

# Episode 310: How to Get Through A Stressful Conversation with Candice Elliott

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**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 00:00

You're probably familiar with the fight or flight response to a scary situation. But did you know there are actually four stress responses? Difficult Conversations often cause us to react in unhealthy ways. And today's guests will walk us through the four acts of stress responses, and how you and your team members can engage in difficult conversations more productively.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 00:20

Joining me today is Candace Elliot, Candace is a fractional CHRO and HR mentor for business and nonprofit leaders. She focuses on the intersection of public health, organizational and community development, all in order to help leaders foster cultures of healing, where they and their teams can thrive. A warm welcome to Jennifer m to be podcast plus community, Jennifer now gets access to the extended episode, where Candice shares what to do when the person you're speaking with becomes activated, and how to handle difficult group conversations. Now, here's the conversation.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 00:52

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week, I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at [themodernmanager.com/more](https://themodernmanager.com/more).

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 01:17

Thank you so much for joining me today, Candice. I am so excited to talk about the four Fs of, I won't even call them like the the response to defensiveness to conflict to the day, but like whatever that is like, oh, my gosh, everyone has this. Everyone feels it, it's impossible to ignore.

And I'm really happy you're here to unpack it and help us find some strategies for how to navigate it when these feelings come up in ourselves and others. So thank you for joining me.

**Candice Elliott** 01:46

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to talk about it too.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 01:51

What is this? I just tried to explain it. And I think he did a terrible job. So why don't you explain what it is that we're talking about today?

**Candice Elliott** 01:58

Yeah, so we're talking about stress responses. And when people are under stress, they respond to stress in a variety of different ways. We can also call these trauma responses. But that doesn't necessarily go over as well in the business community as talking about stress response, it's a little bit more palatable if you're in meetings and talking about stress rather than trauma. But so there are four responses that are typical. So there's fighting, which is arguing basically could be throwing could be, you know, anger. There is fleeing, so running away, deciding you like don't want to do whatever the thing is that you're supposed to do or be with the people that you're supposed to be with. Then there's this state that's called freeze, which is kind of where you feel like you need to take one of these actions like you need to fight or you need to flee but you can't. And so we can get into this state of freeze where we're kind of stuck not being able to take an action. And then there's this other response that's called fawning and fawning. I feel like it's something that I'm still unpacking, learning about. But it's when you agree with something even if you don't actually agree with it, in order to avoid an argument about that thing. So that's what we're going to be talking about today fighting fleeing freezing and fawning.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 03:25

When I was learning about this from your work, that fawning was like little light bulbs were like going off my brain was like, that's what I do. I am so conflict avoidant. And also I feel like the easiest way to like, end the conversation is just to be like, You're so right. I totally agree. I made a huge mistake. I'm really sorry about that. And mostly this happens with my husband, and he hates it. And he's like, You always say that, and then you still do it. And I'm like, I know, I'm sorry. You're right. And it's not actually healthy. But I never realized that that was actually a stress response that I was having in the moment. I thought I was like so self actualized. And I

was like, Oh, yes, I totally can take this feedback. I am really understanding what's happening right here. And I'm, I am agreeing with you because it's your right. And now like, oh, maybe I'm not actually agreeing with him. That he was right. Maybe I'm just trying to avoid escalating a situation and having to have a, you know, an argument or a difficult conversation. Because that is scarier than just letting him be upset about whatever it was that I just did. And mean acquiescing to his situation.

**Candice Elliott** 04:38

So yeah, you bring up an important word, which is like feeling scared, right? And so we have each of these different mechanisms that we use in order to protect ourselves and it can feel like you know, really big to our body right to be in disagreement with our partner. This happens with me and my head. has been all the time. And he tends to avoid. And I tend to go more into the argumentative or talking a lot, piece of things. But yeah, these types of dynamics really show up in those close personal relationships, and then also with the people that we are managing. And the way that we manage people can bring up these different kinds of strategies. And sometimes they're, they're helpful, because they're helping to protect us from our vulnerabilities. But sometimes they're, they really get in the way of actually having a real authentic conversation about whatever it is, that is the thing that we need to talk about.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 05:43

So maybe let's first look at if I am having these feelings for myself, how can I recognize what is happening so that I, and then what can I do about it to actually be more present and to engage more, I would say, like productively in the moment, and not let my stress response get in the way of a having a good conversation that probably needs to happen in some way, shape, or form.

