

# Understanding Fear

Some thoughts on Fear and its impact on the Therapist

An introduction to workshops I run as part of CTI  
training programme:

Fear and the Therapist

Fear and Attachment

If we want to understand  
TRAUMA,  
we need to understand...

FEAR



TRAUMA

is a

FEAR-SYSTEM DISORDER

The fear-system has  
activated in response to a  
threat but then cannot  
deactivate when the threat  
has passed

Complex Trauma is a  
*chronic*  
fear system disorder

When the fear-system fails to switch off chronically, lots of things go wrong....

In our body

distressing and worrying sensations

physical illness, chronic pain, chronic fatigue

...our behaviour (self-harm, self-neglect, avoidance, violence, addiction)

...our thoughts (focus on danger, “othering”, or hopeless, brain-fade)

...our patterns of relating to others (dominant/submissive,  
controlling/appeasing)

... our ability to work, to earn and have autonomy

...to be able to create a supportive external  
environment for oneself



...and these compound  
and self-reinforce over  
time to make it harder  
and harder for our fear  
system to switch off

Guilding, M. (2020). What is Complex Trauma?  
*Perspectives on Trauma*, Volume 1, Issue 1, pp. 3-18.

so if we want to be able to  
help people suffering from  
complex trauma

we really need to know all  
we can about fear

...so what *is* fear?

lets start with what it  
feels like...

# Exercise

Heart beating faster

Heart starting to pound in your chest

Suddenly feeling hot or flushing

Sweating

Going tense around shoulders

Rigid tension

Trembling

Fists clenching

Legs tense

Feeling useless

Hearing, eyesight, smell, become more acute

Holding your breath

Goosebumps

Dry mouth

Feeling of nausea

Wanting to go to the toilet

An upward rush of energy

A sinking feeling

Postural collapse

Feeling dizzy

Feeling faint

Wanting to run and hide

Irritation or anger

Legs suddenly feeling weak

Mind going blank

A stream of anxious thoughts

Sense of danger

Self-attacking thoughts

Hopeless thoughts

Heavy eyelids – feeling really sleepy

A sense of being out of body

No feeling at all – just numbness

# What does fear feel like?

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What *is* fear...

Fear is the ancient and complex set of biological systems with which the body responds to threat

## Biological responses to threat

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) **when danger sensed but not close**
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy **when danger is close.**
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown **when danger is inescapable**

## Biological responses to threat

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
  - **Orienting response**
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy when danger is close
  - **Fight, Flight**
  - **Freeze, Fright**
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown when danger is inescapable
  - **Immobility / Tonic Immobility**

Literature on fear is a mess!

Take the use of the word “FREEZE”

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(Kozłowska, K., Walker, P., McLean, L. and Carrive, P. (2015) Fear and the Defence Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* [Online], 23(4), p. 270.)

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Take the concept of “TONIC IMMOBILITY”

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## Biological responses to threat

