

# EXPLORING THE INTERNAL EXPERIENCES OF FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE AND COLLAPSE

Those of us who carry trauma, loss and extreme stress in our bodies have a narrower-than-usual window of tolerance\* where we feel safe and can think clearly, learn, love and be loved.

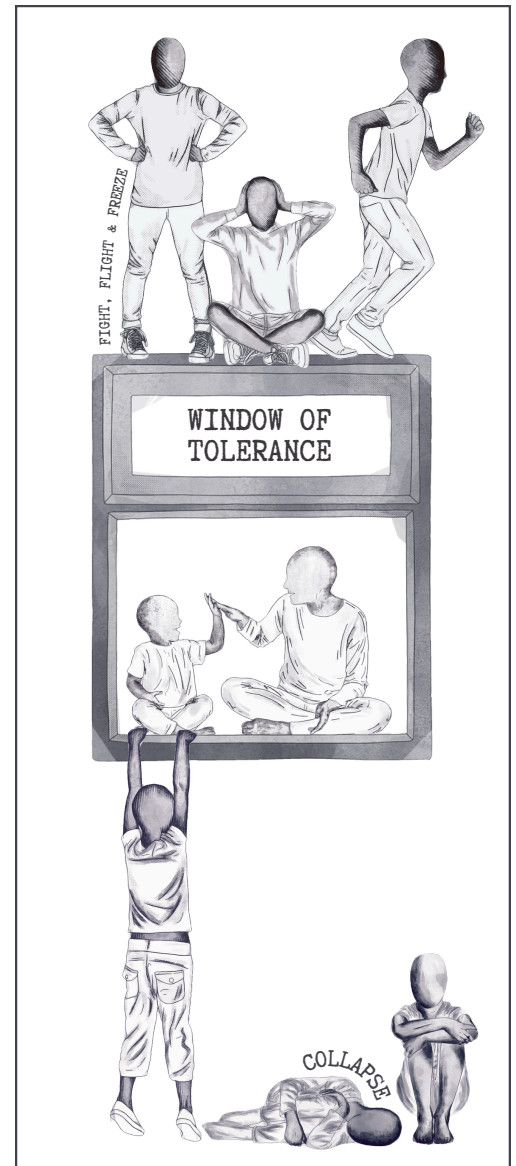
This means that in times of stress or perceived danger we may be easily triggered outside of our window of tolerance into our fight, flight, freeze or collapse survival modes.

Due to the highly sensitised alarm system in those of us who carry trauma, we might stay in these modes for longer than they are needed and sometimes we can't move out of them.

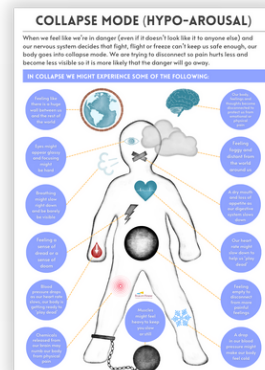
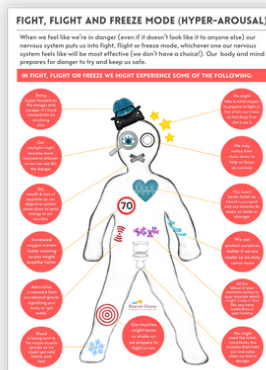


It can be frightening for children, teens and adults to feel 'stuck' in a fight, flight, freeze or collapse survival state, especially because usually it does not feel within the individual's control.

From the outside, behaviours triggered by these survival modes might look and feel disproportionate, alarming, frustrating or downright baffling!



This resource looks at what is beneath these behaviours and explores what might be happening inside the person, giving us a deeper understanding of the internal experience of others.



## FIGHT, FLIGHT AND FREEZE MODE (HYPER-AROUSAL)

When we feel like we are in danger (even if we are not actually in danger) our nervous system mobilises into a survival response, and may swing us into a fight, flight or freeze reaction. Our nervous system becomes hyper-aroused in order to protect us from harm.