**Candice Elliott** 06:09

So you can notice what's happening in your body when you're experienced. And let's just say before I even get into this, so many of us live in just a constant state of hyper vigilance and stress, that it may be that that your body has become so used to that state, that you may not notice these things, just right off the bat. But I think if you think about the opposite of stress, think about a time when you felt like maybe you were enjoying something that was beautiful that was in front of you, or you you're drinking like a warm cup of like hot chocolate in front of a fire, it's like a really comfortable feeling. Or if you, you know, like children, or maybe if you have had your own children, if you think about holding a baby, though, that's the kind of feeling of relaxation, where it is good to have difficult conversations from. Because you can really connect in those kinds of moments when you're in that place. And when you're in that place, you're

actually building new neural pathways. And you are thinking more creatively, you're able to be in disagreement in a more comfortable space. The opposite of that, is having heightened heart rates, I think if you actually just drink a cup of coffee, and think about like the way that that affects your body, it pushes you into a more heightened stress state. So breathing quickly, heartbeat going faster. And this feeling of needing to react or respond. When you're in the comfy space, you're more receptive. When you're in that more stressed space, you're more trying to project or deliver information. And so when you notice that about yourself, what you can do is try to uncover what it is that you need in order to move into a more calm state, before you have whatever the difficult conversation is that you need to have. And our capacities are different for being able to move into calm space and relaxed space, right? Like if we're working to aid our jobs every day, you know, our capacity is going to be at one place. And so having compassion for yourself and where you're at is really important as you're doing this work. And also finding ways to, you know, bring in things that help you to feel more, more calm and centered.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 08:48

I'm wondering about, that like, like taking a break, like not going so far as to flee the conversation, but to like, proactively ask, like, can we not have this conversation now? Can I think about this Can I can be you know, can we schedule some time later today? Like I just I feel like I need a moment or those kinds of things. Okay, are we kind of trying to do foreign to the fleece space where we're like, oh, okay, and then you get back to the next conversation you're like, again,

**Candice Elliott** 09:23

Yeah, I know, if it's an intentional time to take space away to be able to get yourself into a place where you can approach the conversation in a grounded way, then yes, of course, the flee is like, Oh, I was like, I need to get away from this person. I can't deal with this thing. And if you're fleeing, kind of, you'll notice that it can happen consistently. It's starting to feel like you need to avoid work or you need to avoid this person or you need to avoid certain kinds of situations. And so it comes up not necessarily just in one conversation or in one topic, but on a regular other bases, so you'll start to notice patterns. But yeah, it's it's an important part of having healthy boundaries to tell people when you need space in order to be able to have a conversation. And it's not something that is, you know, something that we learn, really. But it is really important, especially if you're a manager and managing a lot of different people or a lot of processes. That if you're not able to be fully present in a conversation, or you're find yourself in that reactive space, to Yeah, take a minute, tell the person that this is really important, you can tell that it's important to them too. And that you want to be able to bring your full experience and everything to bear on the subject that's coming up. But that you're, you need a little bit of time to think it over first, and then you can just schedule time later that day or later that week, I've found that when you start to schedule out into the future, people will then start expecting that from you. So

if something comes up, people can feel like they need to talk about it right now. And you may be in a project or something where you have to have certain conversations in order to keep things moving forward. But sometimes that's not the case. And so you can come back to the conversation tomorrow, or you can come back to it next week. And so if you need time, just holding firm in that boundary of yours that you need that time.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 11:22

Yeah, I love that, that most of the time, it's not that urgent. And it in my experience has also helped the other person right, it gives them a chance to also process a little more and come in because it takes two of us. And I know it's when I tend to give feedback or have a difficult conversation with someone. Even though I'm not the one receiving I'm the one sharing my own nerves go up, right, like my own stress responses can kick in, if I feel the person being defensive or feel like they're not understanding me, or I feel like they're whatever it might be. And I'm guessing and I kind of noticed my own experience, too, like stepping back really helps me then be better at delivering because I've had a chance to kind of call myself and re enter that conversation. So kind of goes bad.

