



A Trauma-Informed
Approach: It Starts with
YOU

Presenter Information

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****NO DISCLOSURES OR CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS*****

Objectives

- Describe neurobiological structures and roles involved in a traumatic event process
- Describe the responses to trauma and defense cascade
- Understand the effects of a traumatic event
- Discuss best practices for speaking with a victim of a traumatic event



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Definition of Trauma/Traumatic Event

- ▶ The definition of traumatic events described by the American Psychiatric Association in the diagnostic manual has changed over the years since the initial definition in 1980.
- ▶ Traumatic events were first described as events that occurred “**outside the range of human experience,**” but over the years, world changes have proven this definition to be inaccurate.
- ▶ Forms of sexual assault, and domestic violence which have historically been described as uncommon have become ordinary experiences today. Similarly, over the years, combat trauma and military trauma is no longer outside of the range of human experiences and rather considered a common part of the human experience (Herman, 1997).

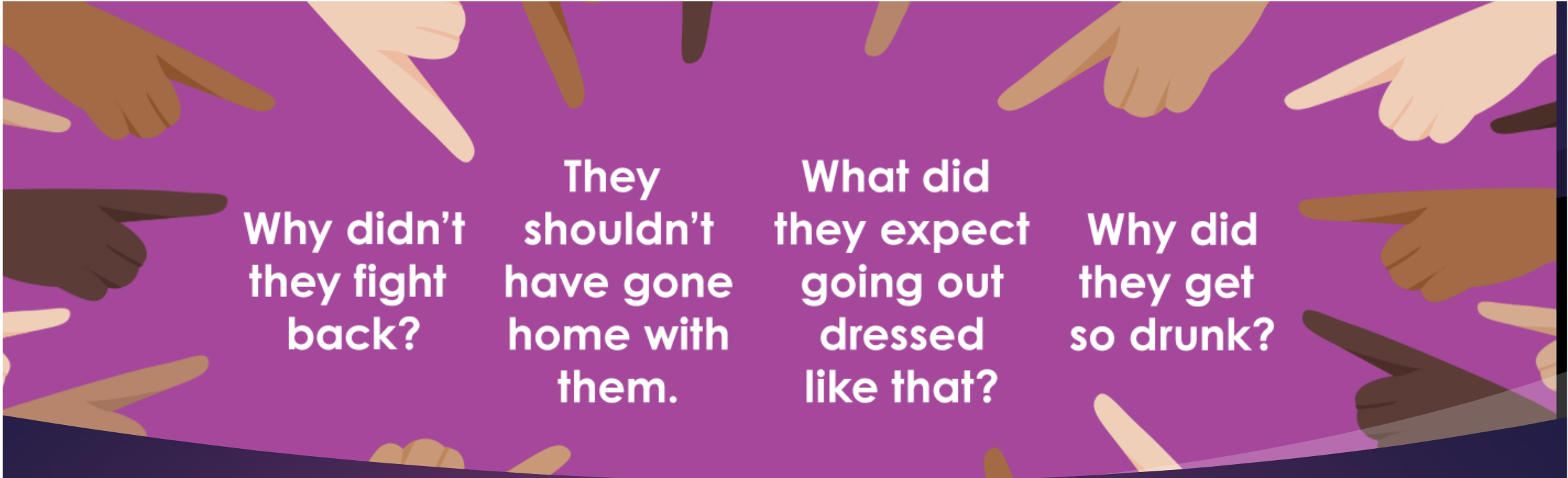
Psychological Trauma

- ▶ **Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a distressing event.**
 - ▶ It is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope, or integrate the emotions involved with that experience.
- ▶ Psychological trauma can be experienced in many different forms.
- ▶ Some experiences are traumatic and dangerous of human design while others such as natural disasters or a car accident are simply extraordinary because they overwhelm the ordinary human response and adaptations to life (Herman, 1997).



Psychological Trauma

- ▶ These traumatic events generally involve threats of death or bodily harm, or personal encounters with inescapability, violence and threats to life.
- ▶ They leave the individual with feelings and emotions of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and threat of annihilation, which evoke psychological trauma responses.
- ▶ These traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes for victims that can cause them to become disconnected from daily life (Herman, 1997).



Why didn't they fight back?

They shouldn't have gone home with them.

What did they expect going out dressed like that?

Why did they get so drunk?

