

# What Survival Looks Like In Secondary School

© Mark Thorley & Helen Townsend



When I was younger, wires got connected in the wrong places. I often think and feel like I am under attack, even when I'm very safe. This is when my brain activates survival mode to protect me.

Sometimes I won't even know that I have gone into survival mode, I probably won't be able to tell you what feels wrong. It has happened so often for such a long time, that this part of my brain is now incredibly strong and it controls the calm parts of my brain. I find it difficult to turn it off by myself.



## But why do you need to know this?

The part of my brain that is activated to help me survive, is different from the part of my brain that is activated when I am calm. I can only learn properly when the calm part of my brain is activated. When I am in a survival state – which is often – it takes over from my calm brain and I cannot learn. If I don't feel safe, you will find it very hard to teach me.

The problem is, it can be hard to see when I am in a survival state. I look very different to how I feel on the inside and often I can remain in survival mode for so long, that it seems like part of my personality.

The truth is I would really appreciate your help to feel safe so I can learn. I need you to see that I am in a survival state and it's not a personality trait. I do want to learn, I do want to feel ok and I do want to fit in but I cannot do that in school without support.

# Freeze

# What I look like in Freeze

- Bored
- Distracted
- Not listening
- Not moving to where I am supposed to be
- Standing still/sitting still (hanging about)
- Quickly looking around, scanning the room
- Wide eyed, my pupils might dilate
- 'Drugged'- zoned out



# What I am aware of in Freeze

- My heart is beating faster
- My breathing is faster
- My brain is slowing down
- Background noises (I can hear what is around me without focusing)
- The tone of voices rather than words, listening for threats of danger
- I am under attack
- Terrified
- I need to get ready to protect myself
- Body language cues, looking for where the attack may come from
- My immediate surroundings and where the danger or escape route is



# *How my body feels in Freeze*

- Under attack
- Ready to fight and defend myself
- Very scared
- My pulse rate is going up
- My muscles are tensing, my hands might clench into fists
- Some sounds are louder and some more distant, I can't focus on what is being said but I can hear intonation and where the threats could be from the tone of your voice



# What's happening in my Inner World

- I am a failure
- I'm not as good as everyone else here
- I am not worth bothering with
- I hate myself
- I need to get somewhere safe
- I am an outsider, I don't belong
- I can't do this and you will single me out when you realize
- You will all laugh at me
- I am humiliated, embarrassed
- I'm scared
- I am out of my depth, I'm drowning





## *You can help me feel safe with the following*

- Don't stand over me if I am struggling with the task, talk to the whole class and explain further so everyone hears and I am not singled out
- Don't ask me questions in front of everyone by name, ask if anyone knows the answer so I can join in when I feel it is safe
- Accept that things you might think are just 'messaging about', may make me feel like I am under attack by others
- Let me choose where to sit so I can find somewhere that does not make me feel threatened, it might be at the back of the class so no-one is behind me or it might be at the front of the class nearer to you
- Try not to get annoyed with me if I have forgotten where I was or what I was supposed to be doing, remind me alongside my friends gently

# Flight

# What I look like in Flight

- Hyperactive, manic
- Aggressive: stiffening up or clenching fists
- Running away, escaping, disappearing
- Threatening
- Clumsy
- Disruptive, loud and noisy
- Unable to follow rules
- Disrespectful
- Anti-social, lonely, a loner
- Immature



# *What I am aware of in Flight*

- Vigilant to what is around me as a threat to my survival
- Sudden noises (others might not hear)
- Overwhelmed, too much stimulation to cope
- Noise levels
- Tone of voice from anyone speaking
- Who might be a danger to me, not just staff but other pupils
- How far away I am from being safe
- I need to get out of here - now



# *How my body feels in Flight*

- Terrified
- My heart is beating faster and faster - my pulse is going up and my heart is racing
- My breathing is getting quicker, I am ready to run
- My muscles are tensing so I can fight my way past
- Nauseous
- Increased sweating



# *What's happening in my Inner World*

- I need to get out of here, I am in danger
- There is more of them than me, I need to find somewhere safe
- I am ugly
- I am not as important as the rest of the pupils
- I am not worth much, if anything at all
- Alone
- I must not show how I feel to anyone
- I must not tell anyone how I feel
- I don't belong here, I am not part of this



## *You can help me feel safe with the following*

- Organize and allow me time to go to a safe base when I need to
- Recognize you might not feel the classroom or school is threatening, but I might see things you can't
- Understand secondary schools can be terrifying places for people like me, they have too many people in and too much stimulation such as noises or movement of pupils
- Accept that if I feel threatened, it's not just messing about or horse play to me, I feel in severe danger. Please don't trivialize how I feel about a situation, even if you don't agree with me and feel I am making more of it than there seems.
- Don't focus on me by name, talk to the whole class even if it is me you are directing it at e.g. asking me to get back to the task
- If my work is not good enough, don't tell everyone, let me know and give me a time when I can come to speak to you 1:1 without everyone else listening in, this includes pupils and their parents and other members of staff
- Appreciate that if I forget something, it doesn't automatically mean I didn't do it or I forgot on purpose, sometimes I come to school already on hyper-alert and it is difficult to focus on anything other than survival
- If you send me somewhere and I forget what for, don't make this a huge thing, just patiently ask me to do it again