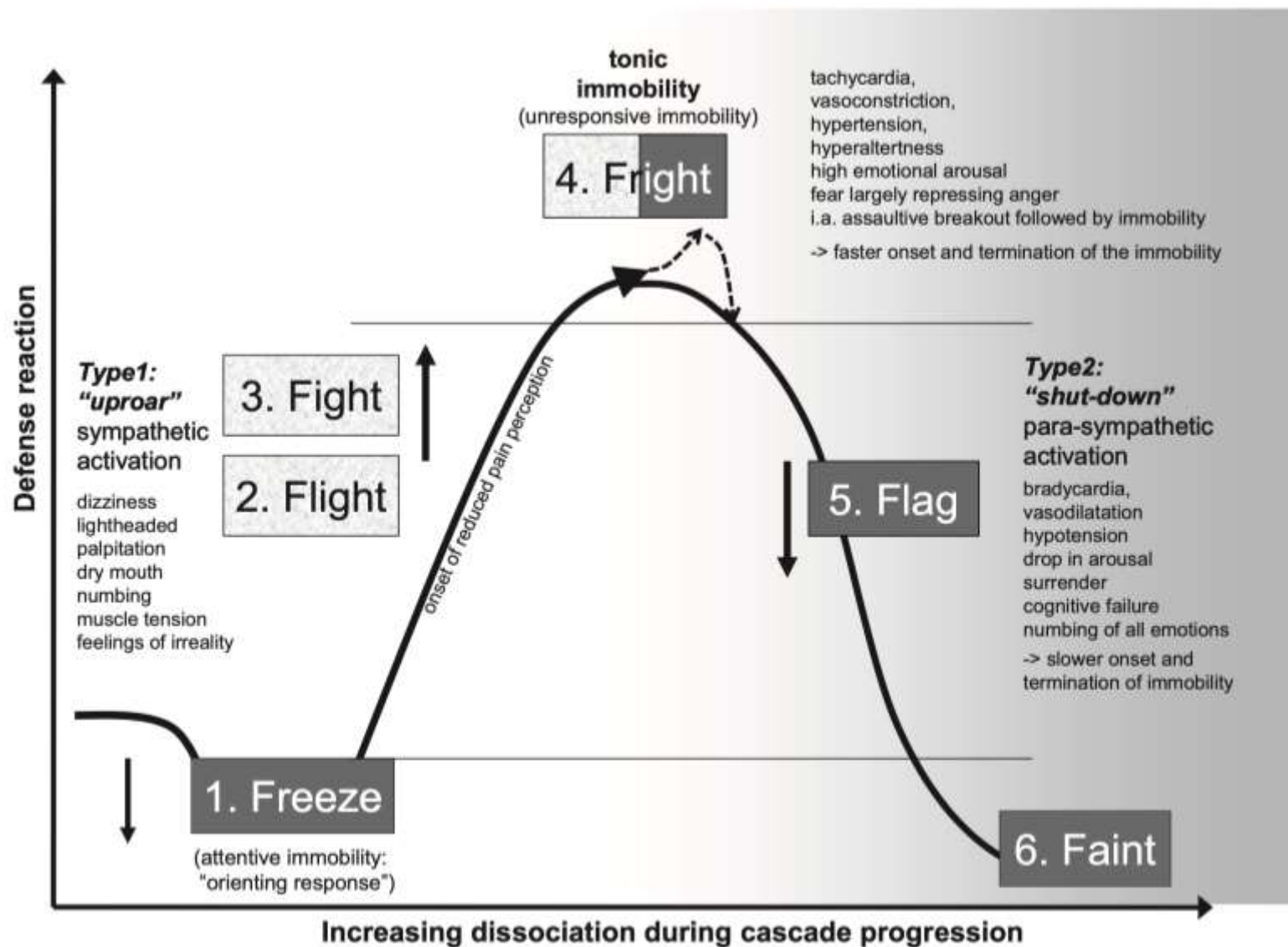
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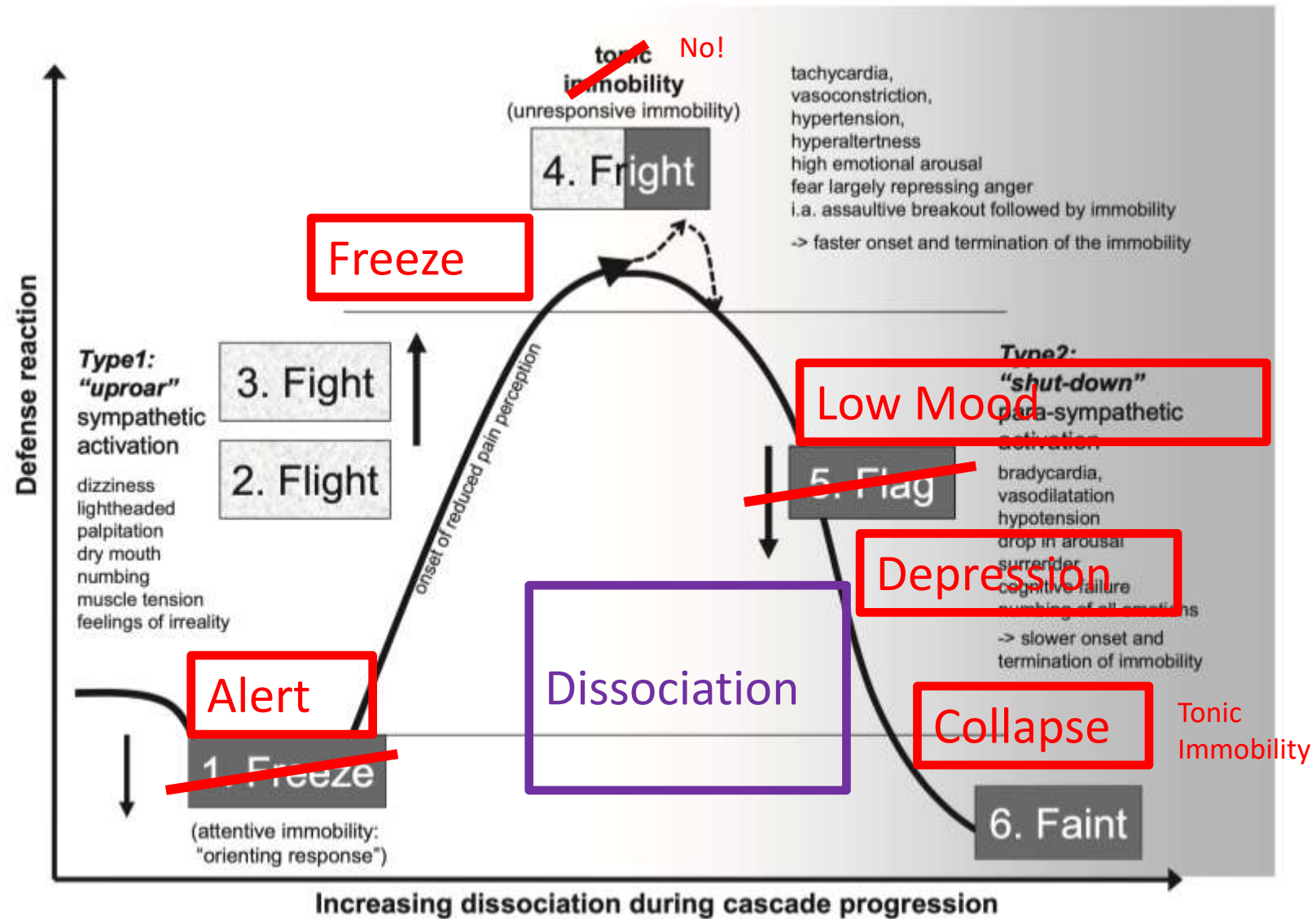
Here's an example:

