

— Adapted from Karlen Lyons-Ruth, PhD —

# HOW THE NERVOUS SYSTEM RESPONDS TO THE THREAT OF ATTACK VS THE THREAT OF ABANDONMENT

As you know, when faced with the threat of attack, the nervous system's first lines of defense are to:



**FIGHT**



**FLIGHT**



**FREEZE**

But what happens when the threat to your survival is abandonment?

In abandonment trauma, the nervous system has a different defensive response. That's because fighting, fleeing, or freezing won't protect you or help you connect with a caregiver.



Instead, the nervous system's first response is to **call out** or **seek contact**.

Sometimes, this doesn't work either. But in early childhood, connection and closeness with a caregiver is a survival need.



When an infant or young child does not get the connection they need, they may engage in caretaking behaviors toward their parents in a last-resort effort to secure the relationship.

This can affect their relationships throughout life. **But abandonment trauma doesn't have to be a life sentence.** Working with a skilled therapist can help begin the healing process.