



Trauma-Informed Interviewing: Understanding & Supporting the Impact of Trauma in Workplace Investigations

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Why Study the Neurobiology of Trauma?



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- Give context to the behavior of traumatized individuals
- Get better interviews and get better evidence
- Helps with memory recall
- Creates best practices that mitigate secondary trauma

Possible Traumatic Events

- Death of Family Member, Lover, Friend, Teacher or Pet
- Divorce
- Serious Illness
- Parental Abandonment
- Sexual Harassment
- Sexual Assault
- Natural Disasters
- War
- Terrorism
- Witnessing Death
- Physical Pain/Injury
- Jail/Prison Stay
- Domestic Abuse

Possible Traumatic Events

- Helping Families Facing Death of Child or Adult Family Member in Worker Caseload
- Frequent Exposure to Photos of Serious Injury or Death
- Investigating Emotionally Charged Cases
- Investigating Vicious Abuse/Neglect Cases
- Frequent Exposure to Crime Scenes
- Repeated Exposure to Accounts of Traumatic Events by Children
- Supporting Grieving Family Members

This experience of trauma is not unique to one particular group.



What happens to the brain during a traumatic incident?



- The brain perceives a threat
- The brain takes self-protective measures
- These measures are automatic reactions
- These measures can have an impact on reporting

Peri-Traumatic Stress Affects Three Main Areas of the Brain (among others)...

Amygdala & Defense Circuitry:
(Reflexes and Habits)

Prefrontal Cortex:
(Rational Decision Making)

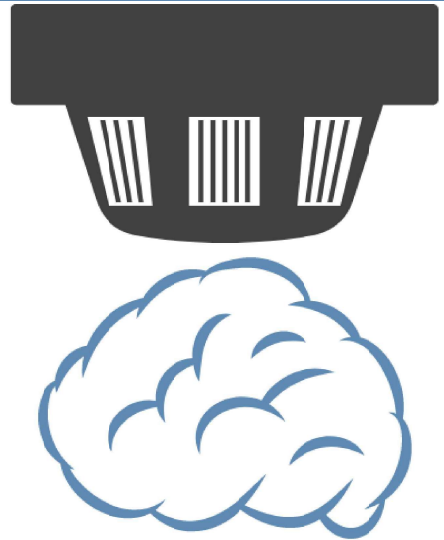
Hippocampus
(Forming/Recalling Long-Term Memory)



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The Amygdala & Defense Circuitry: Reflexes & Habits

- Part of the Limbic System (The reptilian brain):
Regulates body functionality and instinct
- The brain's "smoke detector"
- Emotion/reaction center



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The Amygdala: Instinct

- When the Amygdala perceives a threat, it triggers defense circuitry
- This is a natural response to unnatural circumstances

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Stress Chemicals

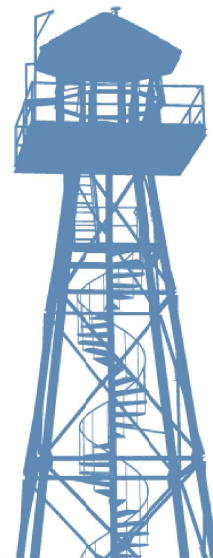
- Chemicals released into the brain that may affect reactions
- Must be taken into consideration with other learned and instinctual behaviors
- Have different effects in peritraumatic and posttraumatic situations

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The Prefrontal Cortex: Rational and Deliberative Thought

- Top-down or executive attention
- The brain's "watchtower" for monitoring effectiveness of behavior
- Modulation of emotions
- Preventing or ending impulsive habits or behaviors



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Response to Trauma

- Brain reverts to *REFLEXES AND HABITS...*



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Defense Circuitry

- Always on and scanning for danger
- When under attack or extreme stress:
 - Impaired Prefrontal Cortex
 - Controls attention
 - Shifts behavior to reflexes and habits
 - Altered memory encoding and consolidation

Habit Circuitry

- Learned habits to react to or minimize stress
 - What may have worked in the past
 - Constant, repetitive muscle memory training



