

Trauma Chat Episode 4

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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** [00:00:00] Trauma Chat podcast, episode 4.

[00:00:04] Hi, welcome back. Glad you're here. So last time I talked about symptoms of trauma that maybe some may be familiar, some may be surprising, but they can definitely sneak up on us and be disguised as other things other than trauma. In fact, many people are diagnosed with ADHD, or bipolar disorder, when it might be more accurate to diagnose them with PTSD from a trauma perspective, which is the way I practice and therapists who specialize in trauma, this is the way they practice. You would do the assessment of the symptoms, considering whether [00:01:00] trauma may explain the symptoms. And if you do that, what I've found is it usually does. So what I wanted to talk about today is trauma responses. So when we go through a traumatic event, when we are experiencing a traumatic event, if we are unable to cope with what's happening, then our brain just kicks into literally survival mode.

[00:01:37] And our trauma defenses kick into gear, trauma defenses, then I'm also calling them responses to trauma or trauma reactions, are fight, flight, freeze, and [00:02:00] submit. So most of us have heard of fight or flight. But we don't often talk about freeze and submit when someone is going through a traumatic experience, basically it's like they say, if you were walking in the jungle, and suddenly you saw tiger. The primitive part of your brain which is this instinctive response, your trauma responses, your trauma reactions, that part of your brain is going to jump into gear. And what typically happens is you're walking in the jungle, you're maybe whistling a tune or you're admiring the monkeys swinging through the air, suddenly your eyes see a tiger.

[00:02:53] And next thing, you know, you're catching your breath here, going, 'Wow. [00:03:00] Oh my gosh. Was that a tiger?' And you're, you're looking back and you're like far away from where that tiger had been, because without you even thinking your legs just moved and you ran, maybe you climbed up a tree, maybe you jumped in the water.

[00:03:23] But it happens before your conscious brain can even register what's happening. It's not like your brain says, oh, there's a tiger. I should run away. You just run. And then, like I said, you might realize afterwards, 'Wow. I think I just saw a tiger. So that's an example of how the instinctive trauma response happens without our cognitive brain being involved.

[00:03:58] So [00:04:00] fight what fight looks like and how it shows up in our behavior, it could be someone behaving with anger, rage, or defiance. Fight could look like hitting, it could look like screaming no, it could look like arguing, continually, being oppositional. So those are some of the behaviors that match up with that fight instinct being activated when a threat is detected by your nervous system.

[00:04:33] One thing I want to say about fight is it's not always visible from the outside. Sometimes our fight response is turned inward. So self-harming behaviors often fall into that category. Sometimes eating disorders can also be examples of the fight response.

[00:05:01] [00:05:00] Now flight is what I gave an example of before with the tiger. It could be running away. It could be going away in your mind. It could be avoiding.

[00:05:17] Now freeze is a little more confusing. Freeze might look like the person is just staring at you. It might look like what it feels like is it feels like you are wanting to get away. You're maybe filled with energy and anxiety internally, but you have no ability to move yourself.

[00:05:47] So when we're stuck in a freeze state, oftentimes that is how depression looks. [00:06:00] Freeze explains why sometimes in dangerous situations, people just are very still and other people might say, well, why didn't you do something? Why didn't you pick up something and hit them? Or why didn't you fight in some way? And the other person, the person who went through the experience, can't really answer that because they don't know why, but the reason why was because they were frozen.

[00:06:36] And when we freeze, that is freeze is very confusing because you may feel like you want to move and you can't. So you don't understand why you're not moving. But if you go back to the example of the jungle, another thing that someone could do, if they were to encounter a [00:07:00] tiger that wanted to attack them, fighting back is not really going to be a very good option most of the time, because the tiger is bigger, and stronger, and has powerful jaws and fangs and claws, but what could be effective would be to freeze and play dead. If you've ever watched a nature special where a lion will chase an antelope and capture the antelope and its mouth, and then the antelope goes limp, and then the lion ends up dropping it down on the ground. Maybe turns his back for a second.

[00:07:37] And the antelope jumps up and runs off. Freeze is an adaptive response, just like fight and flight that can be very useful in life-threatening situations. If you've ever heard that if you were to go camping or something and you see a bear, you should play dead if you can't escape. And [00:08:00] that's the same thing, that's freeze, except you're not doing it on purpose. Your body does it for you.

[00:08:06] One of the confusing things about trauma is that our logical mind can tell us that the situation that we were in was not life-threatening. I mean, there are many traumatic events that are life-threatening events, but there are so many more other types of traumatic experiences that people have that if you look at it, you would say, well, you know my life wasn't actually in danger, no one dies from, blank, whatever it was, but your nervous system may experience it as a life-threatening experience or a risk of severe danger and it responds accordingly. Now the other trauma reaction I mentioned is submit, [00:09:00] submit is again, a very adaptive trauma response, but very confusing after the fact.

[00:09:07] So an example of submit could be, if you were at an ATM machine and someone walks up behind you and they had a gun and they put the gun on your back and said, 'Withdraw all the money from your account and hand it to me.' You may respond, 'Listen, I don't want any trouble. How much money do you want? I'll even give you a ride if that's what you want. Don't worry. I'm not going to call the police. Here's my money. You can take my phone too. Here's my keys. Just take my car. You can, you can take the car, go ahead.' Now that could happen. And that might seem real, strange and confusing to many people

afterwards, when you know, the person says I was robbed, they took, [00:10:00] you know, they made me, take all my money out of the account and they took my car too.

[00:10:05] And then they see the video from the ATM machine and they see that the person said here, here's my keys, just take my car to, and you know, if we don't understand trauma responses, we might say, well, why you gave, 'why did you give them your keys? It seemed like you were doing this on purpose. Did you, you know, were you in on this somehow with them?'

[00:10:27] And the victim again is confused too. They're like, I, I don't know. I, I just wanted, I didn't want them to hurt me. But it's hard to understand because our logical brain is like, Well I didn't have to give him the keys to the car, but your trauma response is just doing whatever you can to stay alive in that situation. And if that means engaging the person to show them that you are not a threat and [00:11:00] discourage them from wanting to hurt you.

[00:11:05] It might work. It might not, but when there's a gun on your back, your body is going to respond as if your life is in danger, your nervous system, doesn't say, is that a real gun or is it loaded? Is this person really serious about it? It just reacts with the trauma response that can save your life. But it's so confusing because afterwards you may second guess yourself, criticize yourself and, and be deeply disturbed by the fact that you responded the way you did in that situation.

[00:11:50] So one of the things that I want to emphasize in this episode is that [00:12:00] trauma responses are automatic. To our logical mind they may not make sense, but they're always your body's best attempt to keep you alive, your brains attempt to protect you. And judging how someone responds in the midst of a traumatic situation is not fair to the person because nobody knows what they would do if they were in the same situation. It's easy to critique by hearing about someone else's experience and say, 'oh, I would've done this,' but you really don't know what you'll do until you're in that situation. When you hear people say, when someone makes a daring rescue. And you hear about it on the news. And the news person says, "how did you make such a brave decision?" And the person who rescued the other person will say, "I didn't even think about it." You know, you don't think [00:13:00] during those situations, you just jump into action. And that's, that's how your nervous system activates your threat response system during traumatic experiences.

[00:13:12] I hope this was helpful in just just giving a basic introduction to the four trauma threat responses, fight, flight, freeze, and submit

[00:13:29] If you like this episode, please go to iTunes and leave a rating and review so then Apple will show the podcast to more people who would like to find it.

[00:13:39] Until next time, be well.