

# Choosing a New Response: From *Fight or Flight*, to *Engage*

We typically react in a *fight or flight* mode when encountering difficult emotional situations. But *fight or flight* reactions are often more subtle and varied than simply attacking or running away from a threat to survival. They can include all manner of aggressive or escapist behaviors that we may not recognize as *fight or flight*. Below are some phrases that describe habitual *fight or flight* reactions, so we can identify them and then choose an alternative approach.

While the *fight or flight* reaction may be appropriate in some situations, it is counter-productive when encouraging patients to participate more in their own healing process. Instead, responses that *engage* patients naturally lead to productive, healing partnerships, as described below.



## **FIGHT REACTIONS**

*Fight reactions* include a wide range verbal and nonverbal messages that intimidate or weaken another person.



## **FLIGHT REACTIONS**

*Flight reactions* go beyond obvious acts of running away. We can also withdraw in our minds, emotions and communications.



## **ENGAGE RESPONSES**

*Engage responses* differ from *fight or flight* reactions in that they come from a conscious choice rather than an instinctive reaction.

You are in a *fight reaction* when you:

- ▶ Insist on being right.
- ▶ Impose your solution on others.
- ▶ Try to control the patient's choices or behavior.
- ▶ Use a dominating tone of voice.
- ▶ Talk down to people.
- ▶ Invalidate the experience of others.
- ▶ Judge harshly or show contempt.
- ▶ Blame others and make excuses.
- ▶ Treat people as objects .
- ▶ Direct your anger, irritability or frustration at others.
- ▶ Use jargon or terms that others don't understand.
- ▶ Deflate confidence or hope.
- ▶ Retaliate for perceived offenses.
- ▶ Use your position to threaten or humiliate others.

You are in a *flight reaction* when you:

- ▶ Avoid difficult situations and emotions.
- ▶ Ignore everything but your own agenda.
- ▶ Assume you already know.
- ▶ Stay too busy to notice or listen.
- ▶ Gloss over issues that are important to patients.
- ▶ Focus only on tasks and ignore your relationships.
- ▶ Pretend things are different than the way they are.
- ▶ Dump responsibility on others, bail out.
- ▶ Become resigned, indifferent, give up.
- ▶ Withdraw, stay distant, aloof, disconnected.
- ▶ Feel sorry for yourself; resent others.
- ▶ Take your problems home.
- ▶ Escape through addiction.

You are in an *engage response* when you:

- ▶ Don't take it personally.
- ▶ Stay present and nonjudgmental despite the difficulties.
- ▶ Make a conscious choice.
- ▶ Listen carefully.
- ▶ Ask questions, inquire, stay curious, interested.
- ▶ Learn from, and about, your patients.
- ▶ Show respect and appreciation.
- ▶ Give choices.
- ▶ Find common ground.
- ▶ Retain your humanity, express warmth, kindness and humor.
- ▶ Ask the patient's permission before doing something to, or for, them.
- ▶ Recognize each individual's uniqueness.
- ▶ Invest in the relationship, build the partnership.
- ▶ Self-evaluate rather than place blame.
- ▶ Collaborate. Innovate. Co-create.

