



PENNY HOLBURN COACHING

It's about You and Results

THE PLEASING (FAWN) RESPONSE

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We get told that the response to danger is fight or flight. Like everything to do with human beings, however, it is more complicated than that. There are at least two other responses that are common - freeze and fawn (please). Sometimes in a dangerous situation fight is not an option and neither is flight. You cannot run away as you are trapped with nowhere to run to, and you cannot fight because you would definitely lose and possibly get killed. So, in order to survive we try other responses. We can freeze - which is like playing dead - in the hopes we will be ignored. Or we can try and please in the hopes that someone will not harm us because we are making them feel valued and important; we are pleasing to them.

As an adult you have probably had to use various responses to cope with danger. There may be times when you had to flee - run away. Which you can do because the stress hormones prime your body to run away. You could also fight. Which you will do if you think you can escape the danger that way. Once again the stress hormones prime the body to fight. With both flight and fight, the natural responses of the body prepare you for action, and often the danger is then over with quickly. And that is the end. Everything physically and mentally can return to normal in almost all instances.

With the freeze and fawn responses it is not so simple. They tend to be more complicated and layered responses when fight or flight have been tried and found to be ineffective. They are also adaptations to surviving danger, but more complex and less easy to deal with. I am not going to talk about the freeze response here, I am going to talk about the fawn response. The pleasing or fawn response is a more complex response to deal with continually being in a dangerous situation. The pleasing response usually means you have tried fight or flight and it hasn't worked, so when people deploy the fawn response it usually means they have already encountered a helpless situation and feel powerless. The fawn response is used to survive in an ongoing dangerous situation because it sometimes is the only thing that works. It however, takes a huge toll on the survivor.

The fawn or pleasing response means that I try and survive in the dangerous situation by pleasing the people who pose a danger. It means I learn to tune in so carefully to the needs and wants of others that I know exactly how to respond to make them feel good. It also means I learn to anticipate how the dangerous person will behave and adapt my responses accordingly, in the hopes of surviving the dangerous situation. I please, placate, understand, and do what I need to do to survive. Which means I work really hard to be useful to the other person by making them pleased with me. Because if they aren't pleased with me, if I express my own ideas and needs instead of cater to theirs, I might not survive.

Detrimental consequences of having to use the fawn response include: co-dependence, obsequiousness, servitude, people pleasing, doormat, slave, victim or parentified child.

Now because the fawn or pleasing response is often the case in situations of exposure to prolonged danger, it can become a learned way of responding. It becomes ingrained in the way we think, feel and act. And even when we are no longer in the dangerous situation, we still act with a pleasing response, because that is the only way we know how to be. However, this is not a healthy response. It may have kept us alive in a dangerous situation, but it exacts a huge toll in real life.

- The pleasing response may be the only way you feel you can be approved of, or feel loved and appreciated. And that means you repress or deny your own needs and wants and do what everyone else wants.
- The pleasing response may be the only way in which you feel you can avoid danger. So if you do try and act according to your own needs and wants you will be frightened that something bad will happen to you.
- It takes a lot of energy to anticipate how someone else is going to react as well as to cater to their needs and wants. It is exhausting demonstrating a pleasing response all the time.
- When the pleasing response doesn't work you come to think you are to blame for not being good enough rather than recognising that the other person needs to take responsibility for their (bad) behaviour. It becomes easy for you to blame yourself for others' unkindness and cruelty.
- Over time, if you are so focused on trying to read others and please others, you can start getting it wrong. You are so overwhelmed and exhausted and overrun with anxiety that you start misreading people and signals. You lose your self-reference which creates lots of doubt and overthinking.
- In the process of learning to please in order to survive, you lose yourself. The result can be a feeling of emptiness, loneliness, hollowness, and possibly even feeling like you don't exist as a person. In addition to various anxiety disorders, depression is also a common consequence.
- Co-dependency is often the result of an over-developed pleasing response. If you are continually devaluing yourself and constantly seeking validation from others, it leads to you becoming emotionally unstable and dependent on others.
- Hints of danger trigger servile behaviours and abdication of your rights and needs.

To deal with this:

1. I think you cannot do all the work with self-help. Self-help is great. However, nothing will replace having a relationship with a therapist/counsellor/coach who provides a safe space and a totally different relationship experience. We get damaged in relationships and I believe we only really heal in relationships.
2. Understand what happened to you and why. You are not bad or shameful for behaving in this way. It was the only way you could survive. You are going to have to work through the original trauma. You can't just deal with the here and now and fix this. You need to go back to the past.

3. Deal with the emotions which will be plentiful. There will be lots of grieving. There will be lots of anger. This is perfectly normal, although not nice. Expressing grief and anger are healing though. It may feel like you will never stop feeling the pain and anger, or they will overwhelm you, but they don't and you do move onto better feelings.
4. Know that the dangerous situation has past. You can now learn a different way to respond. No longer do you have to please in order to survive.
5. Start to explore who you really are. What matters to you? What are your needs and wants?
6. Learn new ways to think and act. New ways in which to communicate and act assertively. Aim to talk more and not just listen. Express your ideas and views rather than just listening to and agreeing with others. Take on leadership roles, not just follower ones. Accept help, rather than just be the one offering a helping hand. Learn to stop saying sorry unless it is appropriate. Learn to say no. Define and enforce personal boundaries. Stop hiding, and start expressing what you think and feel.
7. It will take time. You have learned to behave in one way in order to survive. And you have learned this well. Now you need to learn a new way to be. It doesn't happen overnight, but you can learn a different way to be in the world. A way that is much healthier and doesn't require you to forgo who you are as a person.

NOTE: If this article triggers strong emotions in you or is very upsetting to you, please seek professional help.