

## ACTIVITY: THE STRESS RESPONSE

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**Goal:** The goal of this activity is to understand how the brain and body respond to stress in the moment.

The facilitator summarizes key points related to the stress response system.

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Read aloud:

- The brain has a built-in alarm system designed to detect threat and keep us safe.
  - When faced with threat, the emotional brain takes over and initiates a fight, flight, freeze response.
  - A stress becomes traumatic when it overwhelms our stress response system.
  - In times of stress, there is less capacity to reason and verbalize.
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### Facilitator instructions:

1. Pass out the participant handout for the activity.
2. Read the activity goal.

Read aloud:

The goal of this activity is to understand how the brain and body respond to stress. We will talk about how the stress response plays a role in our daily interactions with service recipients.

3. Remind staff about key aspects of the stress response.

Read aloud:

Our brain has a built-in alarm system that is designed to detect potential threat and help the body react in ways that will keep us safe. We respond to threat by fighting, fleeing, or freezing, depending on what is most likely to keep us safe in the moment. Understanding the process and sequence of the stress response can help us understand our own reactions and those of service recipients and colleagues.

4. Refer to the participant handout and review instructions with the group. Decide whether you are going to ask participants to complete the activity individually or in a pair or small group and direct the group accordingly, modifying the script below. The facilitator version of the activity includes an answer key.

Read aloud:

Order the experiences in the right-hand column from beginning to end to reflect how the stress response works.

5. Determine how you want to debrief the activity. For example, you could do a general call and response from the whole group or call on individuals for their answers.

6. Use the discussion questions to engage the group in further conversation about the stress response. Presenters should modify the questions as needed and pose them to the large group or print as a handout for small group discussions.
7. Close the activity after the discussion.

Read aloud:

Knowing how the stress response system works helps us to understand our own stress reactions and those of others. For example, when a service recipient is feeling threatened, even if we are not sure why, it is important to remember that the emotional brain has taken over and attempts to talk at or rationalize with the individual in that moment will be ineffective. We also know that if our interaction with service recipients or others sets off our own stress response, we, too, will have a hard time thinking clearly and managing our emotional responses.

It is important to remember that not every threat that sets off the stress response is traumatic, and some amount of stress helps us to learn and grow. A stress becomes traumatic when it overwhelms this system that is usually effective at keeping us safe. When the system becomes overwhelmed, the emotional brain remains on alert and continues to send the body instructions to fight, flee, or freeze, even after the threat has passed. People exposed to chronic trauma may remain in survival mode much of the time, which compromises their ability to engage with others and to learn new skills.

## ACTIVITY: THE STRESS RESPONSE – FACILITATOR HANDOUT

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**Participant Instructions:** Order the experiences in the right-hand column from beginning (1) to end (7) to reflect how the stress response works.

Order—Leader answer key	Stress response
3	Your thinking brain checks things out and confirms that there is a potential threat.
7	Your thinking brain comes back online to help your body calm down.
1	You are interacting with an individual who becomes agitated and starts to yell at you, accusing you of purposefully not helping them.
5	Your emotional brain initiates the “fight, flight, or freeze” response.
2	Your emotional brain senses a potential threat to your physical or emotional wellbeing and sets off the alarm.
6	You react in the situation by raising your voice and becoming more directive with the service recipient.
4	Your thinking brain goes “off-line” so that the emotional brain can take over.

## ACTIVITY: THE STRESS RESPONSE – PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

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**Participant Instructions:** Order the experiences in the right-hand column from beginning (1) to end (7) to reflect how the stress response works.

Order	Stress response
	Your thinking brain checks things out and confirms that there is a potential threat.
	Your thinking brain comes back online to help your body calm down.
	You are interacting with an individual who becomes agitated and starts to yell at you, accusing you of purposefully not helping them.
	Your emotional brain initiates the “fight, flight, or freeze” response.
	Your emotional brain senses a potential threat to your physical or emotional wellbeing and sets off the alarm.
	You react in the situation by raising your voice and becoming more directive with the service recipient.
	Your thinking brain goes “off-line” so that the emotional brain can take over.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: THE STRESS RESPONSE

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1. What situations during the work day have the potential to activate your stress response system?
2. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for you in the moment (e.g., sweating, heart racing, yelling, shutting down)?
3. What situations are more likely to set off the stress response for service recipients?
4. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for service recipients?
5. What does the “fight, flight, or freeze” response look like for colleagues?
6. How might information about the stress response inform your daily work?