Avoidance, Protection, and Resistance: physical and psychic survival tactics

Origins of avoidance, protection and resistance

We learn about threats and appropriate responses in order to survive in the world. We learn to avoid potential threats when possible, and to protect ourselves in the presence of unavoidable threats. Much of this becomes automatic, unconscious behavior, ready to be activated in the uncertainty and panic of facing a threat.

- **Avoidance**
  
  If it is possible to avoid confronting a perceived threat, this is usually our preferred survival tactic. We protect ourselves by staying out of harm's way. This requires the lowest expenditure of energy, and, even if it doesn't work (effectively or at all), we view it as worth attempting before a threat becomes unavoidable.

- **Protection**
  
  We usually conclude that we must actively protect ourselves as soon as we perceive that a threat is not avoidable.
  
  - **Fight or Flight?**
    
    At the simplest level, self protection in the face of an *unavoidable* threat comes down to either eliminating the threat, or escaping from it somehow—Fight, or Flight.
  
  - **Psychic versus physical threats**
    
    Our minds have the capacity to experience imagined events as if they were real. This capacity enables us to interpret psychic threats—threats to our beliefs and our images of self and environment—as being as dangerous and as real as physical threats.
  
  - **Survival value of beliefs and image**
    
    Our beliefs about how our world functions have acquired survival value to us. We value their ability to produce desirable and seemingly-predictable consequences, and how they appear to bring order and meaning to complicated situations. When we perceive that our beliefs and our images of ourselves and the world are under threat, we usually move to protect them.

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- **Resistance**
  A facilitator attempting an intervention may experience individual or group protection behaviors as a form of *resistance* to the intervention. When this happens, the intervention, or some artifact of it, is being perceived as a threat. Awareness of resistance is an indicator of perceived threats. The facilitator can use this awareness to guide the balance of the intervention.

**Onset and Stages**
As a threat appears and grows in intensity, my response to it unfolds in three successive stages: alarm; indecision; and reaction. The figure below portrays this process. Notice that my reaction, when it comes, may be either Fight or Flight, based on the specific situation.

![Diagram](image)

- **Alarm**
  - I become aware of perceived threat
  - I attempt to avoid perceived threat

- **Indecision**
  - I can no longer avoid the perceived threat
  - I am not sure whether to fight or flee in response

- **Reaction**
  - danger is unavoidable and now imminent
  - I react by choosing to Fight or Flee
  - my reaction may then create further alarm, and thereby initiate another alarm ⇒ indecision ⇒ reaction chain

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Alarm/Avoidance Indicators

In alarm/avoidance mode, I have become aware of a perceived threat, and now begin to track it. As mentioned above, my first strategy is to attempt to avoid the threat. If I sense the threat has not yet detected me, I will engage in freezing/shrinking/hiding behaviors, designed to prevent detection. This is the first form of avoidance. If I perceive that I have already been detected by the threat, I will either maneuver in some way, create a distraction, or activate some protective device so as to deter the threat. At this stage, my primary deterrent is to raise the threat’s perceived cost of attacking me through my deterrent strategies.

I may “hide” from my boss by burying myself in more work, so that she is simultaneously “deterred” from asking me certain questions. On the other hand, I might deter a car-jack by quickly locking my car doors.

The avoidance strategy may outwardly resemble either flight or fight behaviors. This is because maneuver and flight are similar, and a threat or promise of a fight can be an effective deterrent. The appearance of any one or more of the following conditions or behaviors by themselves, or in addition to flight/flight behaviors, may indicate an alarm/avoidance response:

- **Physical**
  - vocal patterns
  - hiding silence
  - eye condition, position, focus, pupil dilation and movements
  - rapid eye movements in a stationary head
  - rate, depth and regularity of breathing patterns
  - holding breath
  - body position and posture
  - freezing—sitting/standing absolutely still
  - facial expressions, skin color and condition
  - frozen expression
  - skin blanching and lightening to white

- **Mental**
  - tuning out, distraction
  - subject changing
  - deterrent threats