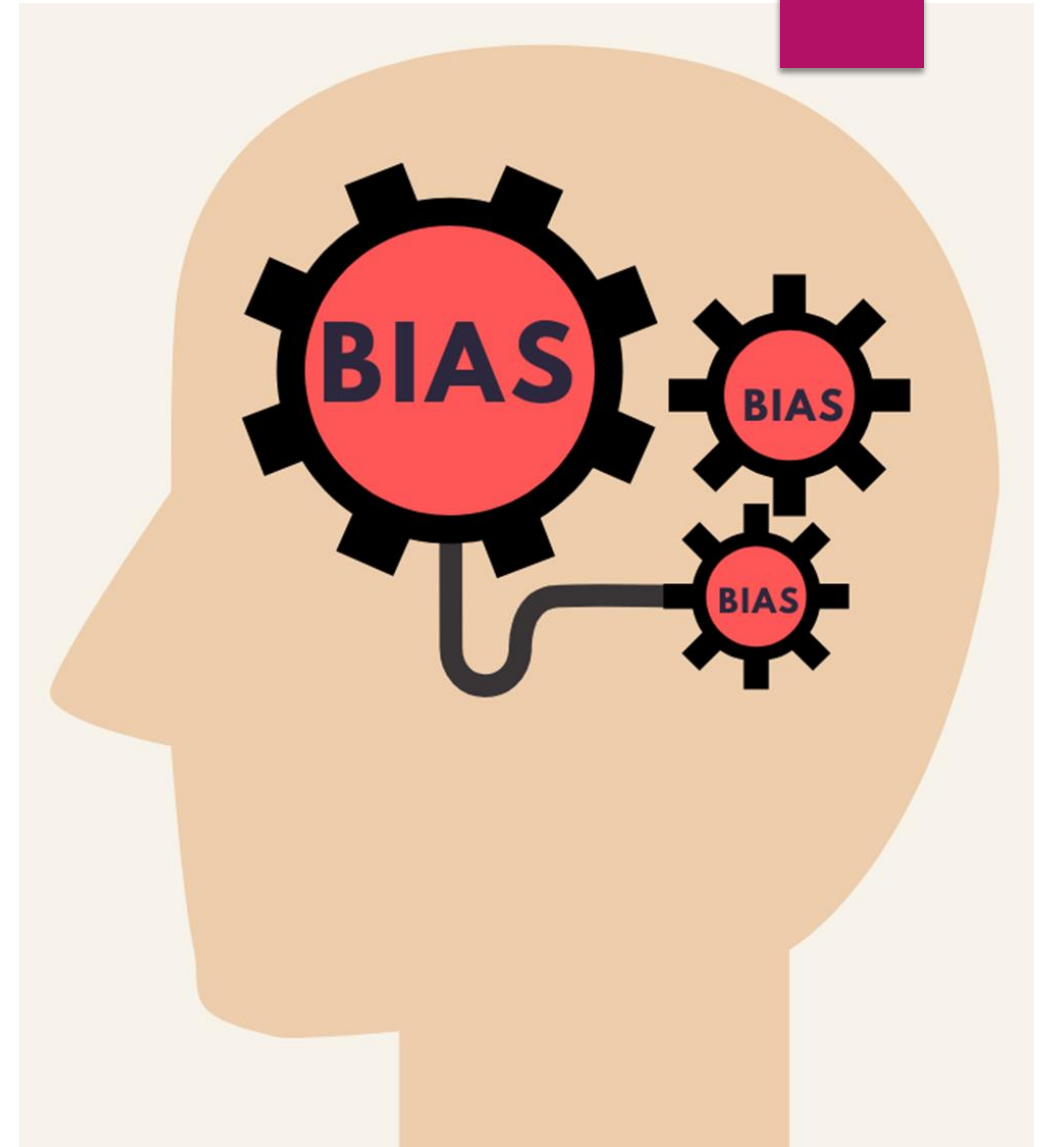
Bystander/Societal Support

- ▶ Social judgment of (chronically) traumatized patient tends to be harsh due to a lack of understanding of neurobiological and psychological changes undergone during the experience.
- ▶ Many bystanders presume they would have shown more courage in a similar circumstance.
- ▶ They account for the patient/victim's behavior by finding moral character or personality flaws.
- ▶ Bystanders show more support for survivors of natural disasters compared to a traumatic event of human design because they are less emotionally charged situations.



Biases

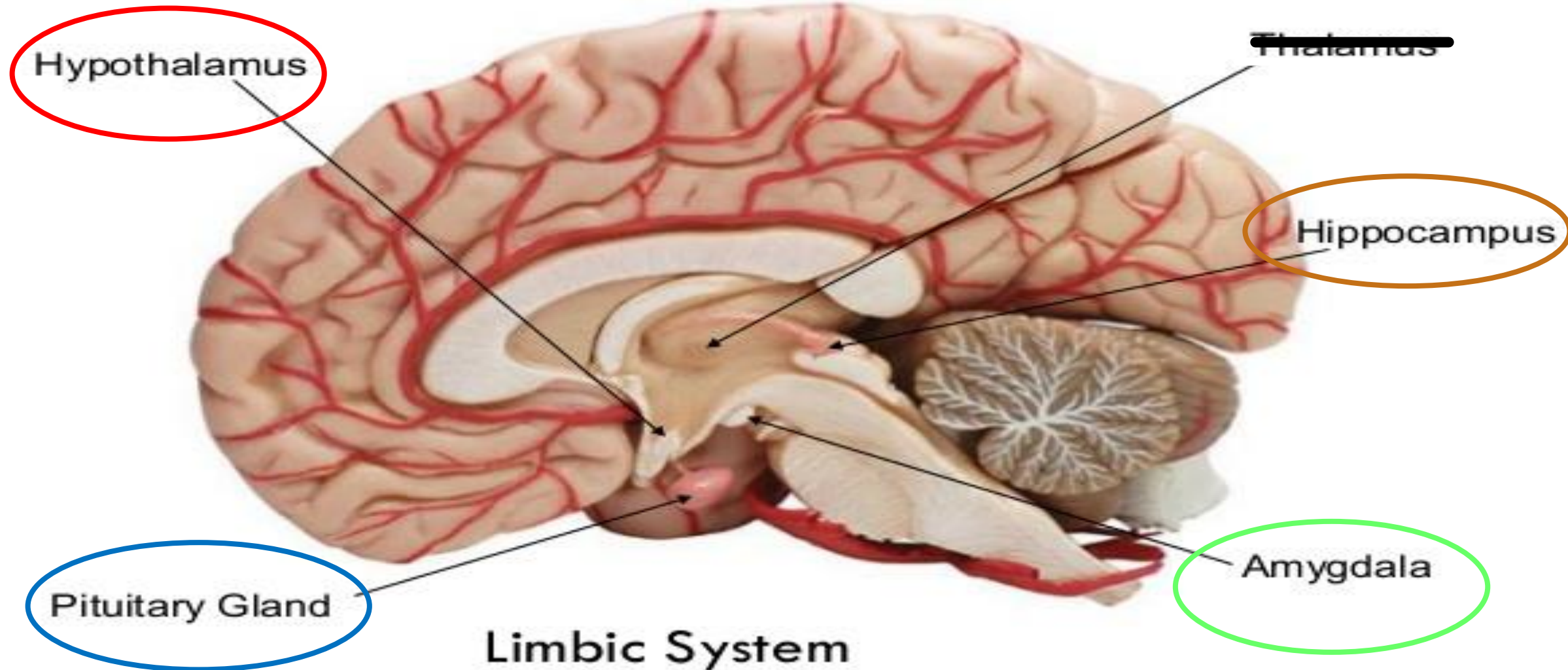
- ▶ Explicit (**conscious**)- When a person outwardly expresses their negative feelings, beliefs, or stereotypes and is aware of this behavior and judgments.
 - ▶ Controllable, monitorable, deliberative
- ▶ Implicit (**unconscious**)- When a person has judgments but is not aware he/she is projecting these upon others.
 - ▶ Subtle cognitive process that function at level below conscious awareness and without intentional control
 - ▶ Unaware, uncontrollable, spontaneous



Understanding Trauma

- ▶ Trauma **physically changes our brain** and the way it functions
 - ▶ Brain's sole focus is survival
 - ▶ Impairs all higher-capacity brain function
- ▶ Not understanding this can lead to **bad outcomes and potentially long-term, devastating effects for victims.**
- ▶ Understanding helps **promote victim healing and recovery.**
 - ▶ First impressions matter

Brain of Emotions



RESPONSIBLE FOR EMOTIONS, SURVIVAL INSTINCTS, AND MEMORY

Neurobiological Response to Trauma

1. When the **amygdala** senses a threat from the external environment, it activates the **hypothalamus** to enhance survival.
2. The **hippocampus** begins collecting as much information as possible (for memory).
3. The **hypothalamus signals** the **pituitary gland** to release Adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH).
4. ACTH reaches the **adrenal glands** (located on kidneys) via HPA Axis initiation
5. **Adrenal glands** release appropriate hormones based on body's response.
 - ▶ Fight, flight, or freeze (Campbell, 2015)

Neurobiological Responses to Trauma

- ▶ When a threat is sensed, the brain chooses to act or freeze.
 - ▶ We do not choose how the brain and body respond.
- ▶ This manifests in one of three involuntary responses
 - ▶ FIGHT
 - ▶ FLIGHT
 - ▶ FREEZE

(Russo, 2017)



Fight or Flight-Body Preparation

Hormones surge

Increased **heart rate**

Glucose
rerouted to
major muscles

Digestive and immune systems
are suppressed

Rational
thought can be
impaired

Superfocus on
sensory details

Baltimore Man Royal Quinn Convicted In Rape Of Child At Norwood Elementary School In Dundalk

WJZ
NEWS

SEPTEMBER 3, 2021 / 3:15 PM / CBS BALTIMORE



Baltimore Man Royal Quinn Convicted In Rape Of Child At Norwood Elementary School In Dundalk 



Royal Quinn

Fight!!