Trauma Responses

- Fighting back
 - Trying to escape
 - Dissociation
 - Rationalizing
 - People-pleasing
 - Obeying
 - Appeasing
 - Placating
 - Otherwise passively going along
 - Tonic Immobility/Collapsed Immobility
 - The list goes on...
- It's an individual thing
 - It may not make sense to the person who is reacting or the person who is hearing about the situation
 - It is an automatic response

Hippocampus

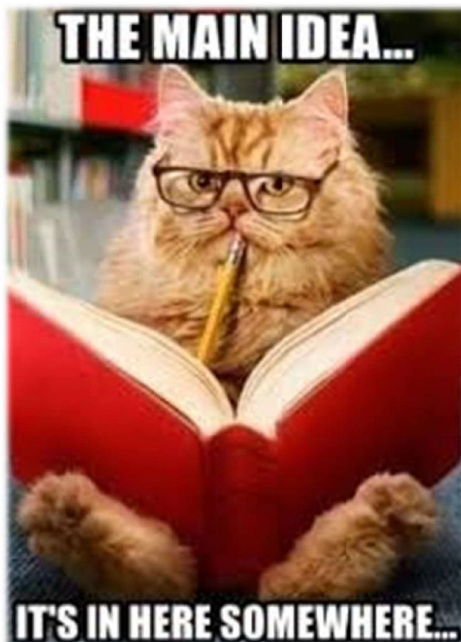
- Supports short-term memory (~30 s) and transfers information into long-term memory
- Encodes and stores associations between pieces of memory and between pieces of memory and contexts – locations in space and time.
- Sensitive to electrical and chemical effects of defense circuitry, which change over time



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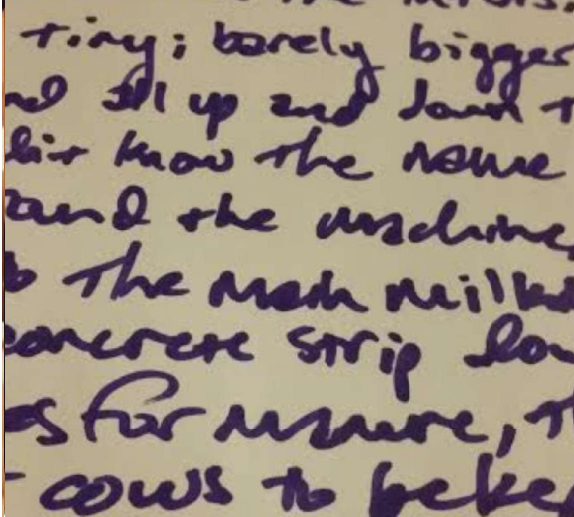
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Central vs. Peripheral Details...



- Memory is associative
- Stronger emotional connection = more central memory

Memory Processing Example:



- An experience processed as a logical sequence
- Amplification Differential Encoding:
 - Super-encoding to minimal encoding modes

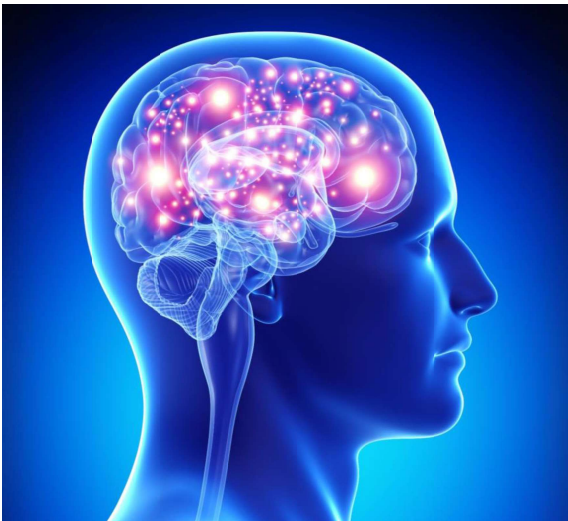
Images from: <http://aisylum.com/2015/04/22/neurobiology-of-rape-and-sexual-assault-lets-talk-about-it/>