**Candice Elliott** 12:14

And you can get into this loop, right, where you're activating the other person and they're activating you, and it just goes in this spiral. And especially when we're managing other people were in that leadership position. And as a leader, it's really about creating a safe space for the person who's working for you to be able to work through things with you. And then for your own self to be able to do that with with other people who are higher up in the organization to if you're, for example, a mid level manager, or if you're an entrepreneur who is working with other entrepreneurs, these activated conversations can happen in all different kinds of environments. I mean, they even happened at our city council meetings.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 13:01

So, so true, it's really, these are life skills we're talking about. Let's talk for a second about the freeze response. And what that might look like, if you are having a difficult conversation with someone and you're trying to like it's let me rephrase. It's easy, I think are easier to notice when someone is going into flight mode or fight mode, right? Like they are clearly defensive, right? You're trying to have a conversation and their voices rising, right? All of those things, you're like, Okay, I can see what's happening here. Flee, right, if they're just like, I can't have this conversation right now. Like, I am too busy, like, I'm not having this conversation with you again, or whatever, right? There's some kind of like departure from this. That's relatively obvious, I think, fawning similarly, the like, you know, giving in and kind of agreeing with everything. What

does freeze look like? Are we just saying like, they're literally like silent and sitting there and kind of derided and like not sure what to do.

**Candice Elliott** 14:04

Let's say you have someone who's working for you. And they have taken on some additional responsibilities. And they have asked you for more pay in order to fairly compensate them for this more work that they're doing. And you have, you know, looked at your budget, and there just isn't more money right now. And you have told them that, let's say you haven't avoided it, you haven't fled that situation, because you don't have the conversation with them. You've told them that there isn't. There aren't finances right now in order to be able to give you the raise, but it's your intent, maybe in the future to be able to do that. And then three months down the line, the person comes to you again and they say hey, you know, can we give, get this raise going? And you say the same thing again, and then they become angry, and they're like, uh, you know, I really thought this was gonna happen, you know, maybe I need to go find another job, that's a flee, right? Maybe I need to go find another job, they're upset with you, that's, you know, the anger, the fight coming out. And let's say this person is feeling this way all of these different emotions for a while and there's no resolution of it. And when there's no resolution, that's where we get stuck in freeze. So my anger isn't working, my threat to leave isn't working. And I need something in order to feel safe or like my work is valued, and I'm not getting it. And so this is where a person can start to shut down. So maybe they start to stop doing whatever the new responsibilities were that they were supposed to take on. Or maybe they start feeling like they don't have enough time in the day in order to be able to do all the things that they're supposed to do. Or maybe they start like dropping balls on things that they normally wouldn't have a problem doing. Or there's something that maybe they learned that now they're not doing it as well again. And so that's how freeze can show up in, in a situation. And the way that you can resolve it is, is to help this person move through, they actually need to get back to being angry and wanting to flee before they can actually get to a space of being, you know, feeling valued in their work again.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 16:29

Okay, you have to just continue that line of thinking because I that is not where I thought you were gonna go with, you have to cycle into other motions. First, you can't just jump back to a good place. Explain..