Trauma Hormones

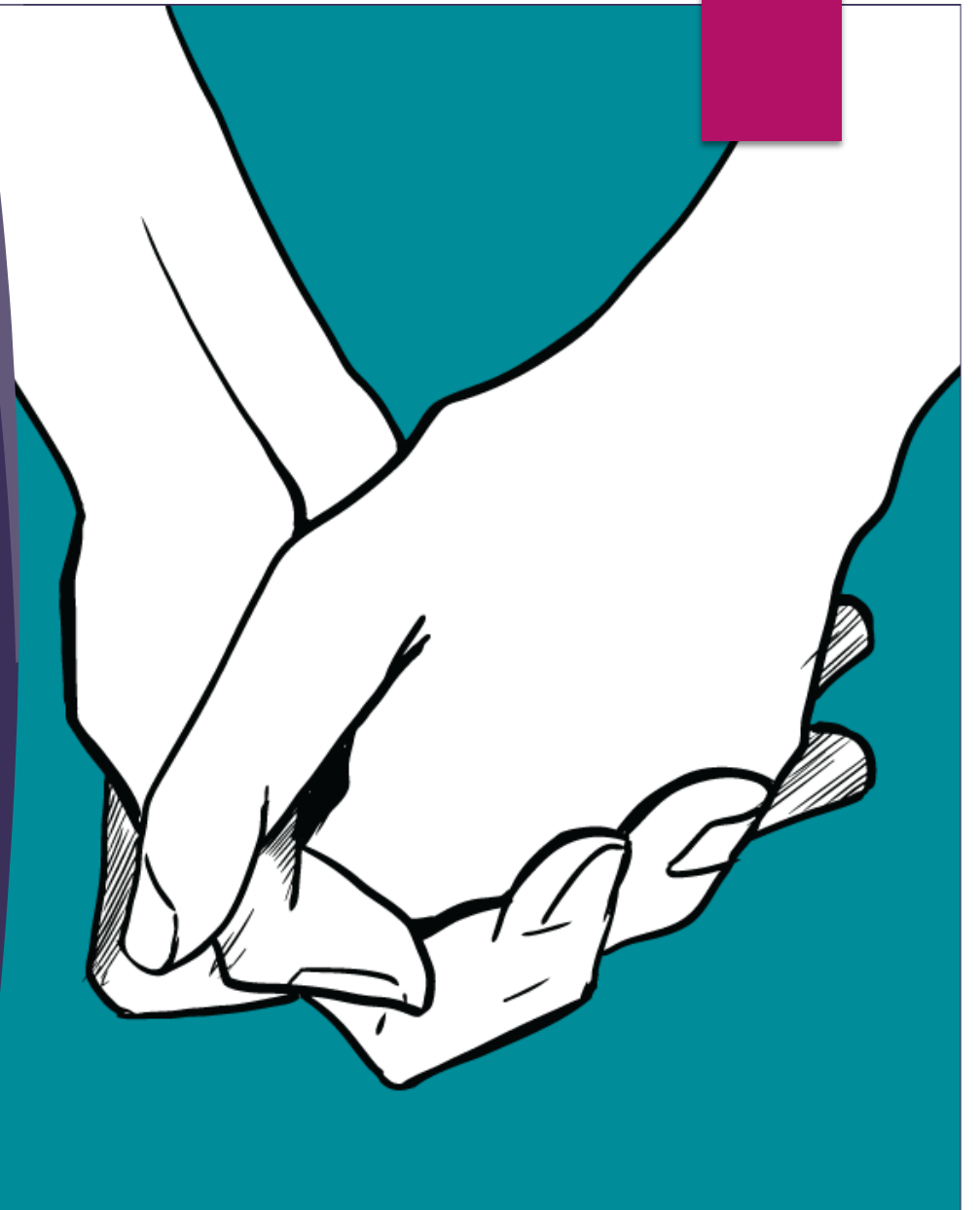
The background features a complex molecular structure composed of dark blue spheres connected by thick blue lines. Interspersed among these are several larger, semi-transparent spheres in shades of red, yellow, and green. On the right side of the image, a small, stylized illustration of a person with brown hair, wearing a red t-shirt and dark blue pants, is standing on a large pink sphere. The overall aesthetic is scientific and modern.

- ▶ These hormones and chemicals flood the body during a trauma and can cause changes
 - ▶ They can impair rational thought
 - ▶ Cause a flat affect
 - ▶ Cause hyperactivity
 - ▶ Shut-down bodily functions
- ▶ The hippocampus is very sensitive to these hormones, and can cause memories to be fragmented, incomplete, out of sequence, or absent.
 - ▶ This does not mean the memory can not be accurately recalled, it just may take additional time (Neurobiology: During Trauma, 2018).



Tonic Immobility-Rape Induced Paralysis

- ▶ A **documented neurobiological condition**, also known as rape-induced paralysis (Van Buren & Weierich, 2015).
- ▶ An **autonomic (uncontrollable)** state of paralysis elicited in situations where extreme fear and perceived inescapability is present (Van Buren & Weierich, 2015).
- ▶ Experienced by about 70 % of rape victims (Russo, 2017)





Are Humans
the Only
Species to
Utilize Tonic
Immobility??



Tonic Immobility- Predator/Prey Relationship

- ▶ Tonic immobility is present in animals via a predator and prey situation.
- ▶ Relate that to human interaction: suspect and victim situation



- ▶ Animals are usually able to return to their normal state after the threat has passed
- ▶ Humans often cannot. They find themselves locked in response pattern tied to the original trauma, which can lead to PTSD (Kozłowska, Walker, McLean & Carrive, 2015)

