

Fight or flight response

Some of our most basic emotions like fear, anger or disgust are signals that help our body keep us safe. It would be dangerous to react slowly to a threat to our life so our body has an alarm system that automatically gets us ready to react when it senses these signals. This is the “Fight or Flight” response.

The Fight or Flight response is set off when we feel a strong emotion like fear or its close relative, anxiety. It automatically gets our body ready to run away, to fight, or sometimes freeze so that we aren't seen.

The Fight or Flight response developed to help us respond to feeling fear for our lives, but these days it is much more likely be set off by fears and worries about problems that can't be solved by fighting or running away. Then, because we're not using our body in the way it has prepared for, this can feel uncomfortable until the response wears off.

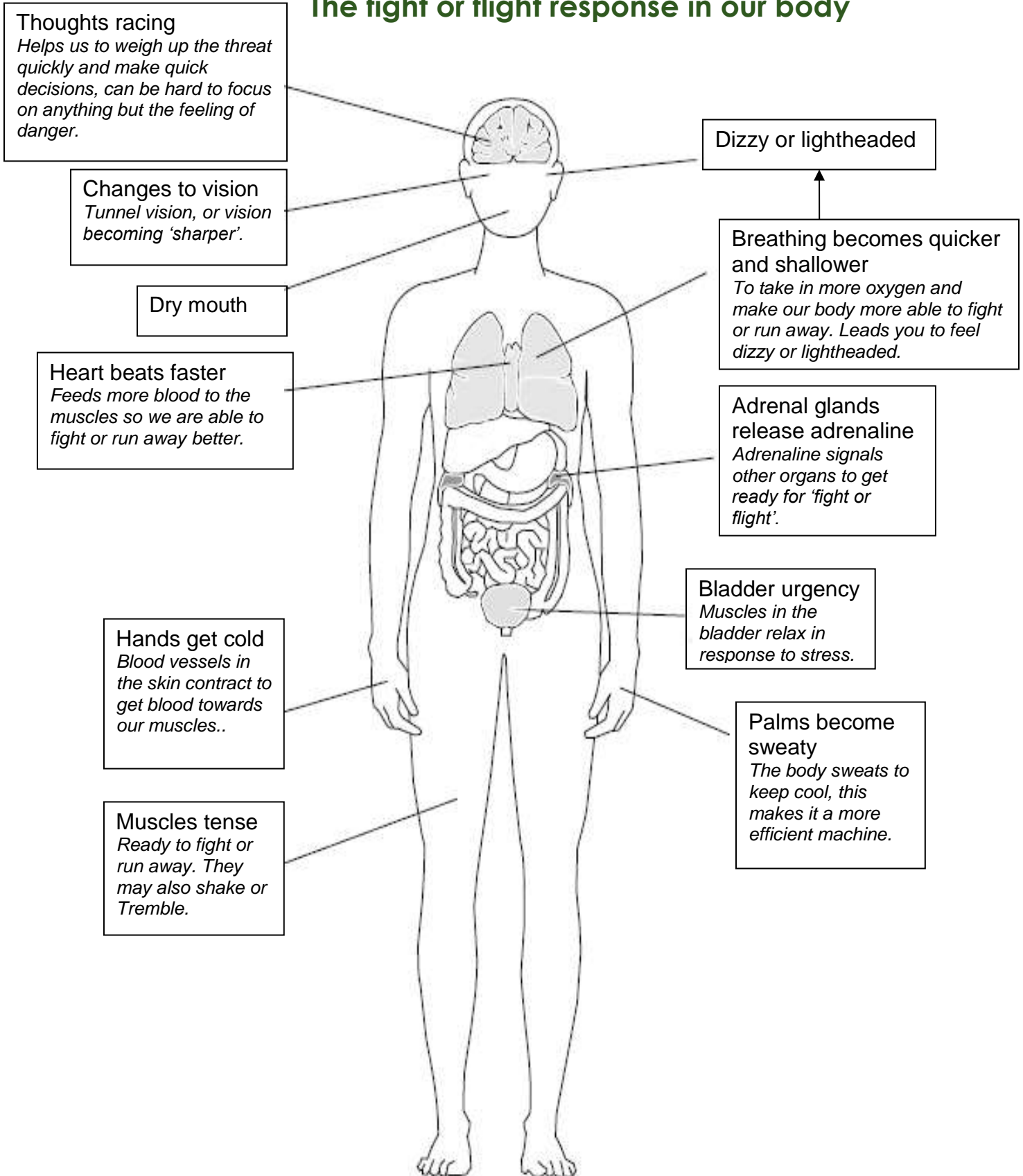
It can be helpful to understand what's happening in our body, because some of the symptoms of “fight or flight” can seem similar to the symptoms of a health condition that we might find worrying.

For example, if we're living with a condition that can cause breathlessness, we may worry when the 'fight or flight' response changes our breathing. This worry can make the fight or flight response stronger, and lead to a vicious cycle. So being able to tell the difference can help us to break this cycle, or prevent it from developing.