Schauer, M. and Elbert, T. (2010). Dissociation following Traumatic Stress: Etiology and Treatment. *Journal of Psychology* [Online], 218(2), pp. 109-127

# Schauer & Elbert (2010) The Fear Cascade



# Schauer & Elbert (2010) The Fear Cascade (my changes in red)



## Biological responses to threat

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
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## Biological responses to threat – MY RE-NAMING

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy when danger is close.
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown when danger is inescapable

## Biological responses to threat – MY RE-NAMING

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
  - **Fear-Alert**
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy when danger is close.
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown when danger is inescapable

## Biological responses to threat – MY RE-NAMING

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
  - **Fear-Alert**
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy when danger is close.
  - **Fear-Arousal**
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown when danger is inescapable

## Biological responses to threat – MY RE-NAMING

1. Elevated metabolic activity (but staying very still) when danger sensed but not close
  - Fear-Alert
2. Huge metabolic arousal / surge in energy when danger is close.
  - Fear-Arousal
3. Metabolic collapse / energy shutdown when danger is inescapable
  - Fear-Collapse

- **Fear Alert** – stillness / elevated metabolic activation
  - when danger sensed but not close
- **Fear Arousal** - huge metabolic arousal/surge in energy
  - when danger is close
    - Fight, flight, freeze, fright
- **Fear Collapse** – metabolic collapse / shutdown of energy production
  - when danger is inescapable

This is how I define the “Fear System”

# What does fear feel like?

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# Why is it important to understand Fear?

- Clients come with activated and unregulated fear systems
- Our bodies pick up our clients' fear system cues and activate our own fear system
- When our fear system activates –
  - **We lose our thinking capacity**
    - In Fear Arousal our thinking is hijacked to focus on nothing but danger
    - In Fear Collapse our brain cells just slow down and stop working – brain fog
  - **We lose our capacity to relate to others**
    - In Fear Arousal we perceive the client as a threat and react defensively
    - In Fear Collapse our social engagement system stops working

**In other words, we cease to be a therapist**

# Fear and the Therapist



# Fear and Attachment

Complex Trauma Institute

<https://www.completraumainstitute.org/cpd-workshop-info>  
(for online workshops)

[michaelguilding.com](http://michaelguilding.com)

(for in-person workshops in York)

# Fear and the Therapist

<b>Online</b>	<b>Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2023</b>	<b>(09.30-12.20)</b>
	<b>Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024</b>	<b>(09.30-12.20)</b>
	<b>Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024</b>	<b>(09.30-12.20)</b>
<b>In-person</b>	<b>Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> January 2024</b>	<b>(10.00-13.00)</b>
	<b>Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> March 2024</b>	<b>(10.00-13.00)</b>

# Fear and Attachment

<b>Online</b>	<b>Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> and Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023</b> <b>Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2024</b> <b>Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024</b>	<b>(09.30-12.20)</b> <b>(09.30-12.20)</b> <b>(09.30-12.20)</b>
<b>In-person</b>	<b>Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024</b> <b>Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2024</b>	<b>(10.00-13.00)</b> <b>(10.00-13.00)</b>

michael.guilding@gmail.com  
(for THIS WEEKEND)