share. She went from being comfortable to being cut off and lifeless. Everybody in the group could see this happen. She and I both knew it and talked about her going numb each time it was her time to share.

This going numb continued to happen for a short number of months. We were both hanging in there waiting for a breakthrough to happen. A year prior to this, she was a shining example for everyone in the group of living from GGS (God's Guidance System). She was open and alive in the group meetings and in her life.

It came to a point that it was not good for her to continue to come to the meetings. There was no progress in her being able to share. She and I were both frustrated. I had tried everything I knew. I tried others actively supporting her in different ways during her sharing. I tried kindness and harshness. We explored me being a man (issues with men) and we explored me being in an authority position. Nothing was working.

We had worked together very well for years and now it was time for us to part. This parting was easier because she had also been working with Racquel. She could continue to work in group, though not in the group I was leading.

Now I can see very clearly that she was stuck in the freeze response every time it was her time to share. I now know how I'd positively, attentively and steadily approach working with her. [Peter Levine](#)'s work has given me tremendous insight into the freeze response.

It now seems so simple (though not easy) in how to help guide her out of the freeze response. I do strongly feel that we could have de-thawed the freeze if I had my current capabilities. We both knew we were up against something big because it wasn't going away or lessening. We were both giving it what we had. I didn't have enough skill. I failed her.

Now Working With People In Group When They're In The Freeze Response

I now very much look forward to working with people when they're in the freeze response. I will be able to lighten up on myself and not expect that every time the person will be able to fully get out of the freeze response. Peter Levine works with people for months and even years before a person is free from the traumatic energy that is being held in by the freeze response.

My teacher was a master of working with people in the freeze response. He was not successful each time in helping the person thaw out and come back to life. Each time he did help the walls crumble some; often very significantly crumble.

Since I recently and so vividly experienced being stuck in the freeze response, it's impossible for me to criticize someone else who's in the freeze response. I now know why they can't do more. It's very difficult (near impossible or impossible) to let go when the freeze response is active. I understand this much better now.

I have so much thanks for Charles, Racquel and Peter Levine for helping me in being able to work with the freeze response in others and in myself.

What We Can Do When The Freeze Response Is There

There are three aspects to getting out of the freeze response. The first aspect comes first. The other two aspects happen simultaneously throughout the time that we're helping ourselves to be free from the freeze response.

The first component in getting out of the freeze response is to recognize that the freeze response is there. Some of the signs of the freeze response are very obvious. Whenever we're in resistance, when we feel stuck, numb, dead or shut down, the freeze response is active.

The second aspect (done simultaneously with the third aspect) is to actively help ourselves to lessen the hold that the freeze response has on us. The simplest action, which almost always can be taken, is to breathe a little deeper into our belly and to help soften any noticeable tension in any part of our body; especially in our chest, belly, neck, shoulders and jaw.

There are two recently written articles that present different effective ways to actively help ourselves to lessen the power of the freeze response. You can click on the name of the articles to read them. The articles are [Healing Trauma Part One: An Alternative Approach To Talk Therapy and Drug Therapy](#) and [Healing Trauma Part Two: Getting Out Of Our Own Way](#).

The third aspect to get out of the freeze response is to be kind toward ourselves. It's so easy to criticize ourselves when the freeze response is active. Why don't I do more? Why am I procrastinating? I shouldn't be so stuck. Am I ever going to be able to get over this?

The freeze response can be very frustrating. Our logical thinking can say to us: "Start doing something." And yet we remain stuck. This is when kindness and compassion come in. We can have kindness and compassion for ourselves.

When we're caught in the freeze response, even the smallest of actions seems ominous. This is why I recommend to be kind to yourself knowing that you're in an almost powerless state. In this state you can deepen your breathing and relax tension in your muscles. Both of these actions (breathing more life into yourself and softening the hard resistant areas of your body) will help you move out of the freeze response.

With this base of deepening our breathing, softening the tension in our muscles and being kind to ourselves we can start to add some of the other recommended ways in the previous two articles on healing trauma to thaw out the freeze response and come back to life.

May all beings live in peace and happiness.