Understanding the Effects of Trauma is Critical

- The survivor's first impression of an investigator:
 - Can determine their level of participation
 - Affects the successful outcome of an investigation
- Investigators can cause as much harm as good if not working from a trauma-informed perspective



Trauma's Effect on a Survivor



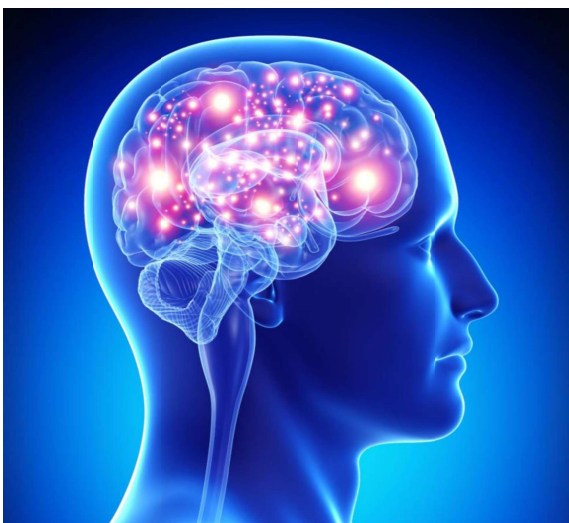
- The brain's emotional centers overwhelm the rational centers
- *The survivor may present with any emotion at any intensity, including dissociation*

Trauma's Effect on a Survivor



- Memory of a traumatic event is stored as sensory fragments
- *The survivor may not be able to explain the event in a complete, logical sequence*

Trauma's Effect on a Survivor



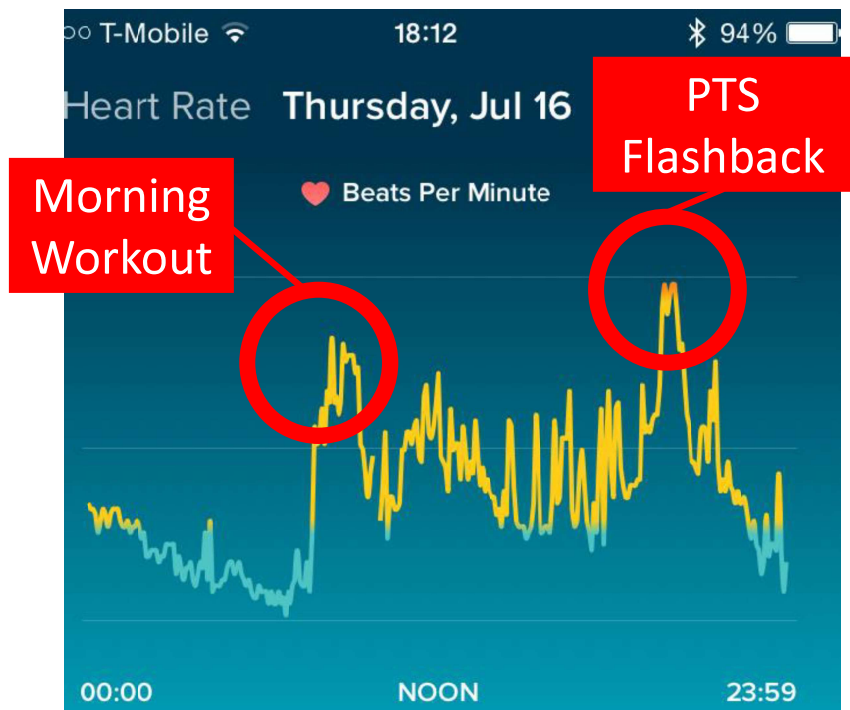
- The imprint of Trauma is on the right (emotional) hemisphere of the brain
- *The survivor may not be able to participate in an investigation in a "rational" manner*

Trauma's Effect on a Survivor



The effects of trauma can often be misinterpreted as false reporting to investigators who are not trauma-informed

What might your interviewee be going through?