**Candice Elliott** 16:40

We think there's like the straight line, right? Like, they're angry and upset, and they're trying to go somewhere, and then you know, okay, great, I got the money. And now I give it to them, and

everything's fine. But it's that that's not actually what happens, you know, it's that people go back through the anger, and the and the fleeing and the activation that they had in order to be able to move back into their more calm state. And so when someone gets into a freeze state, it takes that process of going back through the activated state in order to get back to a norm like a homeostasis. And, and people can be in a functional leave free frozen state for decades. And it can happen in relation to a lot of different events in people's lives where they want things to go one way, but they can't get there. And so they're stuck. My husband is Marine, and as disabled. Now he has a disability status with the VA. But there was this two year long period where he was trying to get this status, but was stuck. And it was like once it finally moved, once it finally happened, there were all these different things that were available for him in life that he felt like he could actually do again and participate in again, where he just felt stuck and out of for that whole time when he was frozen. And so it affected you know, if something is going on at work, it will affect all these different areas of your life, too.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 18:16

Are there any just, you know, top tips for managers who are thinking, you know, maybe someone on my team is in that stuck space? Like what can I do, just to start moving them in the right direction to try to kind of, you know, get rid of a little bit of whatever glue is holding them there and like give them some opportunity to shift back to a healthier spot?

**Candice Elliott** 18:39

Yeah, I think it really starts with building trust and relationship building. And so saying good morning to people, and, you know, asking them how their weekends are. And, you know, it can be tough to go from, you know, we're on strict deadlines all the time. And I need to make my team perform to, you know, suddenly having conversations about people's, you know, non work lives. And it can feel a little bit like a bait and switch at the very beginning. But if you actually continue with it and continue with really genuine relationship building with your team, you know, remember people's birthdays and their anniversaries and, you know, know something about each one of your employees that they really care about. And if you hear something about that thing, you know, maybe share it with them or bring it up in a conversation. It's really about building a community. And so it's just, you know, extending that what is that extending the olive branch is the term so there's that and then there's also for you as the manager working in your own space, you know, work on sleeping enough. I know these are the things that everybody is like, only I could do this thing, but try to get eight hours of sleep at night, turn your screens off before like an Hour two before bed and Drink Water Regularly, you know be hydrated. It's interesting a put a teaspoon of salt in a warm glass of water in the morning. And that helps to actually keep water in my body and my body does not like to hold on to water. That being high, I think it's there's some crazy statistic of like 80% of Americans are dehydrated, and eat regularly throughout the day, you know, every couple of hours, eat something throughout the day and

make space for lunch in the middle of the day. And it is amazing that if you do those things, how much of an effect it will have on your body feeling safe. And it's about your body. Because we're animals. It's about giving your body what it needs in order to feel supported and safe throughout the day. That's where it starts. Oh my gosh. And those are the hardest things for me to.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 20:58

And I think we underestimate that the importance of those factors, because they seem so basic, but they're actually essential. So, yes, 100% to all of that.

**Candice Elliott** 21:12

Can I just add one thing, which is that my body is one that will tend to actually hold on to things if it is not getting enough. And I think that that's something that not all, like people understand it's that like dependent on your genetics, your body may get rid of everything that it gets if it's stressed, or it might hold on to everything that it gets if it's stressed. And so if you're feeling like swollen or bigger than feels healthy to you, it could actually be that you need to eat more, or you need to drink more water. And that was like a big light bulb that went off for me as a you know, especially a woman in our society.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 21:52

Yeah. Oh, yes. Well, and the half life of the stress hormones was a huge eye opener for me when, like, when my husband and I do get into a discussion as I wouldn't describe them, he might say more like a debate. But for me, it's a discussion. And afterwards, I'm like, okay, great. So what should I make for dinner? Right? Like, what's alright? Are we gonna watch a show now, like what's happened here, like, I am just like, ready to go into the next thing in my life. And probably because I'm like, avoid, avoid, avoid, don't like, don't let any bad feelings come in, which makes it very easy to continue on in my life. Whereas for him, I'll be like, I know, I'm not angry at you. But I still feel angry at you. And, and it's like, it takes so much time for all of those emotions and the, the hormones are pulsing there, his veins to get out so that he can actually recover, be recovered, and ready to engage in a kind of normal, calm, not stressed mode. And that realization for him to be able to say, I know I'm not angry anymore, but I still feel angry. Like, I know, there's no reason I need to be feeling this. But I'm feeling it was like a big aha moment. And I'm wondering what we can do for ourselves or for our team members, when we're in a difficult conversation at work, right? And you leave and the conversations been resolved. But now you're supposed to go like into this other meeting, or like turn your attention to like this doc, this client deliverable, and you're feeling all whatever those fields were, whatever that stuff was happening. How do we, is there anything we can do to kind of help ourselves come out of that stage faster?