## COST OF **FIGHT REACTIONS**

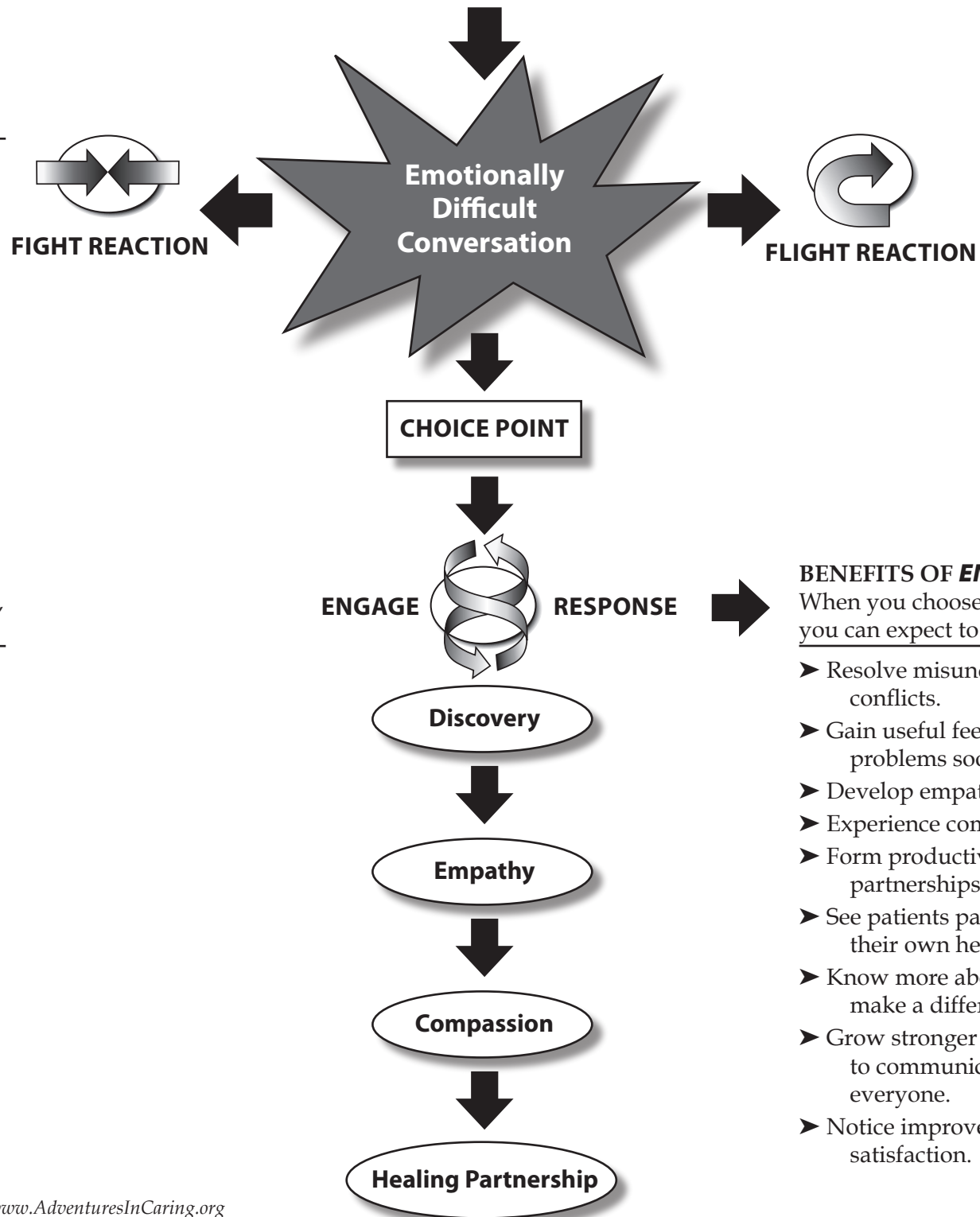
When you give in to a *fight reaction*, you can expect:

- Escalating tension and tactics.
- Entrenched positions.
- Adversarial relationships.
- Barriers to communication.
- Lack of partnership or collaboration.
- Unsustainable decisions.
- Little useful feedback or discoveries.
- Unaware of problems or misunderstandings.
- Minimal patient participation.

## COST OF **FLIGHT REACTIONS**

When you give in to a *flight reaction*, you can expect:

- Weaker relationships.
- Lack of trust.
- No commitments or follow-through.
- Loss of meaningfulness and job satisfaction.
- Sense of isolation.
- Barriers to communication.
- Lack of partnership or collaboration.
- Unsustainable decisions.
- Little useful feedback or discoveries.
- Unaware of problems or misunderstandings.
- Minimal patient participation.



## BENEFITS OF **ENGAGING**

When you choose an *engage response*, you can expect to:

- Resolve misunderstandings and conflicts.
- Gain useful feedback; discover problems sooner.
- Develop empathy.
- Experience compassion.
- Form productive healing partnerships.
- See patients participate more in their own health care.
- Know more about the lives you make a difference in.
- Grow stronger in your ability to communicate well with everyone.
- Notice improvements in patient satisfaction.