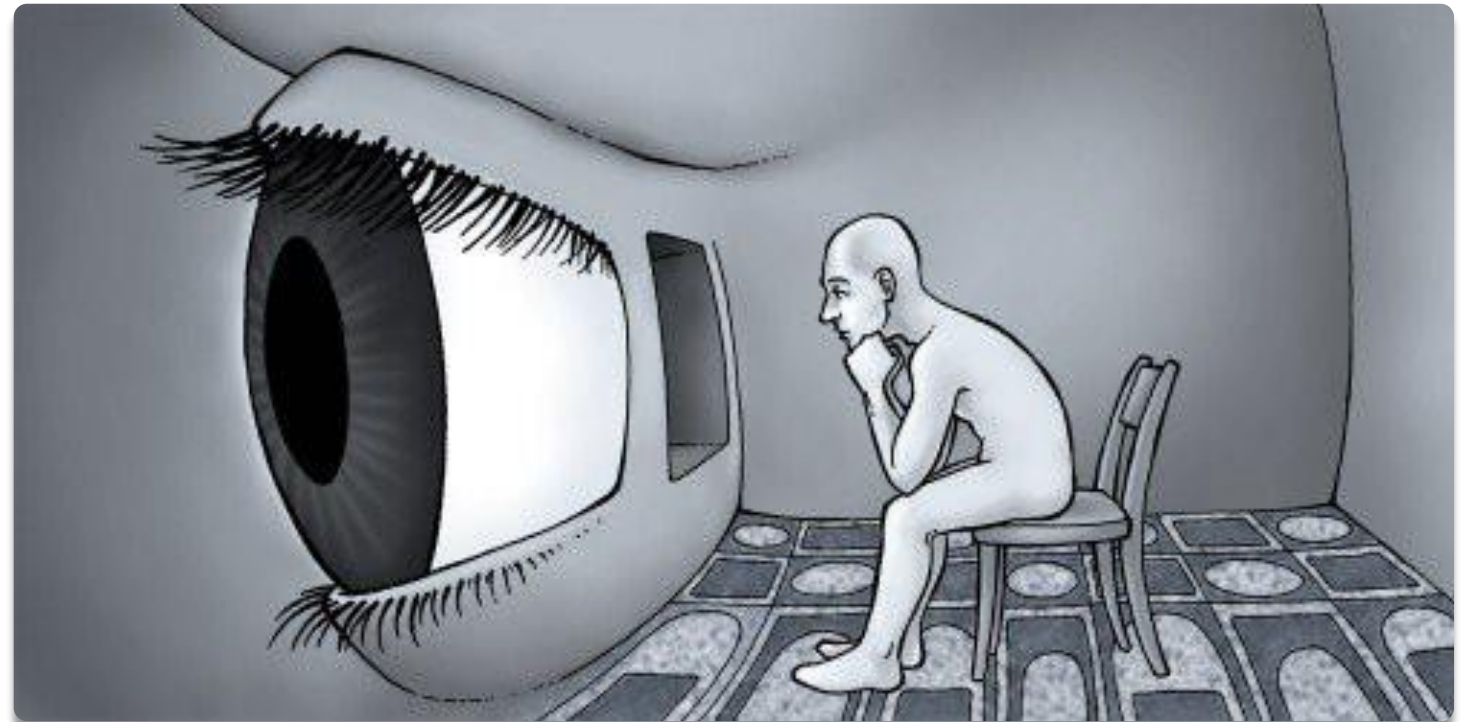
Tonic Immobility- Patient Statement

"When I was raped, there was **no struggle**.

I repeatedly said I didn't want to have sex, but when he started pulling down my pants and underwear anyway, my body seemed to **freeze over**. A million thoughts rushed through my head and then stopped, and my mind started drifting somewhere else, somewhere safer, as I lay in the back of his car **stiff and silent**."

Dissociation

- ▶ A detachment from reality
- ▶ A defense mechanism of the brain to cope with traumatic situation
- ▶ **Escaping from reality to go some place safer**



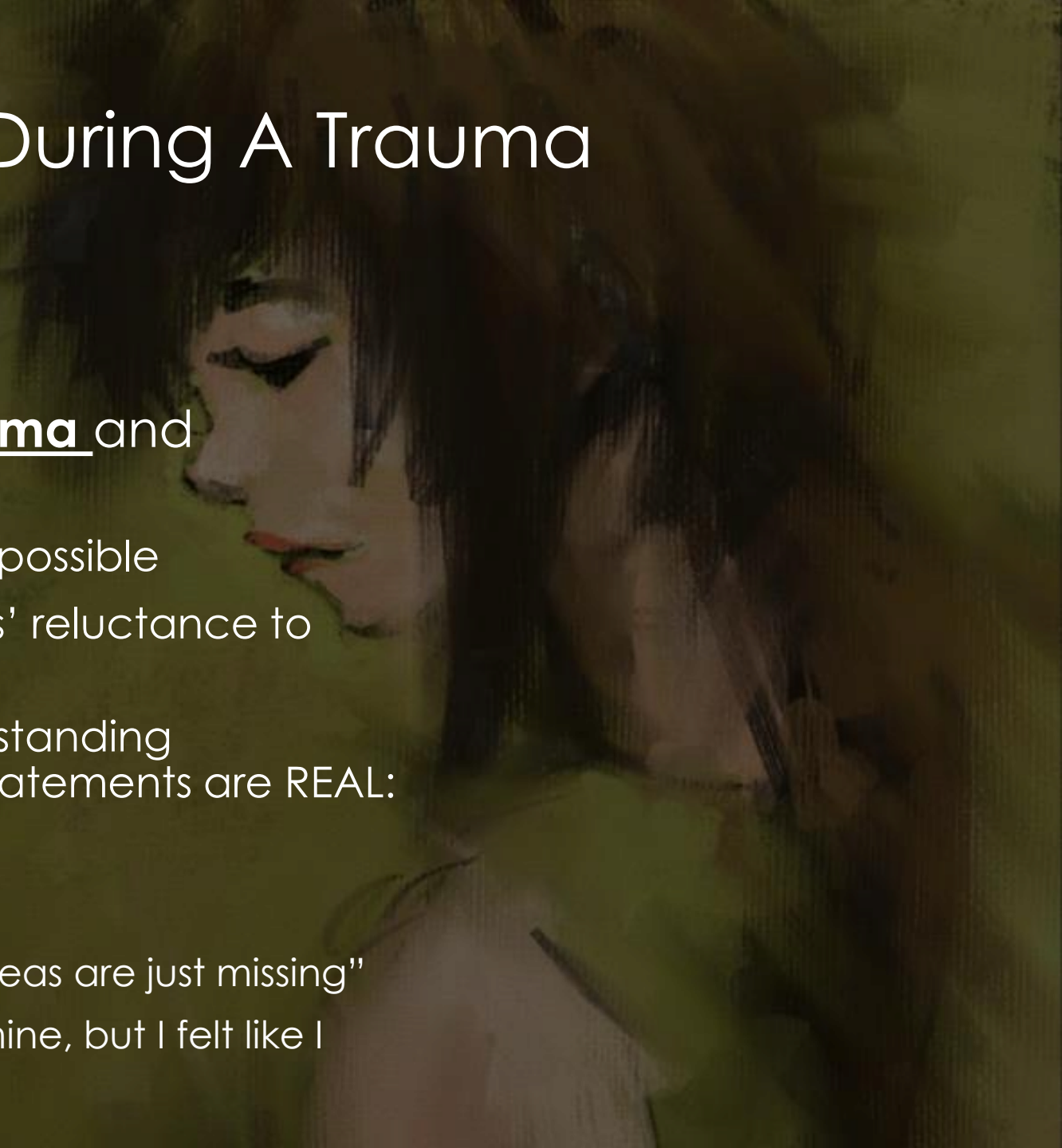
Dissociation

- ▶ A state of detached calm where terror, rage, and pain dissolve.
- ▶ Events continue to register in awareness but become disconnected from the original meaning.
- ▶ Perceptions are numbed and/or distorted with a partial loss of sensation.
- ▶ Time sense can be altered.
- ▶ Can be described as:
 - ▶ Out of body experience
 - ▶ Happened in slow motion
 - ▶ A bad dream soon to wake up from (Herman, 1997)



Memory Processing During A Trauma

- ▶ There is no “normal” response to trauma and memory processes are impaired.
 - ▶ Makes chronological narrative almost impossible
 - ▶ Inability to remember can lead to victims’ reluctance to report.
 - ▶ Be patient, show compassion and understanding (emotional safety)... Understand these statements are REAL:
 - ▶ “ I think I was raped”
 - ▶ “Things got fuzzy”
 - ▶ “I remember bits and pieces, but some areas are just missing”
 - ▶ “I remember feeling his body weight on mine, but I felt like I was out of body”



What About Adverse Childhood Experiences?