- **Emotional**
  - fear dominates

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Indecision Indicators

In indecision mode, I decide I can no longer avoid a perceived threat, and now consider whether to fight it or flee from it. In every case, the preferred strategy is to flee, given equal or better perceived likelihood of a successful outcome through flight. In this sense, flight is like active avoidance. I only choose to fight if I perceive that I have no or little chance of escape through flight. Indecision mode involves the rapid processing of multiple alternatives in an emotional environment of intense fear. This fearful emotional state, coupled with the sheer number of alternatives to consider, usually prompts me to react unconsciously. It also can be highly unstable; my choice may be difficult to predict.

Indecision is characterized by fear and panic. The appearance of any one or more of the following conditions or behaviors by themselves, or in addition to fight/flight behaviors may indicate indecision:

- **Physical**
  - vocal patterns
    - abruptly-terminated speech
    - pre-occupied silence
  - unconscious movements
    - oscillating between advance and retreat; “dancing”
  - eye condition, position, focus, pupil dilation and movements
    - darting eye movements in a snapping head
  - rate, depth and regularity of breathing patterns
    - rapid, shallow breath
  - body position and posture
    - paralysis pregnant with action; “deer in a headlight”
    - “spring” position
  - facial expressions, skin color and condition
    - panic expression
    - skin blanching and lightening to white

- **Mental**
  - unconscious processing of alternatives

- **Emotional**
  - fear and panic dominates
Fight Response Indicators

In Fight mode, I attack what I perceive as a threat. My intention in this is to metaphorically “kill” the threat, usually by manipulating a symbol of the threat. I can “kill” a dangerous fire by putting it out—killing its self-sustaining energy cycle; “kill” an argument by bowling over my opponent—killing his desire to continue; “kill” my opposition by threatening violence—killing its resolve. This symbolic killing may be represented by an infinite variety of behaviors.

A sarcastic, cutting remark serves as a culturally-acceptable substitute for the authentic physical desire to strangle a person, which is not usually culturally-acceptable.

The appearance of any one or more of the following conditions or behaviors may indicate a Fight response, and may indicate a symbolic killing in progress:

- **Physical**
  - vocal patterns
    - ominous silence
    - elevated volume
    - attacking, violent language
    - 'strangulated' speech
    - raging
    - sarcastic, ironic language
  - unconscious movements
    - fist balling or clenching
    - angry hand-wringing
    - gestures signifying threatened physical attacks
    - throwing, kicking, ramming, breaking or striking self or objects
  - eye condition, position, focus, pupil dilation and movements
    - direct eye contact [cultural variations?]
    - ??
  - rate, depth and regularity of breathing patterns
    - angry huffing and flushing of lungs
    - ??
  - body position and posture
    - standing abruptly
    - abruptly facing toward
    - abruptly sitting up/forward toward
    - moving closer in standing position
    - dismissive turning or moving away
    - muscle tensing, attack crouching

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− facial expressions, skin color and condition
  − disgust
  − dismissive turning or glancing away
  − facial clenching, set jaw
  − teeth clenching, baring
  − skin flushing and darkening to red/purple
  − elevated skin temperature, humidity

• Mental
  − belligerent denial
  − blaming
  − angry abdication of personal responsibility
  − symbolic murder

• Emotional
  − anger dominant over fear

Flight Response Indicators

In Flight mode, I escape what I perceive as a threat. My intention in this is to metaphorically ‘outrun’ or ‘outfox’ the threat, usually by manipulating a symbol of the threat. I can ‘outrun’ and ‘outfox’ a persistent creditor by moving away and leaving no forwarding address; I can ‘outrun’ my angry spouse by becoming absorbed in a TV program; I can ‘outrun’ my feelings by changing the subject. This symbolic escape may be represented by an infinite variety of behaviors.

In social relations, we again learn to mask these escape behaviors, and to adjust them based on perceived context. While I may physically run away from a mugger, I know that running away from a traffic policeman will only make things worse—so I escape in a socially-acceptable way, by detaching from my emotions, for example.