### ON THE OUTSIDE WE MIGHT BE SEEN OR EXPERIENCED AS:

- Aggressive, angry, argumentative
- Controlling, inflexible
- Lying or blaming
- Unable to concentrate or finish tasks
- Rejecting of connection
- Loud, noisy, disruptive
- Keeping super-busy
- Running away, hiding, avoiding
- Not managing in free time
- Need to be first
- Baby talk, silly voices, giddy, silly
- Not interested, bored
- Trying to distract
- Scanning the room, watchful
- Not listening
- Hard to move through a task

## COLLAPSE MODE (HYPO-AROUSAL)

When we feel like we're in danger (even if we are not actually in danger) and fight, flight or freeze responses can't keep us safe enough, our nervous system can swing into collapse. In collapse, we become immobilised and disconnected from the world around us so that the danger hurts us less. Collapse also allows us to 'hide' until the perceived danger passes\*.

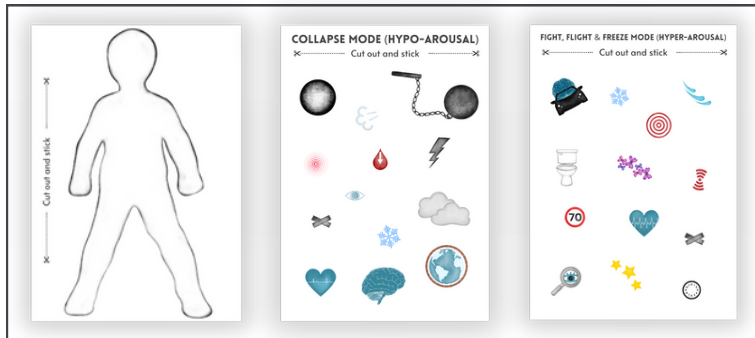
### ON THE OUTSIDE WE MIGHT BE SEEN OR EXPERIENCED AS:

- Head on a desk or laying in bed
- Socially withdrawn, quiet
- Compliant
- Yes and no answers
- Passive
- Neutral expression
- Glazed eyes
- Slow movements
- Disconnected
- Silent

## HYPER & HYPO AROUSAL TOGETHER

Remember: Our nervous system can move into hypo-arousal and hyper-arousal at the same time, so we may notice a mixture of the experiences above

This resource also helps us to use gentle curiosity, combined with ‘felt’ safety, to create opportunities to start small and tolerable conversations about heart, body and mind experiences when in survival mode.



We have provided blank bodies and accompanying symbols which can be printed and cut out, stuck on a large piece of paper and annotated on, to make these more interactive and personalised conversations.

Alternatively you could try drawing around the child, adolescent or adult on wallpaper (with their consent) and together creatively explore and develop your own symbols.

## HERE ARE SOME CONVERSATION STARTERS – PICK THE ONES THAT FEEL LIKE A GOOD ‘FIT’ WITH THE PERSON’S (DEVELOPMENTAL) AGE:

**THOUGHTS**

What happens to your thoughts when you are in fight, flight, freeze or collapse?

If you have thoughts in survival mode, can you notice where that thought sits in your body?

**FEELINGS**

How do you feel after you have been in fight, flight, freeze or collapse mode?

What do you notice in your body when you are in fight, flight, freeze or collapse?

**BODY**

What does your body want to do when you are in fight, flight, freeze or collapse?

Where are your fight, flight, freeze or collapse feelings the biggest, deepest, sharpest, heaviest?

## WHEN WORDS WON'T WORK

What happens when children and young people respond to their environment from the survival (fight, flight, freeze or collapse) part of their brain and why do they do this?