- ▶ What are they?
 - ▶ Sexual or Physical Abuse
 - ▶ Neglect
 - ▶ Domestic Violence
 - ▶ What else??
- ▶ What about kids with high ACE Scores?
 - ▶ Increased likelihood of drug / alcohol use
 - ▶ Increased likelihood of teen pregnancy
 - ▶ Mental illness including depression and suicidal ideation
- ▶ What Else??

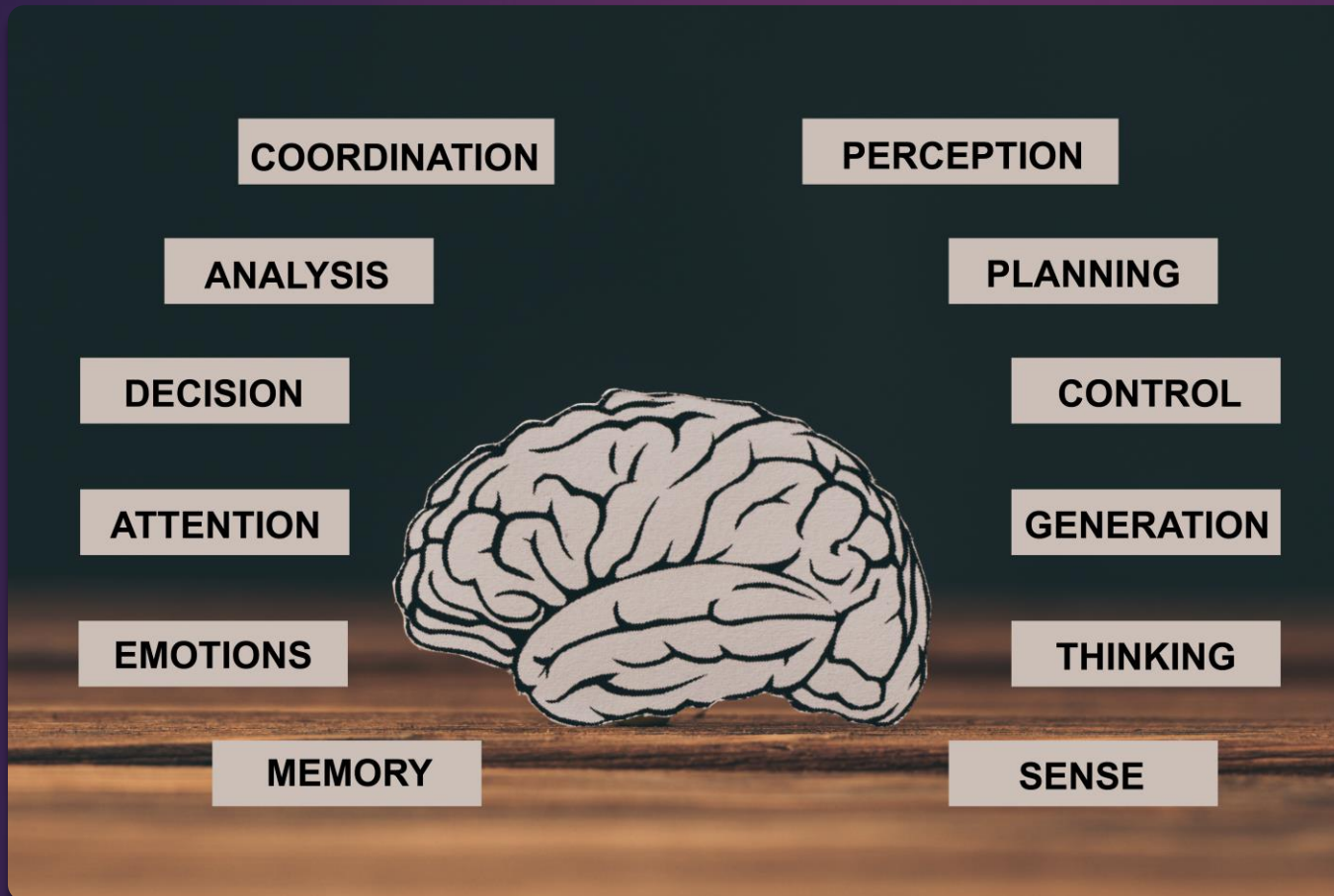


THE IMPACT
OF ADVERSE
CHILDHOOD
EXPERIENCES
IS GREATER
THAN YOU
MAY KNOW.

Sexual Abuse and ACE Scores

- ▶ Victims of sexual abuse are at greater risk of experiencing sexual violence throughout their life span.
 - ▶ Studies indicate sexual abuse survivors are more likely to experience adult sexual assault
 - ▶ Revictimization is often more physically violent
- ▶ 23-year long study found that sexually abused females have poorer outcomes including:
 - ▶ Earlier onset of puberty
 - ▶ Cognitive deficits
 - ▶ Obesity
 - ▶ Asymmetrical stress response
 - ▶ **More health problems and less healthcare utilization**





Taking all this into consideration... lets look at memory, cognition, retention, etc.



The Netflix logo is displayed in its characteristic red, bold, sans-serif font. It is positioned in the upper left corner of the image, partially overlapping a blurred background that appears to be an office or meeting room. The background shows a person in a dark shirt and a whiteboard with some papers pinned to it.The words "OFFICIAL TRAILER" are written in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font. They are centered in the lower half of the image, overlaid on a dark, blurred background. The text is the primary focus of the lower section of the frame.

Baltimore County Sexual Assault Investigations Task Force issues 23 recommendations for changes to policy and practices

- Implementing a comprehensive sexual assault investigations policy to govern all sexual assault cases
- Developing and implementing a uniform and centralized records system for its sexual assault cases.
- Continuing efforts to expand support for rape kit testing
- Continuing to move towards a trauma-informed, victim-centered and offender-focused model of investigations.
- Working with victim advocacy organizations and other non-profits, including TurnAround, Inc., to create a standardized protocol process for engaging with victims.
- Establishing standard procedures for handling incidents of sexual assault on college campuses or involving victims associated with these institutions.
- Increasing staffing of the County's Special Victims Unit to better manage the caseload and best serve victims.
- Performing an audit of 911 calls for service for incidents of sexual assault annually.

