STOP Fearing Fear®

PREVENTIVE MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

Before Behaviour Escalates - Working with Adults

Behaviour and Fear Literacy for frontline and duty-of-care professionals

THE CENTRAL PRINCIPLE
Behaviour does not begin at the point where it becomes disruptive, confrontational or unsafe.

A STOP Fearing Fear® guide for people whose work involves behaviour under pressure, responsibility for others, or situations where judgement and response carry real consequences.

Adult care, health and support	Emergency and public services	Leadership, defence and high-pressure roles
Adult social care, residential services, healthcare support, safeguarding, community and crisis work.	Emergency responders, policing and public safety, crisis services and other public-facing roles.	Managers, supervisors, defence personnel and other roles where pressure, behaviour and consequence matter.

Psychologically informed. Behaviourally organised. Prevention-led.

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Behaviour is more than what you can see

Visible behaviour is information, not the whole explanation. Aggression, refusal, withdrawal, silence, appeasement, rigid control or apparent compliance can be an Action near the end of a longer behavioural process. The professional task is not to excuse unsafe or harmful behaviour. It is to understand enough of the process to respond proportionately, preserve safety and choose the next useful action.

THE OPERATIONAL POINT
If you respond only to the final Action, you may be reacting to the last visible part of a cycle that has been developing for much longer.

The same visible behaviour can mean different things

What you may see	What may be worth considering	Risk of reading only the action
Aggression or confrontation	Perceived threat, fear, shame, loss of control, conflict, intoxication, pain or another active difficulty.	Reacting personally and escalating the exchange.
Refusal or non-cooperation	Uncertainty, fear of consequence, autonomy, confusion, overload or deliberate resistance.	Turning the encounter into a power struggle.
Withdrawal or shutdown	Fear, overload, exhaustion, uncertainty, pain or reduced capacity.	Mistaking reduced response for indifference.
Appeasement or over-compliance	Fear of consequence, need for safety, connection or escape from pressure.	Assuming agreement means understanding or genuine resolution.
Rigid control or repeated challenge	Fear of failure, uncertainty, perceived loss of control, significance or prior learning.	Meeting control with control and narrowing options.

DO NOT DIAGNOSE FROM BEHAVIOUR
Visible behaviour can have different functions, causes and meanings. Use your role, procedures and available information to respond more accurately.

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The Behaviour Cycle

The Behaviour Cycle follows Threat Perception, Pre-Cognitive Fear, Thought (Appraisal), Feeling, Action, Outcome and Feedback. Memory (Stored Experience) informs Thought (Appraisal), and new experience updates Memory. Behaviour is not an isolated event.

1 Threat Perception	2 Pre-Cognitive Fear	3 Thought (Appraisal)	4 Feeling
5 Action	6 Outcome	7 Feedback	

Memory (Stored Experience) ↔ Thought (Appraisal)

RECOGNITION COMES BEFORE REACTION
When professionals recognise the process rather than reacting only to the visible Action, more proportionate options may remain available.

The Fear Cycle

When fear becomes the dominant feeling within the wider Behaviour Cycle, protective behaviour can organise through five common response patterns. STOP Fearing Fear® uses the order Freeze, Flight, Fawn, Fight and Fright.

Response	What it may look like
Freeze	Stopping, going quiet, becoming stuck or unable to choose.
Flight	Leaving, avoiding, retreating, evading or trying to escape.
Fawn	Appeasing, agreeing or complying to reduce perceived threat.
Fight	Arguing, challenging, controlling, threatening or becoming confrontational.
Fright	At the extreme end of the fear response, becoming physically immobilised even when action is needed.

These are not diagnoses or excuses. They offer a way to recognise how threat can organise behaviour before deciding what response, support or escalation is required. Explore the full framework at **stopfearingfear.com/the-frame-work/**.

THE PREVENTION POINT
Recognise threat, narrowing options and repeated protective behaviour while proportionate choices remain.

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What fear, pressure and needs can look like

The 7 Needs of Fulfilment® provide a wider behavioural lens for understanding why the same event can affect people differently. They do not replace the Behaviour Cycle. They help us consider what the situation may be threatening, depriving or activating.