What happens in Fight or Flight?

- Brain takes shortcuts - we think less and react more instinctively.
- Heart beats quicker and harder to get more energy to our muscles. This also means our blood pressure rises.
- Lungs take in more oxygen to get more energy for body, we may breath more quickly.
- Liver releases extra sugar for energy.
- Muscles tense ready for action, and may cause aches and pains.
- Digestion slows down or stops. We might feel sick, or be sick. We might need to go to the toilet.

The fight or flight response in our body



Overlapping Symptoms

When reading the list of 'fight or flight' symptoms, you might have noticed that some are similar to those of your physical health condition.

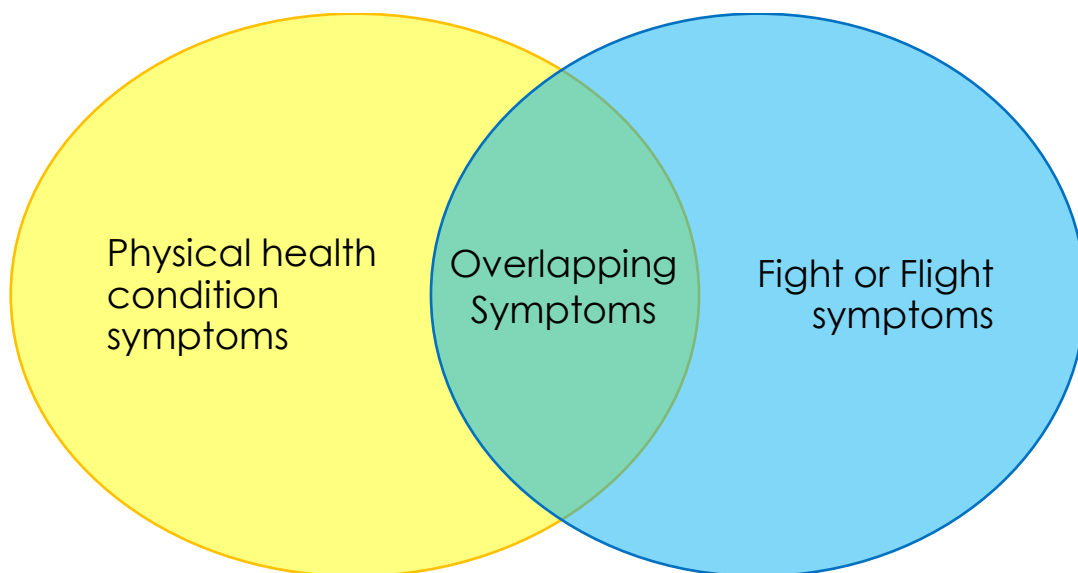
We call these 'overlapping' symptoms. These are symptoms that can happen in both the fight or flight response, or your physical health condition. They can make it hard to tell what's happening because they can feel very similar.

But there are also symptoms that we **only** experience as part of our physical health condition, and others that we **only** experience as part of the fight or flight response. These symptoms are the key to telling the difference.

When we're in that moment of experiencing overlapping symptoms, we can find out what's happening by looking for those symptoms that are **only** explained by one of these options.

If you're experiencing the symptoms that **only** relate to your health condition, this might indicate that it is a flare up and you would take the action recommended by your healthcare team.

But if you're **not** experiencing those other symptoms of your health condition, it is likely to be caused by this fight-or-flight response and you may find using relaxation techniques help it to pass.



Example:

An example from Nina, who has diabetes.

Symptoms related to my condition	Overlapping Symptoms	Symptoms related to 'fight or flight'
Needing the toilet more Blurry vision Numb or tingling hands or feet Thirsty	Dry mouth Dizzy, shaky Sweaty Deep and quick breathing	Intense fear and anxiety that usually comes on fairly suddenly, but goes down after a short time. Strong thoughts that something awful is about to happen

As you can see in this table, Nina has written down quite a few overlapping symptoms that she experiences both as part of her diabetes, and as part of the fight or flight response.

When she experience these overlapping symptoms, Nina worries about what's happening and what to do. This worry can make the symptoms worse by setting off a stronger 'fight or flight' response. Although Nina knows it might be down to anxiety, it feels hard to rule out the possibility that it's her diabetes, and in that moment it seems better to be safe than sorry, and seek treatment.

However, when Nina filled in this table, she noticed there are actually some key symptoms she has only ever experienced as part of her physical health condition.

Nina is now able to feel more confident that if she is experiencing those overlapping symptoms, but not any in the first column, that it's the fight or flight response. This gives her the reassurance to trust that these symptoms won't harm her, and she finds using relaxation techniques helps them to pass more quickly.

Sometimes it can still be confusing to tell the symptoms apart, so when Nina isn't sure, she has found that using relaxation techniques first helps her to see whether the symptoms reduce on their own.

Your Overlapping Symptoms

Fill in this worksheet for your own symptoms.

Symptoms related to my condition	Overlapping Symptoms	Symptoms related to 'fight or flight'