Memory and the Impact of Trauma

Facts expected by investigators may not be what the victim was paying attention to

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Brain pays attention to what it perceives as central to survival

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Brain pays attention to what it perceives as central to survival

Focus on what the victim was paying attention to

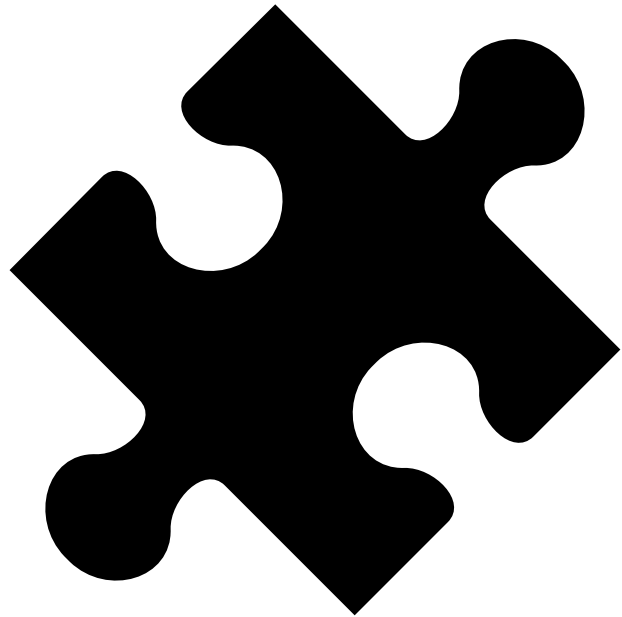
Memory and the Impact of Trauma

Brain pays attention to what it perceives as central to survival

Focus on what the victim was paying attention to

Specific small details that may not seem evidentiary in nature may corroborate the victim's account

Memory and the Impact of Trauma



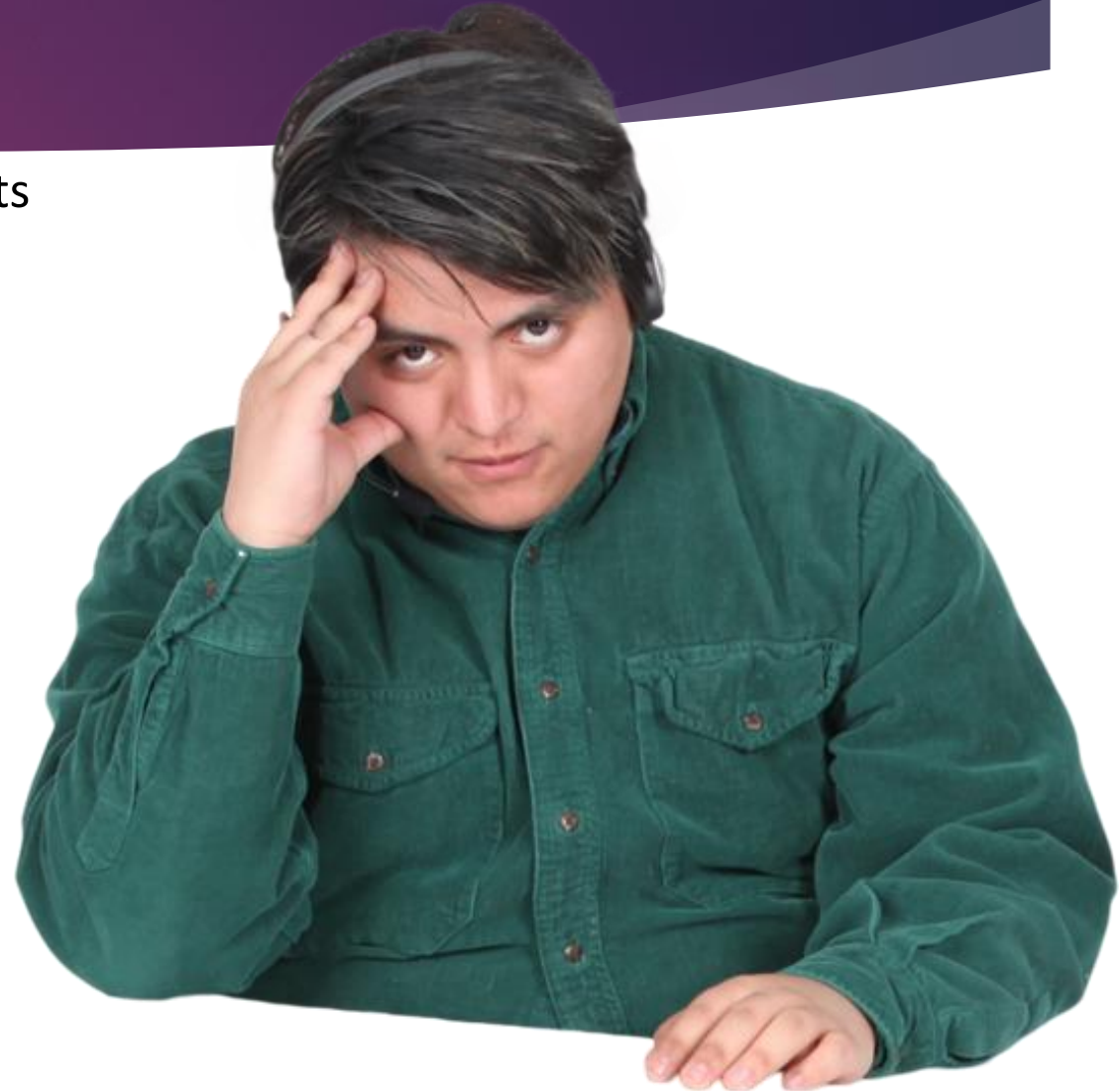
- Memories are fragmented
- Not organized in a contextual, chronological narrative
- Memory association helps with recall
- Memories are incomplete
- Facts and circumstances that may seem central to an investigation may not have been a central focus during the assault

After the Event

- It can take 96 hours for hormones to return to regular levels
- Hormone imbalance can be re-triggered later
- Hormone levels may not have the chance to decrease for victims in abusive relationships
- Physiological changes in the body can cause a variety of lasting reactions

After the Event

- There's no one way people react to traumatic events
 - Lack of emotion, flat affect
 - Smiling, laughing
 - Upset, crying
 - Shock, numbness
 - Confusion
 - Anger
 - Isolation
 - Depression
 - Manic behavior



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Memory Processing During A Trauma

- ▶ **Contextual details such as time, place, and sequence of events** are impaired during the encoding process
 - ▶ This makes them more difficult for the patient to recount
- ▶ **Sensory details such as smells, sounds, and sights** are often not impaired during the encoding of a traumatic event and are more readily available for recall.
- ▶ Sleep helps with consolidation of memories
 - ▶ After several nights of sleep the memories of a traumatic event can become clearer.
 - ▶ For this reason follow-up interviews are of importance (Neurobiology: During Trauma, 2018)

What else can impair how memories are encoded and consolidated?