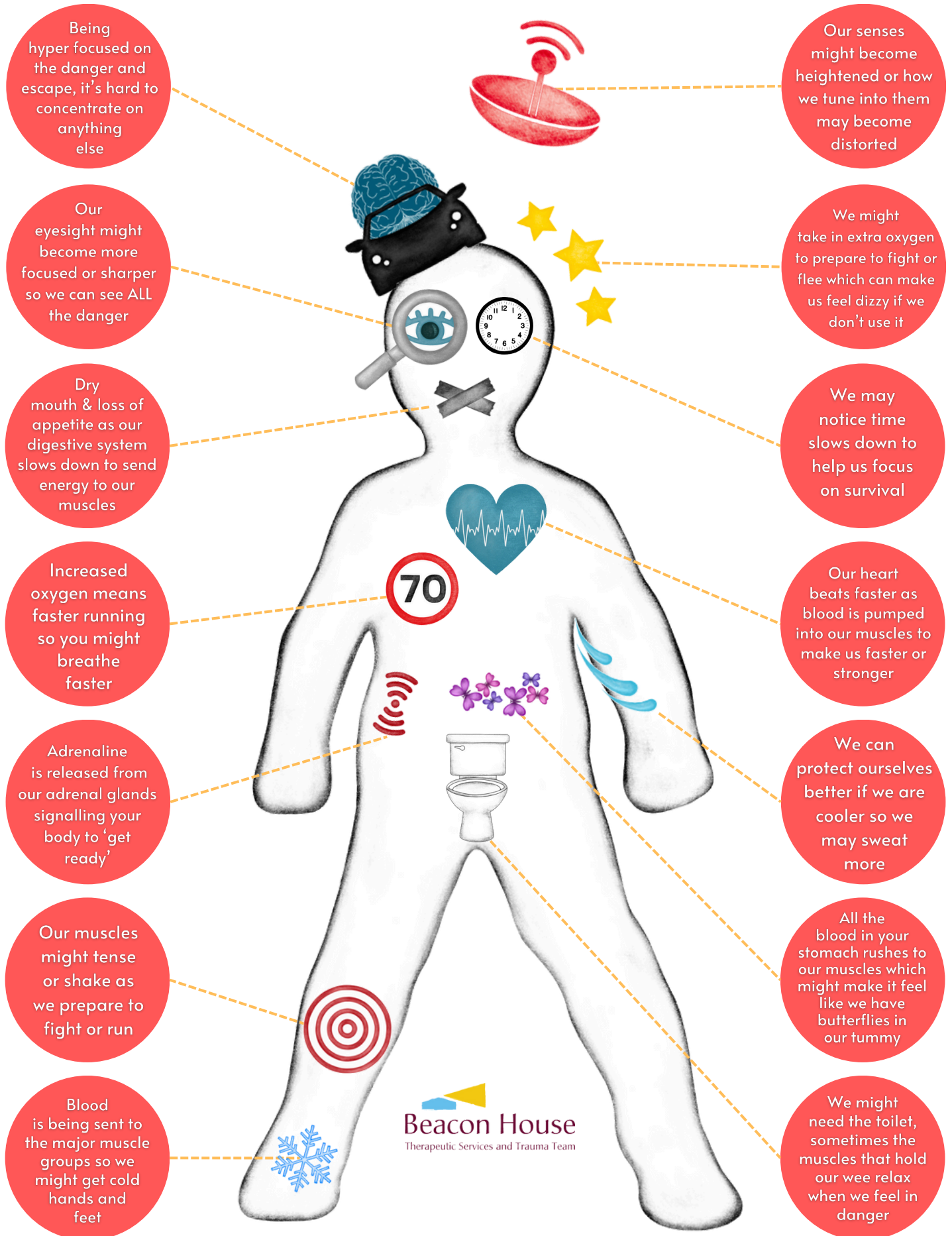
Discover what might be going on underneath with our online training on the eight sensory systems and what happens when there is early disruption. Learn how to support children when words, logic and reasoning won't work. This is a real 'how to' training offering a range of hands on ideas and practical tools to support children at home, in the classroom and in other settings.



[CLICK HERE FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO BOOK YOUR PLACE](#)

# FIGHT, FLIGHT AND FREEZE MODE (HYPER-AROUSAL)

ON THE INSIDE WE MIGHT EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE FOLLOWING:



**REMEMBER: OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM CAN MOVE INTO HYPO AROUSAL AND HYPER AROUSAL AT THE SAME TIME, SO WE MAY NOTICE A MIXTURE OF THE EXPERIENCES ABOVE**

# COLLAPSE MODE (HYPO-AROUSAL)

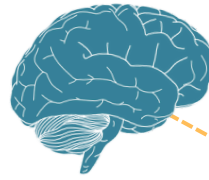
ON THE INSIDE WE MIGHT EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE FOLLOWING:

Feeling like there is a huge wall between us and the rest of the world



Our senses might go off line or how we tune into them may become distorted

Eyes might appear glassy and focusing might be hard



Our body, feelings and thoughts become disconnected to protect us from emotional or physical pain

