

Fight, flight, or freeze?

Chances are, you're familiar with the term "fight or flight". These words have become ingrained in our understanding of how animals tend to react when feeling stressed or unsafe. The instinctive reaction to face an aggressor head-on or turn and run to escape conflict and the biological processes accompanying these responses are well-known and well-discussed in the animal kingdom. We may also talk about the "freeze" response, where animals remain motionless to avoid drawing attention from a threat. Together, these mechanisms form a repertoire of protective behaviours that aim to manage threat responses and enhance survival as part of predator-prey dynamics or as part of managing their social groups within their species. However, another response occurs, which is often overlooked - the "fawn" response.



What is the fawn response?

Better described in studies of human trauma responses, the fawn response refers to displaying behaviours such as submission to avoid negative consequences from aggressors. In humans, this tends to look like excessive people-pleasing, co-dependency, and quickly giving in to appease others to avoid potential conflict (Owca, 2020). These behaviours often result from past traumatic situations where other fear responses, such as fight or flight, haven't worked out. If you are familiar with canine behaviour, these may sound familiar to some, seen in some rescue dogs, adopting submissive posturing, attempting to seem small, and acting overly friendly or non-threatening (Barrera et al., 2010). These behaviours aim to de-escalate, telling a potential threat, "I don't mean any harm", to defuse the tension and avoid negative consequences.

Why is talking about the fawn response important?

So why are fawn responses important when discussing animal wellbeing? If you work with social animals, you may be very familiar with some fawn responses already – even if that isn't the term you've been using to describe them. Many submissive behaviours, such as rolling onto their back, submissive grooming, and avoiding eye contact, are all behaviours that less dominant individuals may display to show more dominant animals that they are not a threat in times of stress. Recognising these fawn responses allows us to better understand animal communication and social dynamics, providing valuable insight into how some species address conflict and reduce tension within a group. More

significantly, acknowledging fawn responses has wellbeing implications. If animals constantly try to appease more dominant animals, this may suggest that they have a learned fear response due to past negative experiences with those animals (Norman et al., 2023).

It may also be the case that you are familiar with fawn responses because you have seen an animal display this type of behaviour towards you. Understanding the forms that fawn responses may take and why they may be triggered may also help us to understand when we are the cause and allow us to take steps when it seems an animal is afraid of us. For example, cringing or cowering when approached could indicate that handling and training protocols need adjusting to reduce stress (Brando and Norman, 2023). Recognising natural fawn body language is crucial to differentiate from abnormal fear-based behaviour changes that may require intervention. The safety and comfort of animals can be prioritised through gentle, positive reinforcement-based training, a compassionate approach, and enriched living environments with safe spaces incorporated throughout. By reducing the fear and stress caused by our behaviour, we can reduce the likelihood that animals we care for feel the need to fight, flee, freeze, or fawn in response to us.

Moving forward

While fight, flight and freeze responses remain dominant in discussions of animal stress, it is time we gave equal consideration to fawning as a fear response. Fawning provides valuable insight into how vulnerable individuals navigate risk and address conflict, with implications for their mental wellbeing. Acknowledging fawn behaviour can deepen our understanding of species-specific responses to stress. Animal caregivers can use this knowledge to adjust handling techniques and living environments to limit triggers which may cause appeasement-type behaviours indicative of fear and stress. The goal is to empower animals with the knowledge that they are not at risk and that if they do feel scared, they have safe places to go. By recognising fawning as a legitimate and informative element of animal fear responses, we can update frameworks to support animal wellbeing more comprehensively.

References

- Barrera, G., Jakovcevic, A., Elgier, A. M., Mustaca, A., & Bentosela, M. (2010). Responses of shelter and pet dogs to an unknown human. *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 5(6), 339-344.
- Brando, S., & Norman, M. (2023). Handling and Training of Wild Animals: Evidence and Ethics-Based Approaches and Best Practices in the Modern Zoo. *Animals*, 13(14), 2247.
- Norman, M., Jones, C., Watson, K., & Previdelli, R. L. (2023). Social Network Analysis as a Tool in the Care and Wellbeing of Zoo Animals: A Case Study of a Family Group of Black Lemurs (*Eulemur macaco*). *Animals*, 13(22), 3501.
- Owca, J. (2020). The Association between a Psychotherapist's Theoretical Orientation and Perception of Complex Trauma and Repressed Anger in the Fawn Response (Doctoral dissertation, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology).