



# Living the Resurrection

*Helping congregations thrive*

## Recognizing Responses to Stress

Harriet Lerner is a clinical psychologist who has authored several books about emotions and relationships. In her book *The Dance of Fear*, she identifies five “patterned ways we move under stress.” We under-function, over-function, blame, distance, and/or gossip. Learning to recognize these responses as part of human nature can help us respond in ways that will calm the situation, rather than make it worse. We won’t be easily sucked into the eddy of someone else’s anxiety if we can recognize it as their response to stress, and not personal attack. Our calm will help people to hear our response.

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### Practice: Recognizing Reactions to Stress

Suggested time: 15 minutes

#### Step 1 (group)

We’ll do this exercise as a group. I’ll read the description of each reaction to stress, and then we’ll all suggest which of the fight, flight or freeze instincts could trigger these behaviors. We’ll share our responses aloud.

#### Step 2 (group)

1. Under-functioning occurs when someone is barely doing their work and often not finishing on time. When people under-function they say things such as, “I didn’t know I was supposed to do that.” “I’ve been busy and just didn’t get to it.”  
*Which instinctual reaction motivates under-functioning? Fight, flight, or freeze?*

2. Over-functioning is at work when someone is doing more than is necessary or making something bigger than it needs to be. Sometimes someone over-functions by doing the work of the one who is under-functioning.  
*Which instinctual response motivates over-functioning? Fight, flight, or freeze?*
3. Someone is blaming when they toss out mean-spirited accusations, which are often expressed as insults or name calling. More subtle signs of blaming are seen when someone rolls their eyes or crosses their arms.  
*Which instinctual response motivates blaming? Fight, flight, or freeze?*
4. Someone is distancing when they stop attending worship or meetings and aren't responding to emails, texts, or phone calls.  
*Which instinctual response motivates distancing? Fight, flight, or freeze?*
5. Gossiping occurs when someone listens to or spreads rumors by saying things that damage another person's reputation or authority.  
*Which instinctual response motivates gossiping? Fight, flight, or freeze?*

**Step 3** (alone)

- Which of these behaviors have you seen in our congregation?
- Which of these have you fallen into?

**Step 4** (group)

Share your responses to step 3 if you think your insight will help the council/teamwork with the congregation.

**Step 5** (alone)

Finish the sentence below.

Recognizing that our reactions to stress are motivated by our fight, flight, or freeze instinct will help me \_\_\_\_\_.

**Step 6** (group)

Share your responses to Step 5.

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