Breathing might slow right down and barely be visible



Feeling foggy and distant from the world around us

Feeling a sense of dread or a sense of doom



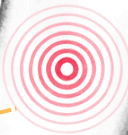
A dry mouth and loss of appetite as our digestive system slows down

Blood pressure drops as our heart rate slows; our body is getting ready to 'play dead'



Our heart rate might slow down to help us 'play dead'

Chemicals released from our brain may numb our body from physical pain

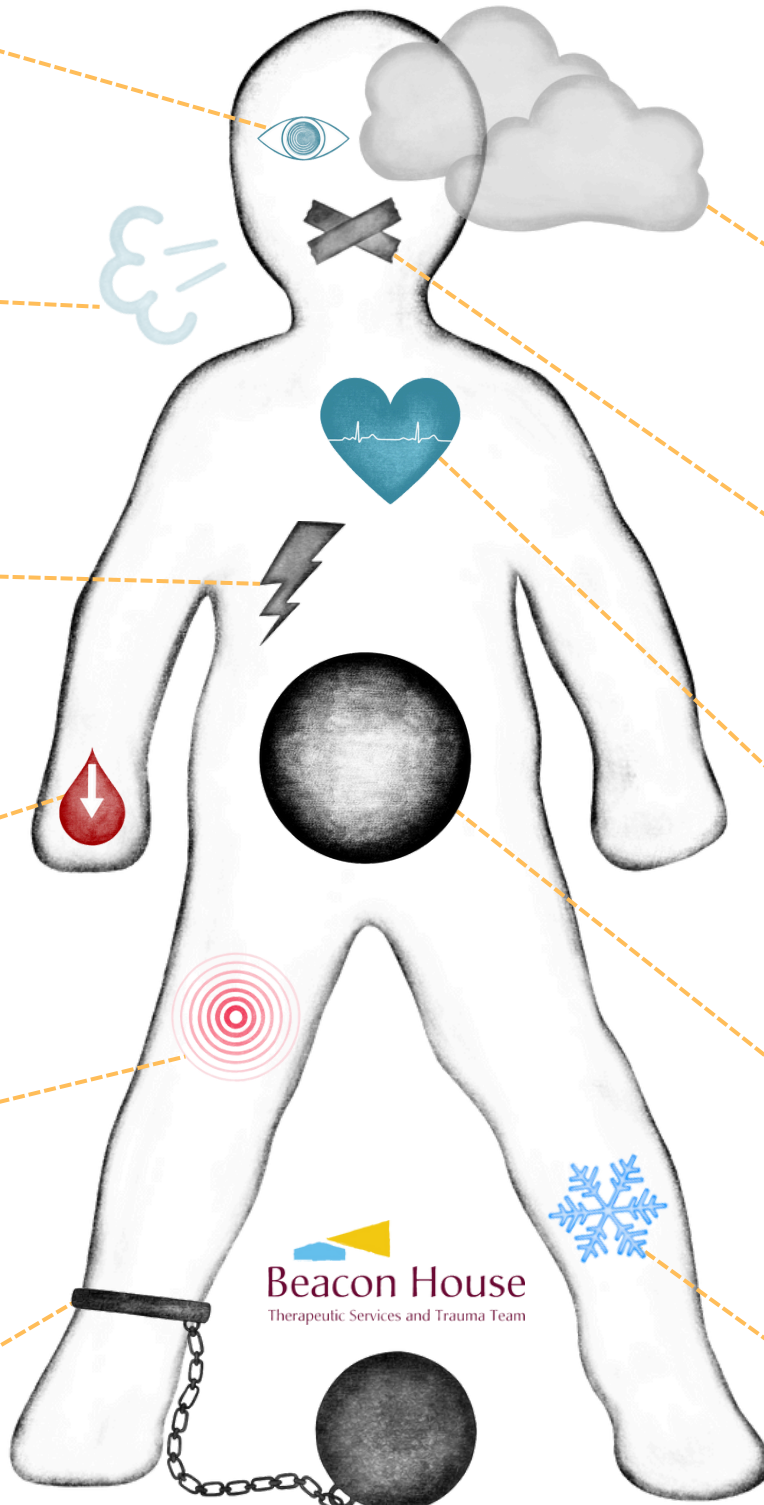


Feeling empty to disconnect from more painful feelings

Muscles might feel heavy to keep you slow or still



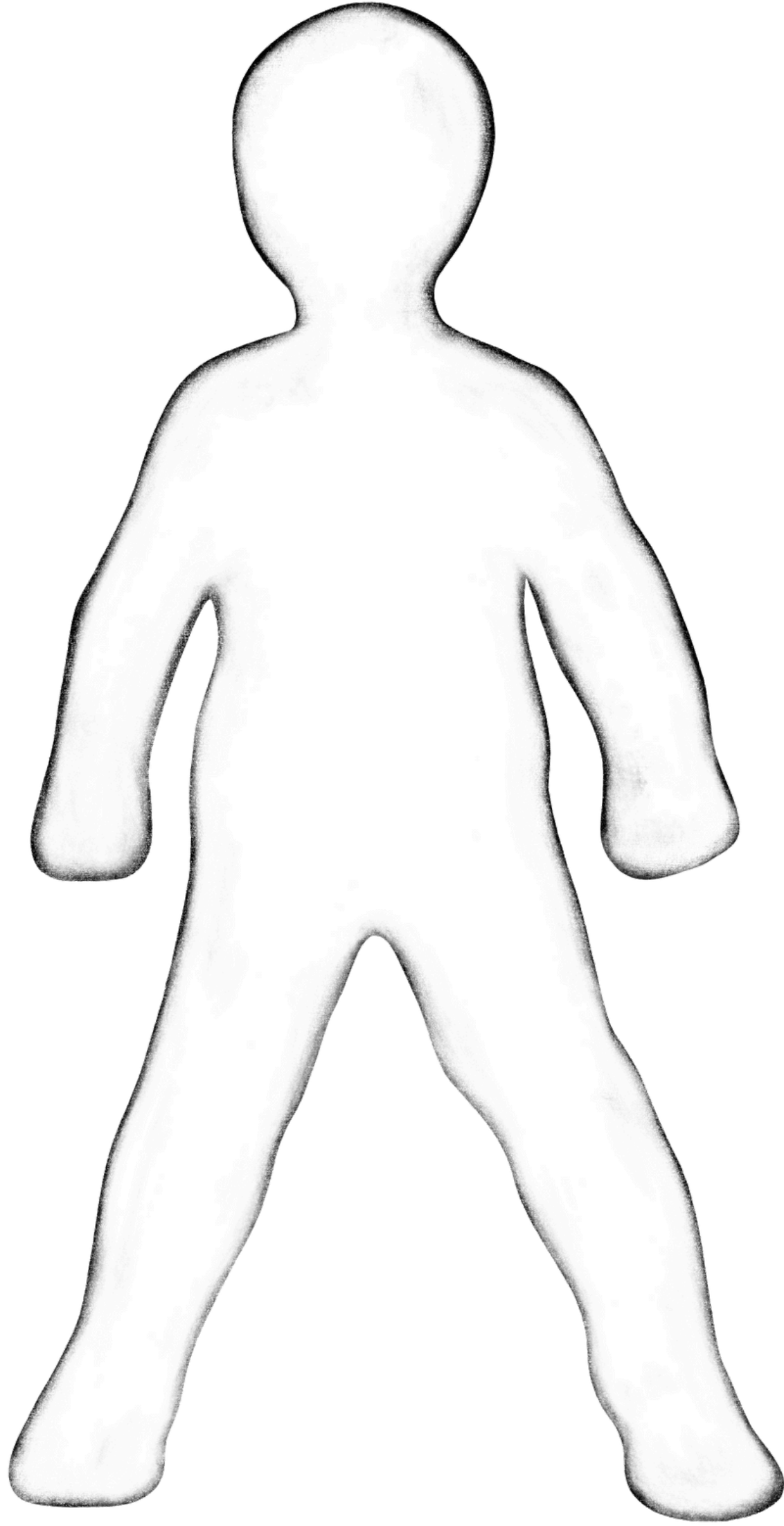
A drop in our blood pressure might make our body feel cold