Need	What it includes	Under pressure, you may see
Stability	Safety, predictability, security and certainty.	Uncertainty, repeated checking, defensive control, refusal or a strong need for reassurance.
Change	Variety, stimulation and novelty.	Restlessness, risk-taking, disruption or difficulty tolerating restriction.
Connection	Belonging, attachment and relationship.	Appeasement, withdrawal, conflict around rejection or bids for attention or proximity.
Significance	To matter, be noticed and have a valued place.	Status conflict, challenge, offended anger or attempts to regain standing.
Development	Learning, competence and progress.	Frustration, avoidance, defensiveness or loss of confidence when capability feels exposed.
Input	To contribute, care, help and make a difference.	Over-carrying responsibility, rescuing, anger when contribution is blocked or loss of purpose.
Autonomy	Agency, choice and meaningful influence.	Resistance, control, refusal or heightened response when choice feels removed.

The same behaviour can serve different needs in different situations, and the same need can produce very different behaviour. The purpose is not to guess perfectly. It is to move beyond labels and ask better questions before choosing a response.

THE PRACTICAL QUESTION
What might this behaviour be trying to protect, achieve, avoid or regain, and what does my role require me to do next?

Fear can affect interpretation before action

Fear can influence which memories come to mind, what we notice and what we expect to happen, even before we decide how to respond. That does not mean our first interpretation is wrong. Sometimes the danger is real. The professional task is to check what is happening, rather than assume the first explanation tells the whole story.

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When two Behaviour Cycles collide

In pressured encounters, the other person is not the only one with a Behaviour Cycle. Their Action can become your perceived threat. Your own fear response, appraisal and Action can then become feedback in their cycle. This is one route by which an encounter can escalate rapidly.

Understanding reciprocal escalation

Part of the interaction	What may be happening
Their Behaviour Cycle	A person responds to pressure, perceived threat or difficulty in a way that may be visible as challenge, withdrawal or resistance.
Your Behaviour Cycle	Their response can be interpreted as a threat, loss of control or urgent demand, influencing your own feelings and actions.
The feedback between you	Each response can change how the other person interprets the situation, potentially increasing or reducing pressure.

YOUR OWN CYCLE MATTERS
Professionalism under pressure does not mean having no fear response. It means recognising that your own interpretation and behaviour can affect what happens next.

What this means in practice

A refusal, raised voice or withdrawal does not tell you everything about the underlying difficulty. The situation may involve threat, uncertainty, overload, deliberate choice or several factors at once. Understanding the interaction helps professionals avoid treating their first interpretation as the complete explanation.

Behavioural understanding is a starting point for proportionate professional judgement, not a substitute for the organisation’s established procedures, specialist training or the responsibilities of the role.

For facilitated training, this principle can be explored through supervised case discussion and sector-specific scenarios.

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Identically Different

Different identities. Shared underlying mechanisms.

Every adult brings a different history into an encounter. Age, neurotype, culture, upbringing, relationships, responsibilities and life experience influence how people interpret situations, experience threats and respond. These differences, alongside repeated actions, outcomes and feedback, contribute to the identities and expectations people develop.

But identity is not the underlying mechanism that produces behaviour. The Behaviour Cycle describes the shared human architecture through which perception, fear, thought, feelings, action, outcomes and feedback interact. When difficulties remain poorly resolved, repeated cycles can reinforce expectations, accumulate pressure and influence how people approach subsequent challenges.

> **For professionals, this distinction matters on both sides of an encounter.** The person you support may experience the situation very differently from you, but both responses can be understood through the Behaviour Cycle. Recognising that shared foundation helps you examine your own reactions, avoid assumptions about someone else's behaviour and adapt your response to their circumstances, capabilities and support needs.

Responding to pressure also means addressing its causes

Understanding behaviour is not a reason to expect people to tolerate damaging conditions. Excessive demands, poor staffing, unsafe environments or inadequate support can create pressure that individual skills alone cannot resolve. A useful response may involve changing how we act, but it may also mean raising concerns, seeking support or changing the conditions themselves. Organisations remain responsible for the risks and working conditions within their control.