How Do ACE's Affect Us As Investigators?

- **Communication difficulties:** Children with higher ACE scores may have experienced trauma, neglect, or abuse, which can affect their ability to communicate effectively. They might struggle to express themselves clearly, leading to challenges in providing detailed and coherent accounts of events during the interview.
- **Fear and anxiety:** Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences might be fearful or anxious about discussing traumatic events with unfamiliar adults. This fear can make them hesitant to disclose certain information, impacting the completeness and accuracy of their statements during the interview.
- **Trust issues:** A child's ability to trust others, particularly adults, may be affected by their experiences of trauma and neglect. This can lead to difficulties in developing rapport with the interviewer, making it harder to establish a safe and comfortable environment for the child to share their experiences.

How Do ACE's Affect Us As Investigators?

- **Vulnerability to suggestive questioning:** Individuals who have experienced trauma might be more susceptible to suggestive questioning techniques. This vulnerability can result in inaccurate or unreliable information being provided during the interview.
- **Memory issues:** Traumatic experiences can impact memory consolidation and recall. Individuals with high ACE scores may struggle to recall specific details accurately, leading to potential inconsistencies in their statements during the interview.
- **Emotional responses:** Individuals with high ACE scores may have emotional regulation challenges and exhibit intense emotional reactions during the forensic interview. These emotions can interfere with their ability to provide a consistent and coherent account of events.



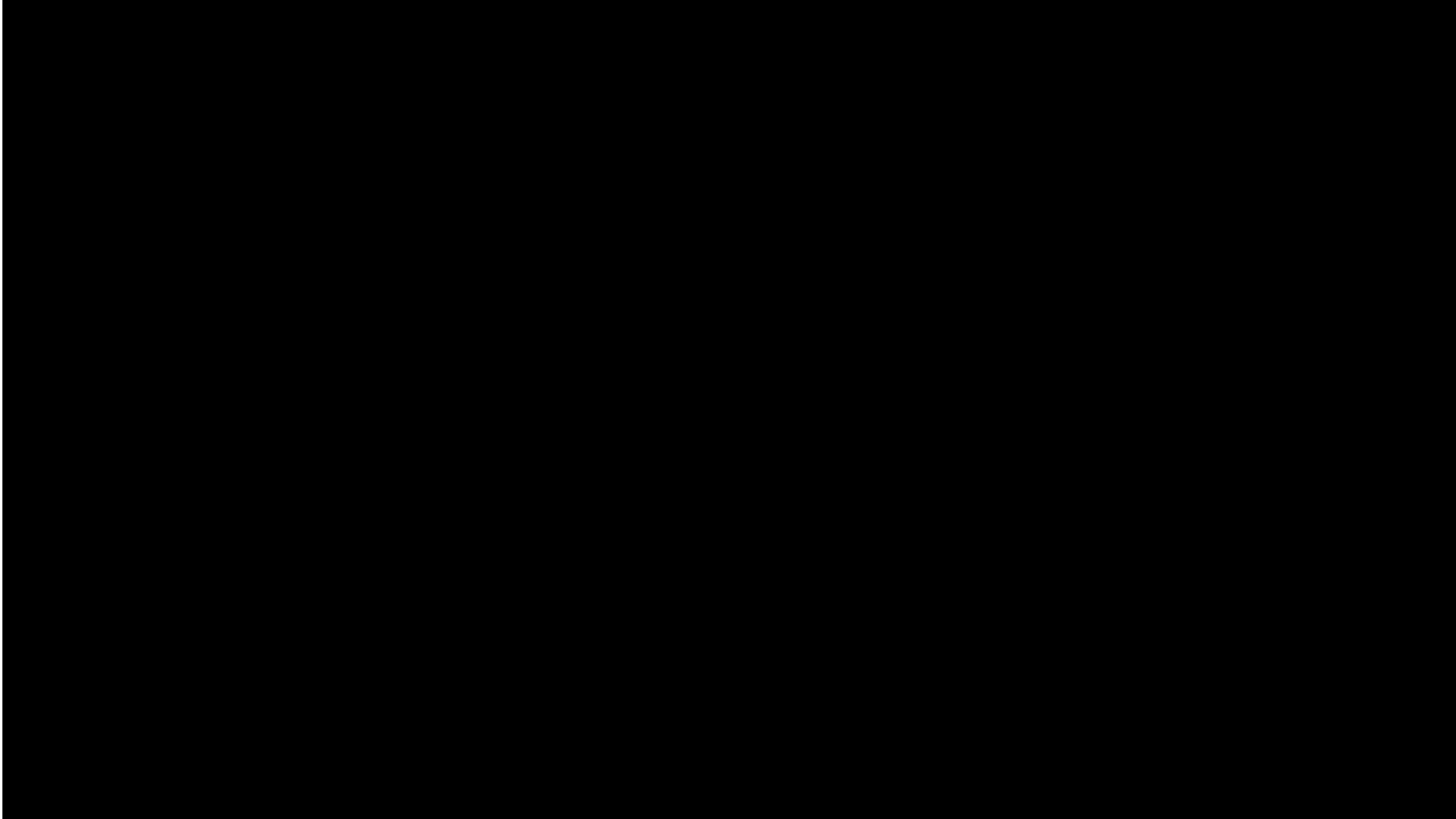
Create a Safe &
Comforting Space
to Interview Victims



Create a
Safe &
Comforting
Space to
Interview
Victims

Establishing a Victim-Friendly Environment

- **Creating a safe and comfortable space**
 - Ensure the interview room is quiet, well-lit, and free from distractions.
 - Remove any intimidating objects or visuals.
- **Child-friendly props and materials**
 - Provide age-appropriate toys, coloring books, or stuffed animals to help children feel more at ease.
 - Offer a selection of items for children to choose from, allowing them a sense of control.



Building Rapport and Trust

- **Active listening**
 - Demonstrate empathy and attentiveness through non-verbal cues like maintaining eye contact, nodding, and using encouraging verbal cues.
 - Reflect the victim's feelings and thoughts to show understanding.
- **Use open-ended questions**
 - Encourage victims to share their experiences in their own words rather than asking leading or suggestive questions.
 - Allow for pauses and silence, giving the victim time to think and express themselves.

Building Rapport and Trust

- **Empower the victim**
 - Respect the victim's autonomy and choices during the interview process.
 - Provide opportunities for the victim to ask questions and express any concerns.
- **Establish confidentiality and boundaries**
 - Explain the limits of confidentiality and when information may need to be shared for their safety or the involvement of other professionals.
 - Assure the victim that they are safe and protected during the interview process.
- **Consider cultural factors**
 - Be aware of cultural practices and beliefs that may influence the victim's perception and response to the trauma.
 - Respect cultural norms and adjust your approach accordingly.

Special Considerations for Younger Children

- **Incorporate drawing**
 - Encourage children to share their experiences through drawing pictures.
 - Ask them to explain the drawings or narratives, allowing for deeper insights.
- **Maintain a calm and soothing tone**
 - Use a gentle voice and soothing demeanor to help young children feel safe and secure.
 - Reassure them of their well-being throughout the interview process.