**Beacon House**  
Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

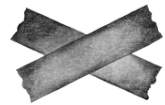
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✂..... Cut out and stick .....✂

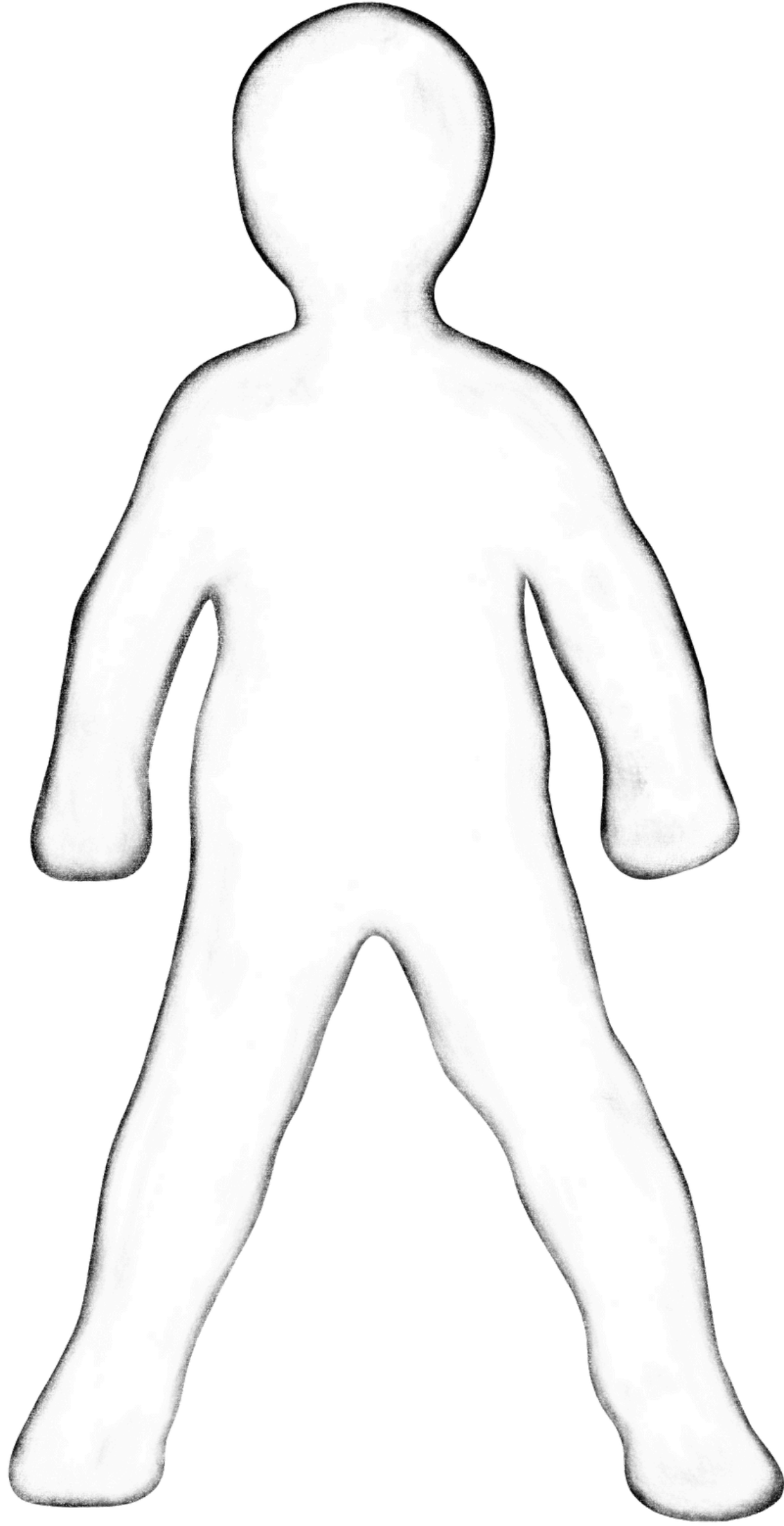


# FIGHT, FLIGHT & FREEZE MODE (HYPER-AROUSAL)

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# COLLAPSE MODE (HYPO-AROUSAL)

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