



Understanding Trauma Survival Responses: A Reflection Worksheet for CPTSD Assessment and Awareness

Purpose of This Handout

This handout is designed to help you reflect, notice patterns, and gather information about how your nervous system responds to stress and perceived threat before your upcoming CPTSD assessment with your clinician.

There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is simply to increase awareness of your automatic trauma responses—how they show up in your body, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—so you and your clinician can better understand what your nervous system has learned to do to keep you safe.

You can also continue to use this handout over time to track patterns, notice shifts, and build insight into your trauma responses as your awareness grows.

How Trauma Survival Responses Work in the Nervous System

Your brain and central nervous system (CNS) are programmed to respond immediately when they detect a threat to your safety or survival. This process happens automatically and outside of conscious control.

A simple example

Imagine you trip while walking down the stairs.

Before you have time to think:

- Your body grabs the railing
- Your brain generates the thought “I could fall and get seriously hurt or die”
- You feel a surge of fear

These three messages are sent together by the nervous system:

- A physical survival response (grabbing the rail)
- A cognitive message (the danger-based thought)
- An emotional signal (fear)

All three work together to help you survive the threat. Once you regain balance and safety, the nervous system releases the activation, and your body returns to baseline.

What Happens With Trauma

With chronic or overwhelming trauma—especially when escape, protection, or support were not possible—the nervous system may not fully complete or release this survival response.

As a result, the brain continues to send similar messages even when the present-day threat is no longer happening.

These messages often include:

- Core negative feelings: powerlessness, unsafety, or a sense of being damaged or defective
- Negative cognitions: “I’m not safe,” “I’m helpless,” “Something is wrong with me”
- Hypervigilance: constant scanning for danger, rejection, or failure
- Somatic activation: tension, shutdown, agitation, numbness, or other body-based reactions

When the nervous system stays activated in this way, you may continue to experience physical symptoms, distressing thoughts, and strong emotions that feel confusing, overwhelming, or disconnected from the present moment.

Why This Awareness Matters

Trauma responses are not signs of weakness or failure—they are learned survival strategies. By noticing how your nervous system communicates through your body, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, you begin the process of helping it recognize safety again.

This handout is one step toward understanding what your nervous system learned to do to survive, so that healing and regulation can begin.

Understanding Trauma Survival Modes (CPTSD)

Your nervous system developed automatic survival responses to protect you during chronic stress or trauma. These are protective patterns, not character flaws.

Instructions:

- Rank Core feelings from 1–3 (1 = most intense, 3 = least intense)
- Check any thoughts, emotions, or body signals you experience
- Add your own experiences where noted



● FIGHT MODE

What's happening in the nervous system: When threat is perceived and safety feels achievable through confrontation, the nervous system mobilizes into fight.

Core feelings (rank 1-3)

- Feeling unsafe or threatened __
- Fear of being powerless or losing control __
- Sense of being damaged, defective, or wrong __

Common thoughts and emotional patterns (check + add your own)

- Hypervigilance: scanning for danger, criticism, or rejection
- Interpreting neutral situations as threatening
- Defensive rumination (replaying or preparing arguments)
- Irritability, anger, or strong defensiveness
- Urge to explain, defend, or prove your point
- Difficulty calming down once activated
- Other thoughts or emotional patterns: _____

Body signals (check + add your own)

- Loud, fast, or pressured speech
- Heart pounding or racing
- Muscle tension (jaw, shoulders, fists, chest)
- Heat in the body or face
- Clenched teeth or fists
- Other body signals: _____

Gentle reminder: These patterns are nervous-system survival responses, not failures. Noticing them with curiosity rather than judgment is a powerful step in rewiring the brain toward healing.

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS:

 **FLIGHT MODE**

What's happening in the nervous system: When danger is sensed and escape feels possible, the nervous system shifts into flight.

Core feelings (rank 1-3)

- Sense that something is wrong or unsafe _____
- Fear of harm, abandonment, illness, or catastrophe _____
- Feeling inadequate, overwhelmed, or unable to cope _____

Common thoughts and emotional patterns (check + add your own)

- Persistent anxiety or dread
- “What if” or worst-case scenario thinking
- Hypervigilant scanning for danger, rejection, or failure
- Avoiding tasks, responsibilities, or social situations
- Fear of failing or not being “good enough”
- Urge to stay busy or keep moving
- Other thoughts or emotional patterns: _____

Sleep-related experiences

- Avoiding sleep due to fear or loss of control
- Restless or fragmented sleep
- Nightmares or anxiety-filled dreams

Body signals (check + add your own)

- Racing heart
- Tight chest or shortness of breath
- Uneasy, knotted, or nauseous stomach
- Restlessness or inability to relax
- Shallow breathing
- Other body signals: _____

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NOTES AND REFLECTIONS: _____

 **ATTACH (FAWN) MODE**

What's happening in the nervous system: When connection feels like the only source of safety, the nervous system prioritizes closeness and approval.

Core feelings (rank 1-3)

- Feeling unsafe, alone, or disconnected __
- Fear of abandonment or rejection __
- Belief of being damaged, unworthy, or “too much” __

Common thoughts and emotional patterns (check + add your own)

- Needing frequent reassurance
- Fear others will leave, withdraw, or be upset
- Emotional collapse, numbness, or emptiness when connection feels threatened
- Feeling fundamentally different from others
- Feeling unseen or misunderstood
- Over-functioning or caretaking to feel safe or valued
- Difficulty making decisions that might upset others
- Guilt or anxiety when setting boundaries
- Other thoughts or emotional patterns: _____

Body signals (check + add your own)

- Urge to make the body smaller or less noticeable
- Tightness in throat or chest
- Shallow breathing
- Tension when speaking up
- Collapsing posture
- Other body signals: _____

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NOTES AND REFLECTIONS:



FREEZE MODE

What's happening in the nervous system: When fight, flight, or attach feel unsafe or unavailable, the nervous system may shut down to conserve energy.

Core feelings (rank 1-3)

- Overwhelm or shutdown _____
- Powerlessness or inability to act _____
- Emotional numbness or disconnection _____

Common thoughts and emotional patterns (check + add your own)

- Feeling mentally “offline” or spaced out
- Losing track of time
- Difficulty starting or completing tasks
- Feeling stuck, blank, or foggy
- Reduced emotional range
- Sense that effort won’t change outcomes
- Other thoughts or emotional patterns: _____

Common survival coping behaviors

- Watching TV, scrolling, gaming, or reading to numb
- Excessive sleeping
- Skin picking or other repetitive behaviors
- Binge or mindless eating
- Compulsive checking or reviewing
- Observing others from a distance

Body signals (check + add your own)

- Heavy or sluggish body
- Extreme fatigue
- Numbness or reduced pain awareness
- Shallow or slowed breathing
- Difficulty sensing hunger or thirst
- Other body signals: _____

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