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The professional role: understanding with boundaries

A behaviourally informed response is neither passive nor permissive. It combines awareness of behavioural processes with safety, professional boundaries, role clarity and proportionate action.

Three principles for supported early intervention

Principle	Why it matters
Recognise complexity	Visible actions can reflect different pressures and needs. Avoid treating an initial interpretation as a diagnosis or certainty.
Maintain safety and role clarity	Professional responsibility, safeguarding, organisational policy and immediate safety requirements remain primary.
Use appropriate support and escalation	The response may require ordinary support, a practical adjustment, supervision, specialist input or formal escalation, depending on the circumstances and the role.

Supported Early Intervention has boundaries

Within a bounded professional role	Outside that role unless specifically qualified or authorised
Recognise possible patterns; communicate clearly; work within agreed boundaries; use established support and escalation routes.	Diagnose; provide psychotherapy; disregard policy; conduct specialist risk assessment outside competence; or assume behavioural understanding removes the need for urgent or clinical care.

SAFETY AND DUTY COME FIRST
Operational procedure, safeguarding, legal duties, emergency response and specialist risk management take priority where they apply. STOP Fearing Fear® adds behavioural understanding; it does not replace those systems.

Developing reliable judgement in complex situations requires more than reading a guide. Training, supervision, organisational procedures and professional competence remain essential.

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MetaSTOP Method®: the professional pause

The MetaSTOP Method® is a metacognitive interruption within your own Behaviour Cycle. It is intended to create space to recognise an automatic response, consider the situation more accurately and choose what to do next more deliberately.

The introductory sequence

Step	Core purpose
S — Stop	Interrupt the automatic response long enough to notice what is happening.
T — Think	Consider the situation, relevant facts, emotions and responsibilities.
O — Options	Recognise that more than one response may be available.
P — Prepare	Identify an appropriate next action within the limits of your role.
GO	Act and learn from the outcome and feedback.

STOP AND GO
STOP creates the opportunity for a more deliberate response. GO connects that choice to action, outcome and feedback. Thinking alone does not close the cycle.

Resilience under pressure

Within STOP Fearing Fear®, resilience is understood as a learned and teachable capability: meeting difficulty, responding as effectively as possible, and learning from outcomes. It is not simply enduring pressure or suppressing emotion.

Experience and feedback matter

After a difficult interaction, the outcome can inform future responses. Reflection, appropriate supervision and professional learning can help individuals and teams recognise what supported a better outcome and what may need to change.

This guide introduces the method. Detailed professional application, facilitated practice and sector-specific exercises form part of structured training rather than this introductory resource.

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Make earlier behavioural response a shared capability

The strongest use of this material is not one person memorising a model. It is a team developing shared behavioural language, clearer thresholds and a more consistent response to pressure before every difficult situation has to become a crisis.

This is part of a wider capability question: how well equipped are people to recognise behavioural and psychological difficulty early, respond proportionately, and know when further support or professional escalation is required?

Where it can apply	What the capability can support
Adult care, health and support	Recognising behavioural change earlier; maintaining boundaries; identifying when specialist or clinical support is required.
Emergency and public services	Understanding behaviour under threat; recognising reciprocal escalation; preserving judgement while operational procedures remain primary.
Leadership, defence and high-pressure roles	Recognising how pressure affects judgement and behaviour; strengthening feedback and earlier intervention capability.

Speaking and training conversations

STOP Fearing Fear® Speaking & Training can be adapted for conferences, staff development, leadership events, emergency-service contexts, community organisations and other groups working with sustained challenge, responsibility or consequence. Visit **stopfearingfear.com/speaking-and-training/**.

Important boundary

This guide is educational and professional-development material. It is not operational doctrine, de-escalation certification, specialist risk assessment, clinical assessment, diagnosis or treatment. It does not replace organisational policy, safeguarding procedures, emergency protocols, legal duties, command structures, specialist training or Clinical / Professional Care where required.

Remember your own pressure

Frontline professionals carry their own pressures too. Recognise your own strain early, not only that of the people you support. Individual guide: **Burnout Starts Before Burnout**.

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