The appearance of any one or more of the following conditions or behaviors may indicate a Flight response, and may be indicate a symbolic escape in progress:

• Physical
  − vocal patterns
    withdrawing silence
    lowered volume, mumbling speech
    withdrawing, timid or excessively deferential language
    distracted speech
    suddenly breezy or sunny language
  − unconscious movements
    anxious hand wringing
    repetitive movements or rocking of body, legs, feet
    tapping of fingers, toes??

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- eye condition, position, focus, pupil dilation and movements
  no, diverted or shifty eye contact [cultural variations?]
  ??
- rate, depth and regularity of breathing patterns
  shallow, irregular breathing
  ??
- body position and posture
  facing away
  sitting down, back or away
  turning or moving away
  muscle tensing, flight poise
- facial expressions, skin color and condition
  fearful aversion
  turning or glancing around fitfully
  facial grimacing
  teeth opened
  skin blanching and lightening to white
  lowered skin temperature, humidity

• Mental
  - subject changing
  - abstracting
  - absorption in detail—storytelling
  - generalizing
  - illogic[??]
  - confusion
  - dumbing out [Fieldman Effect]
  - projection
  - fearful denial
  - fearful abdication of personal responsibility

• Emotional
  - numbing out
  - detaching/disconnecting
  - fear dominates

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Social Masking
In social relations, we learn to mask the expression of these symbolic activities in socially-acceptable behaviors. We also modulate our behaviors based on our sense of status relative to the source of the perceived threat. For example, we may react very differently to a perceived threat from an employer than we would from a telemarketing representative. As a result, the energy of the symbolic activity emerges in metaphoric or “sideways” behavior. This “sideways” behavior is a very useful window into the culture of an organization, as it demonstrates what the organization tolerates, and thus how it is defined.

Learning Opportunities
When I face a perceived threat unprotected except through my self-created sense of safety, I open myself to learning. My greatest learning opportunity lies in the areas where I resist, and where I automatically move to protect myself from psychic harm.

Ultimately, the role of the facilitator is to engage protection and resistance within a context of perceived physical and psychic safety in order to facilitate useful learning.

- Possible learnings
  - discerning that a perceived threat is not an actual threat
  - recognizing actual threats that I have been avoiding or fleeing
  - generating new choices for responding to actual threats

Threat Chaining
The reaction to a perceived threat may itself be perceived as threatening. This tends to set up a chain reaction which plays out until the threatened person perceives himself to be out of danger.

For example, if my boss is pressing me for an answer to a sensitive question [threat #1], and I realize that part of me wants to punch him in the mouth, I may become alarmed by this, which alarm provokes a reaction to my desire to punch my boss [threat #2]. I may flee from this second threat by detaching from my emotions, or by yelling back at my boss to distract my own attention and so outfox threat #2.

This process can create some rather complex behaviors in response to internal psychic threats that only the individual perceives. A facilitator’s skillful sensitivity to this process of “threat chaining” greatly aids the identification of unconscious beliefs.

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Summary

Individuals and groups value the ability to survive. Useful learning is one mechanism for surviving. Learning how to avoid, flee, or fight off threats has high survival value. Learning how to do this automatically, without conscious intervention, has even higher survival value. It confers the ability to respond quickly—extremely valuable when dealing with threats.

Automatic behaviors in response to threats unfold in a predictable process of alarm, indecision and reaction. Each stage can be associated with verifiable cues at the physical, mental and emotional levels. Automatic behaviors, once learned and perfected, tend to persist until intentionally inspected and replaced with new learning.

Deconstructing these automatic behaviors provides an opportunity to consciously inspect the triggering situations and responses to determine the current suitability and appropriateness of the behavior. It allows the individual or group to consider new behaviors that may better serve it in its current context.

The skillful facilitator uses this process to invite an individual or group to consciously evaluate perceived threats and responses.

REFERENCES:

Success Culture™ Glossary

[END]