# Fight



# What I look like in Fight

- Argumentative and aggressive
- Behavior problem
- Unable to concentrate
- Unable to finish work or task
- Unable to 'fit in'
- Unable to follow the rules
- Unable to get along with my peers
- Confrontational
- Disrespectful
- Anti-social and disregarding of others
- Alone
- Non-attender or going missing during the day between lessons
- Disruptive, loud and noisy
- Immature



# What I am aware of in Fight

- Multiple threats of danger from all around me, I need to escape
- If I hit first, I might survive this
- If I disrupt the class, I might be able to escape
- I need to get out of here, it's too dangerous
- No-one likes me
- I am not worth bothering about
- I have no real friends, they are all pretending to like me
- I don't belong here
- No one really cares whether I am here or not
- I can't trust anyone
- You don't listen so I'll just say what you want me to, just to make you go away
- Not as good as the others - you don't really want me here
- The lesson ends soon I need to get ready to move to the next lesson, there's lots of danger out in that corridor
- It's nearly lunchtime, I need to get ready to survive during lunch and break periods, there is danger out there



# How my body feels in Fight

- Tense, ready for action
- Over alert, my heart is beating so loud I can hear it
- Nauseous
- Faint or dizzy
- Terrified
- I can't cope
- I am so alone, no-one understands
- I need to laugh hysterically
- I need to cry, I am so upset
- I am worthless
- I am ugly, no-one wants me here
- Hated, not liked



# *What's happening in my Inner World*

- I wish they would like me
- I wish I had friends
- I wish I could do this work
- I wish I could go somewhere else, where it's safe
- I wish I was popular
- I wish you would notice how scary this all is
- I wish I had someone to talk to
- I wish I was wanted



## *You can help me feel safe with the following*

- Allow me to choose who I feel safe with to talk to, don't tell me I have to talk to a specific member of staff
- Let me pick where to sit and the groups I work with
- Understand that sometimes I need to have extra time if I don't finish my work - understand that I can't focus when in this state – reduce what I have to do, give me a job .....or I might want to finish it at home but communicate this to me in a way that I am not singled out
- Let me have somewhere safe to go at break time, a small room I can sit in? Don't make me go into the yard until I can manage this safely
- Let me leave a few minutes early if I ask, please find a way I can ask without being ridiculed such as going to the toilet or getting something from the office between lessons
- Listen and accept how I feel even if you see it differently, don't disregard how I feel or trivialize this to make me feel worse
- Understand how scary a school this size with this many people can be for me
- Tell me about changes before they happen, especially if strangers are coming into the school
- Don't select me to stand up in front of everyone or single me out, wait for me to volunteer
- Accept I might not know why I behaved that way & I might not remember what happened, I was surviving a dangerous situation

Submit

# *What I look like in Submit*

- Unhappy
- Alone or withdrawn
- Head down on the table
- Fidgety but not disruptively so – anxious
- Never questioning or asking questions, never drawing unnecessary attention
- Yes or no answers - doing just enough to get it done but not going further
- Quiet and passive



# *What I am aware of in Submit*

- I am so tired
- I must put on a brave face
- No-one really cares about me
- If I do what you want, you will leave me alone
- If I just sit here, you won't notice me
- If I sit over there, no-one will notice me
- I need to be like them so I don't stand out
- I feel dead inside





# *What's happening in my Inner World*

- Hurting myself helps me to feel something (self-harm)
- Drinking alcohol or taking drugs, helps me to feel happy
- If I join in on social media, at least I can talk to strangers who don't judge me and might care for me
- I'm not as good as everyone else, I am worthless
- This isn't going to get any better so I might as well give up
- No-one would care or notice if I live or die
- It's all my fault
- I can't win this - I'll never be safe
- Dead inside



# *How my body feels in Submit*

- Exhausted
- Depressed or anxious
- Worthless
- Guilty
- Like crying or screaming
- Unable to sleep
- Unable to relax or enjoy anything
- Unable to care
- Guilty, it's all my fault



## *You can help me feel safe with the following*

- See me
- Listen to me
- Understand that social media might not be your world, but it is a part of the teenagers world today and for some of us it symbolizes a comforting connection
- Understand that playing computer games, lets me be by myself somewhere safe
- Recognize I am hurting inside and might need help
- Know that I am easily bullied, I won't argue or fight back and most importantly, I won't report it either as I won't want to come forward. Look out for this rather than expect me to tell you.
- Understand that I need to talk to someone I feel safe with, not just anyone
- Appreciate I will say whatever I think you want me to say
- Give me a place to be myself - look for what I might be good at but don't focus on me or single me out for this
- Plan small group tasks that I can contribute to but let me choose my group so I am not overwhelmed by powerful personalities
- Be aware that I am an easy target and can be coerced easily to keep the peace
- Appreciate I cannot cope being the center of attention or the focus person - let me blend in and talk when I am ready
- Watch for me removing myself, standing on the outside of what is going on

Spending just a small amount of time making me feel safe, will activate the calm part of my brain and you will get the best from me.

I will probably need you to do this a few times throughout the task and /or day however, the more my brain knows how to stay calm, the less likely I will go into survival mode and you will be able to teach me.

Thank you for helping me every day to make safe and life changing differences to my brain