**Candice Elliott** 23:35

So you can like put it into a freeze, you know, for a little bit until you're able to deal with it, just like consciously know that that's what you're doing. So it doesn't get stuck. And it can help with anger to do things like punching or pushing or you know, things that are with your chest, like to push things away, or punch things away or kicking. And then with fleeing, like sensations, it's it can be really helpful to run, like to actually run. So those are things that you can do later. Or if you're able to take a break. You know, obviously you want to push something that is not another person like a wall or a punching bag or something like that.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 24:17

That's super helpful, like to actually make it physical in a way, right. Like there's the mental part of like, I need to compartmentalize so that I can turn my attention. And I can revisit whatever I need to process later. But there's also the like, just get the physical sensations out of your body. Like I love that. I'm even like moving my hands here and being like, yes, like get it out, like push it away. Right? Like shake it off. All of those things just help our bodies recover. I love that. I've never tried those things, but now I'm excited to try them.

**Candice Elliott** 24:46

Yeah, it's interesting. If you look at a picture of the human body and the nervous system, you can see that the nervous system goes it's everywhere, right? And so if you can get your body the whole body into some kind of movement, then that can really help to move things out of the nervous system that are stuck.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 25:06

Awesome. This is fabulous. All right, I think this is where we're gonna have to wrap up because we are running out of time. Candice, can you tell us about a great manager that you work for? And what made this person such a fabulous boss?

**Candice Elliott** 25:18

Yeah, I think one of the most influential managers that I ever had, his name was Zach Davis is, his name is Zach Davis. And he is the owner of a restaurant group here that's called the Glass Jar. They're a farm to table restaurant group. And when I was first doing human resource

management, he was my boss. And one of the things that I learned from him was that he was very careful to speak. And when people brought something to him, he would pause, sometimes for an uncomfortable amount of time before he would respond to something. But it was because he was really thinking through it and considering it. And so that I have taken with me through my career, and have found it to be very impactful, especially in these charged moments that can come up.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 26:14

Yes, you should always be all embracing the pause and the thinking moments love. Great.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 26:21

And where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

**Candice Elliott** 26:24

So you can do that on my website. And then also, I post on LinkedIn fairly regularly, so you can connect with me there too.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 26:33

Awesome. And what is your website? And what's your name on LinkedIn?

**Candice Elliott** 26:35

I guess. So. website is [www.fortressandflourish.com](http://www.fortressandflourish.com). You spell out and a n d. And then on LinkedIn, it's [Candice Elliot](#), and I'm the Fractional Chief Human Resources Officer, you will find me there.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 26:56

Awesome.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 26:57

Well, thank you again, for joining me today, and talking through our stress responses, and how we can kind of navigate those difficult conversations in our own bodies and feel more successful and more healthy while doing so.

**Candice Elliott** 27:10

Thank you so much for having me.

**Mamie Kanfer Stewart** 27:12

Candice is offering members of Podcast Plus a free burnout buster consult. During this 45 minute session, you'll identify the most impactful next step you can take toward preventing burnout for yourself and your team. To get this guest bonus and many more, as well as the extended interview episode, takeaways and access to our community forum, become a member of Podcast Plus, go to [themodernmanager.com/more](https://themodernmanager.com/more). All the links are in the show notes and they can be delivered to your inbox. When you subscribe to my newsletter, find that at [themodernmanager.com](https://themodernmanager.com). Thanks again for listening. Until next time.