

The Body

What is 'fight or flight'? When we **perceive a threat**, our bodies go into 'fight or flight' mode in an instant – this physical response was developed during evolution to help us survive the sabre-toothed tiger, or that troublemaker that was trying to oust us from the tribe, or indeed anything that threatened our survival.

“Fight or flight is an instant pumping up of our bodies (with a series of physiological changes) that better equips us to fight hard or run fast from ‘danger’ – it prepares us for extreme physical action in an instant.”

Here are a couple of examples that will explain the immediacy and effects of fight or flight:-

You walk over to your lovely bowl of fruit. Reach in, and. 'OH! A big SPIDER! EEK'. The natural reaction is to jump back – our bodies instantly revving into fight or flight, our hearts thump, our stomachs tighten into a knot. But within a few moments, we (well most of us) realise there is no extreme danger here – and our bodies return to a natural balance very quickly.



You're in bed. You're woken by a crash sound somewhere in your home. A BURGLAR!?! You are instantly alert – you spring up, tilt your head back, eyes focussing in the middle distance for danger, ears straining to hear what's going on, your heart pumping and lungs expanding to take more oxygen, heat rising in your body, ready to take whatever action is required (this can include 'freezing' which protected us from notice of predators etc)... then your flatmate shouts in 'sorry, only me, I dropped a plate'. Deep sigh as your body returns to balance and calms down...

Those are examples of real practical problems that would *benefit* from fight or flight... after all, if you had to deal with a giant tarantula or a violent intruder, you would make good use of your body in its prepped and revved up state, right? And in both cases, within a very short time, we realise there has been a *mistake in processing the event*, an 'irrational cognition', and our body returns to balance (homeostasis) very quickly. But many of us fight 'invisible tigers' constantly – imagining dangers and threats where there are none, which brings on our flight or flight even when there is no real danger present. This is at the very least uncomfortable, and at worst results in regular panic attacks and ongoing physical illness.

So... **danger is often psychological rather than physical.** Situations only bring on 'fight or flight' if you *perceive* them as dangerous - it's often not the situation itself (an interview, public speaking, a party, etc) that makes your body sick and shaky, it's how you think about it. We can use CBT to recognise that our thinking causes us to see these metaphorical tigers – and we can learn healthy new thinking that banishes them and lets us relax and enjoy our life and opportunities and experiences.

Can you identify situations that bring on physical sensations? Write these down:

Visit our relaxation page as there are many ways we can relax and control our fight or flight response:

- **Controlled Breathing**
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**
- **Imaginal Relaxation**
- **Distraction**
- **Exercise**