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Physical Reactions to Trauma

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Soreness
- Bruising
- Infection
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Startle response
- Discomfort at site of attack
- Pregnancy*
- Menstrual cycle disruptions
- Genitourinary difficulties
- Gastrointestinal problems

**if involving sexual assault*

Psychological Reactions to Trauma

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Self-blame
- Moodiness
- Nightmares
- Confusion
- Powerlessness
- Concentration problems
- Guilt
- Obsessions
- Anger
- Desire for revenge
- Shame
- Embarrassment

REMEMBER..



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- **The survivor cannot control these effects.**
- **The survivor cannot simply “get over it.”**
- **Credibility judgments cannot be made based on a survivor’s demeanor or inability to state a chronological narrative.**



The Trauma-Informed Interview

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The Interview is a Process

- The impact of trauma is physical, psychological and emotional.
- Attending to the survivors need for safety (physical, psychological and emotional) is paramount.

Before the Interview: Focus on Empowerment



Communicate empathy: “I’m sorry this happened to you,” “I’m sorry to meet you this way.”



Attend to basic needs of the survivor: “Is this space comfortable to you?”, “Have you eaten?”



Acknowledge the difficulty of reporting: “I understand this process is difficult,” “Thank you for trusting me with this information.”

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Focus on Empowerment

- Ask, Don't Tell
 - “Can I tell you?...” “Can I ask?...”
 - Give overview of the interview process, explain need to ask clarifying questions
 - “How can we work together to best support you through this process?”

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Focus on Empowerment

- Explain the interviewing process
- Explain clarifying questions before the interview: "some questions may seem silly or stupid.."
 - Establishes rapport/empowers survivor with knowledge of process

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It's Okay

- Communicate that it's okay:
 - For the survivor to tell their story in their way
 - For the survivor to not remember every detail
 - For the survivor to remember details later
 - For the survivor to feel how they feel (i.e. anger, fear, sadness, nothing)

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**Most Importantly...
Listen &
Communicate Belief**



“I Believe You”

- Can be communicated verbally
- Can be communicated through attending behaviors and encouragement
- Helps the survivor be as participative as possible

“I Believe You”

- Is an initial orientation of belief
- Does NOT mean you are not going to conduct a thorough investigation
- Does NOT mean you will investigate suspected offenders with an implicit bias
- Is both supportive AND professional

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“I Believe You”

- Should be applied to suspects as well
- A good, thorough investigation helps lead to successful conclusions

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During the Interview

Focus on the experience:

- "Where would you like to start?"
- "What can you tell me about your experience?"
- "What did you feel?"

During the Interview

Sit *Back*... Stay Quiet... and LISTEN!!!

