

Fight, Flight, Freeze... or Find a Way

By Gretchen Feinhals
RSVP Director



I recently read an article in which the author described being overwhelmed and even paralyzed by everything happening in the world. He said, “I realize that such a shutdown response may actually keep me from moving beyond my helplessness and taking some -any - form of action.”

As the Director of RSVP, I constantly see how helpfulness, in the form of volunteering, can reframe the feeling of helplessness in seniors and move them to constructive action.

Fight-Flight-Freeze

It is common knowledge that the innate human response to threats is either “fight” or “flight.” But did you know many researchers also add “freeze” to the list? Freezing is the pause before fight-or-flight, where you further prepare to protect yourself, staying completely still and getting ready for the next move. Fight-flight-freeze isn’t a conscious decision. It’s an automatic reaction, so you can’t control it.

There’s no doubt about it; there are a lot of stressors happening right now! A recent U.S. News and World Report article titled [High Anxiety](#) says the most significant concerns are:

- Rising costs of food, energy, and other everyday items due to inflation (87%)
- Supply chain issues (81%)
- Global uncertainty (81%)
- Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (80%)
- Potential Russian cyberattacks or nuclear threats (80%)

When a body is exposed to extreme stress over time, it can get stuck in fight-flight-freeze mode. Research shows this contributes to a long list of health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, increased risk for diabetes, weakened immune system, depression, and anxiety.





Find a Way

I want to propose a final item to the list of reactions to stress – Find A Way. If you are stuck in fight-flight-freeze mode, find a way to trade helplessness for helpfulness.

Several studies point to ways of decreasing stress – meditation, exercising, deep breathing, practicing intentional gratitude, and volunteering. That’s right – people who volunteer report lower rates of depression and increased life satisfaction. Through volunteering, you look beyond your circumstances and make a big difference in the community. Anyone who has spent a morning digging a community garden can tell you it also counts as exercise, much more than sitting on the couch worrying!

I’ve had the good fortune of working at The Senior Source for 25 years, and I am constantly amazed by and thankful for the opportunity to witness helpfulness in action. Even at the pandemic’s peak, when in-person volunteering wasn’t possible, our volunteers continued to find a way to help others. They managed to say “Thank You” to their communities.

One volunteer drew a beautiful picture thanking “the angels” at Parkland and UT Southwestern, who were providing drive-through COVID vaccines. Another volunteer wrote letters of encouragement to school staff as they struggled with the challenges of teaching online. In their small ways, they continued to be helpful and bring hope to so many.

We may not be able to solve the world’s problems, but we can each start with a small act of kindness. If you’d like to learn about volunteer opportunities, please contact me at The Senior Source by calling (214) 525-6122 or emailing GFeinhals@TheSeniorSource.org.