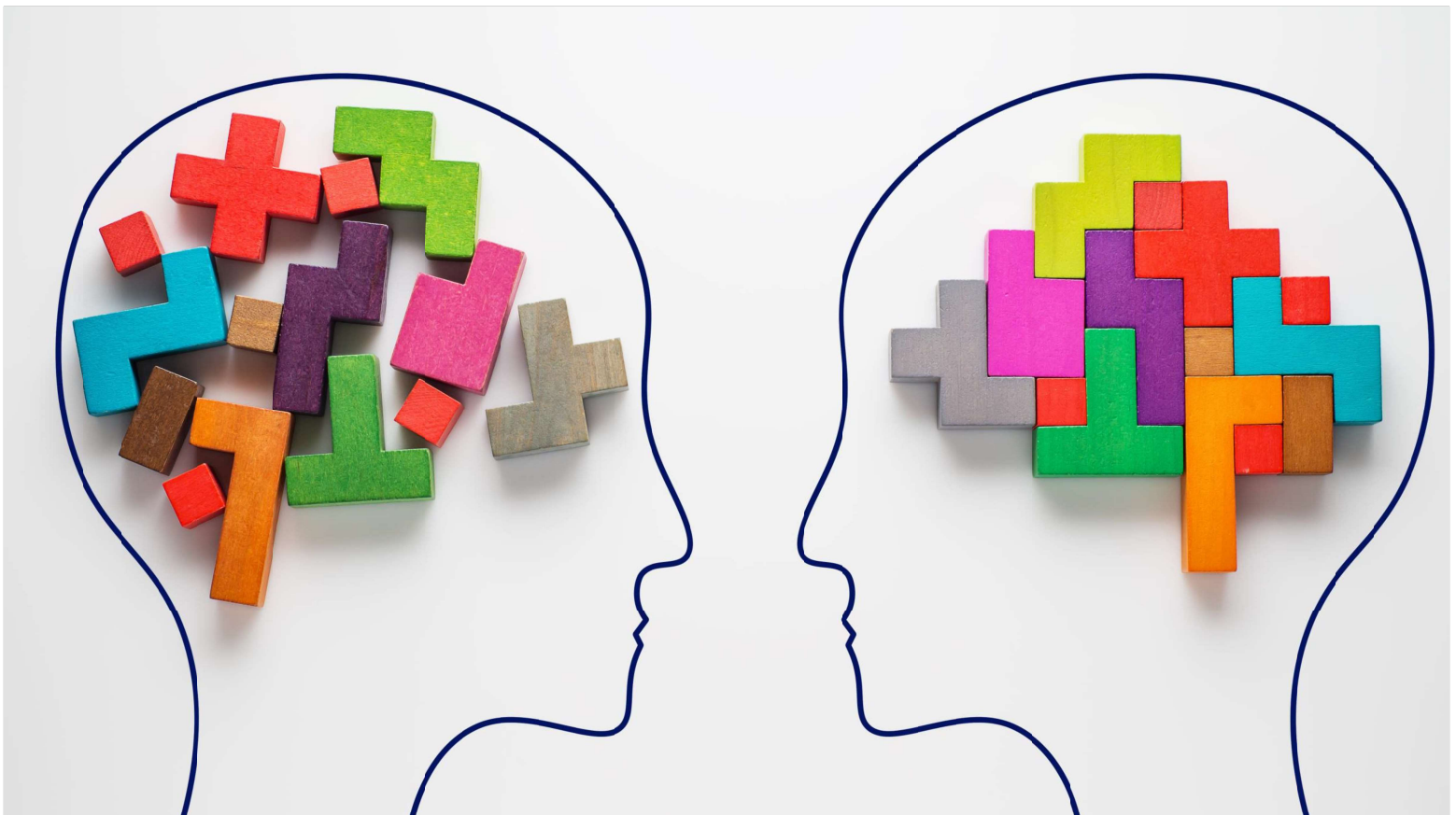
Allow an uninterrupted narrative:

- Be patient
- Avoid rapid-fire questions (may be misinterpreted)
- Demonstrate active listening

After the Narrative

Capturing the experience:

- “What are you able to tell me about”:
 - “How that made you feel?”
 - “What you thought?”
 - “What else stood out in your mind?”

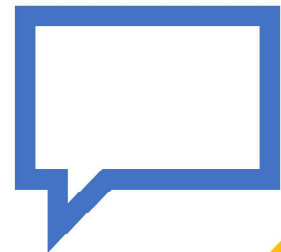


Seeking Additional Details

- Sensory Details: "What are you able to tell me about...":
 - "What you saw?"
 - "What you heard?"
 - "What did you smell?"
 - "What did you taste?"
 - "What did you feel?"



Tell me more about...



Clarifying Questions



- Used to seek clarification of details or determine elements of the offense and evidence
- **EXPLAIN YOUR QUESTIONS**
- Interview, don't interrogate:
 - "Can you help me understand how...?"
 - "Can you tell me your thought process when...?"

Concluding the Interview

Capturing the experience:

- "What are you **able** to tell me about":
 - "Your reactions to this experience physically/emotionally?"
 - "What has changed for you since the experience?"
 - "Any recurring thoughts?"
 - "The experience affecting your sleep/eating/drinking/family relations?"

Concluding the Interview

- Inform the victim of the next investigative steps
- Provide contact information for Victim's Assistance/Advocacy
- Assure the victim that it is not unusual to remember additional information over time and not to hesitate to reach out

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Victims/Survivors who experience a supportive and compassionate response, regardless of the criminal justice outcome, have lower rates of post-traumatic stress.

Campbell, et al. (1999). "Community Services for Rape Survivors: Enhancing Psychological Well-Being or Increasing Trauma."

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Thank You!

Link for Presentation:



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