Age-Appropriate Language

- **Adapt your language**
 - Use words and concepts that match the victim's age and developmental level.
 - Avoid using technical or complex terminology that may confuse or overwhelm the victim.
- **Simplify explanations**
 - Break down information into smaller, more digestible parts.
 - Use concrete examples or visual aids to enhance understanding.
- **Check for comprehension**
 - Ask the victim to repeat or explain what they understood from your conversation.
 - Clarify any misunderstandings or misconceptions.

Validation and Reassurance

- **Acknowledge emotions**
 - Validating the victim's emotions helps them feel heard and understood.
 - Reflect on their feelings and express empathy and support.
- **Offer reassurance**
 - Provide age-appropriate reassurance about their safety and well-being.
 - Explain the steps being taken to help them and assure them that they are not to blame for the traumatic experience.

Active Listening Techniques

- **Reflective responses**
 - Summarize or paraphrase what the victim has said to demonstrate that you are actively listening.
 - Use statements like "It sounds like you felt scared when..." to show understanding.
- **Use open-ended questions**
 - Encourage the victim to share their thoughts and feelings more freely.
 - Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

Individual Considerations

- **Personalize your approach**
 - Adapt your communication style based on the victim's unique personality, abilities, and needs.
 - Some victims may require more time, patience, or visual aids to express themselves effectively.
- **Respect personal boundaries**
 - Be mindful of the victim's comfort level with physical touch or personal space.
 - Allow them to establish their boundaries and adjust accordingly.
- **Monitor and respond to distress cues**
 - Pay attention to signs of distress such as increased anxiety, withdrawal, or emotional outbursts.
 - Adjust your approach to help the victim feel more at ease.

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

- ▶ Use two full sleep cycles as a baseline after the incident to conduct the detailed follow-up interview.
- ▶ With the victim's permission, arrange for an advocate or support person to attend the interview.
- ▶ Work with the victim to identify an interview location that is convenient and comfortable for the victim.
- ▶ Wear attire that will not be perceived as intimidating or threatening by the victim.
- ▶ Provide contact information.
- ▶ Explain next steps and confidentiality.

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

- ▶ Express compassion
- ▶ Use open-ended questions
- ▶ Listen
- ▶ Do not interrupt

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

- ▶ “Where would you like to start?”
- ▶ “What are you able to tell me about your experience?”
- ▶ Allow for an uninterrupted narrative
- ▶ Wait until after the narrative to ask clarifying questions
- ▶ Use the victim’s words or descriptions

- ▶ TELL ME MORE ABOUT THAT.

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

AVOID the following:

- ▶ Questions that start with “why”
- ▶ Directives such as “explain to me...”
- ▶ Requests for a chronological account with prompts such as “and then what happened?”

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

AVOID the following:

- ▶ Questions that start with “why”
- ▶ Directives such as “explain to me...”
- ▶ Requests for a chronological account with prompts such as ~~“and then what happened?”~~

▶ TELL ME MORE ABOUT THAT

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

- ▶ Ask about all five senses – **hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, seeing**
 - ▶ “If anything, what do you remember **hearing** during (a specific time)?”
 - ▶ “Do you remember **smelling** anything when (an event happened)? Would you tell me more about that?”
 - ▶ “When (specific event happened), are you able to tell me about what you were **seeing**?”

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices

- ▶ Ask about additional “senses.” – **thinking, feeling**
- ▶ Emotional memory establishes an element – fear, force, or coercion:
 - ▶ “Would you help me understand what you were **thinking** when (specific event happened)...?”
 - ▶ “What were your **feelings** while you were in (the room, the car, the house, etc.)?”
 - ▶ “What was going on **in your mind** when you realized you were in danger?”
 - ▶ “How did you **feel** when/after/before (specific event happened)?”

Trauma-Informed Interview Best Practices



What is the result?

How do messages of violence against women in our culture influence victims?

- Believe violence is to be expected
- Have a passive response to the violence
- Might not see the behavior as criminal
- Blame themselves and experience stigmatization
- Fear they will not be believed
- May not report or be reluctant to participate in the criminal justice process
- Distort ideas of femininity / masculinity



What is the result?

How do messages of violence against women in our culture influence offenders?

- Feel a sense of entitlement
- Believe violence is an option
- Believe the victim is to blame
- Reject responsibility
- Believe that there will not be consequences
- Distort ideas of femininity / masculinity

What is the result?

How do messages of violence against women in our culture influence **agency members**?

- Continue to believe myths and misperceptions
- Minimize the violence experienced
- Desensitize officers
- Suggest that victims' behavior contributed to the violence
- Distort ideas of femininity / masculinity

Report Should Include:

- ▶ Perpetrator's behavior, including premeditation, grooming, coercion, threats, force, etc.
- ▶ Traumatic reaction of the victim before, during, and after the assault
- ▶ What the victim observed with 5 senses: see, smell, taste, hear, touch
- ▶ Additional senses: what the victim thought, felt, and feared
- ▶ Victim's condition
 - ▶ Physical: Injuries, clothes, etc.
 - ▶ Emotional: Fight, flight, or freeze response

Document What the Victim Says

Sensory details explain behavior and/or emotion

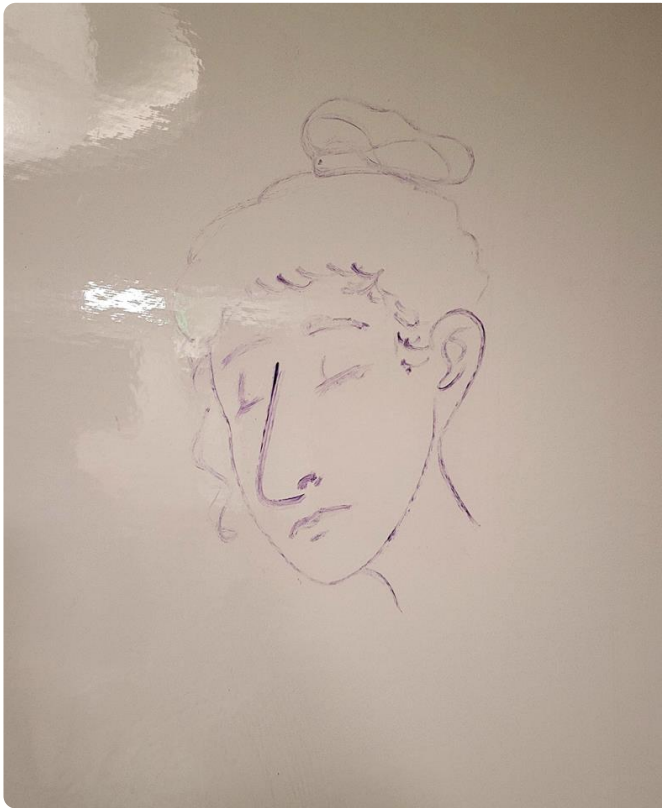
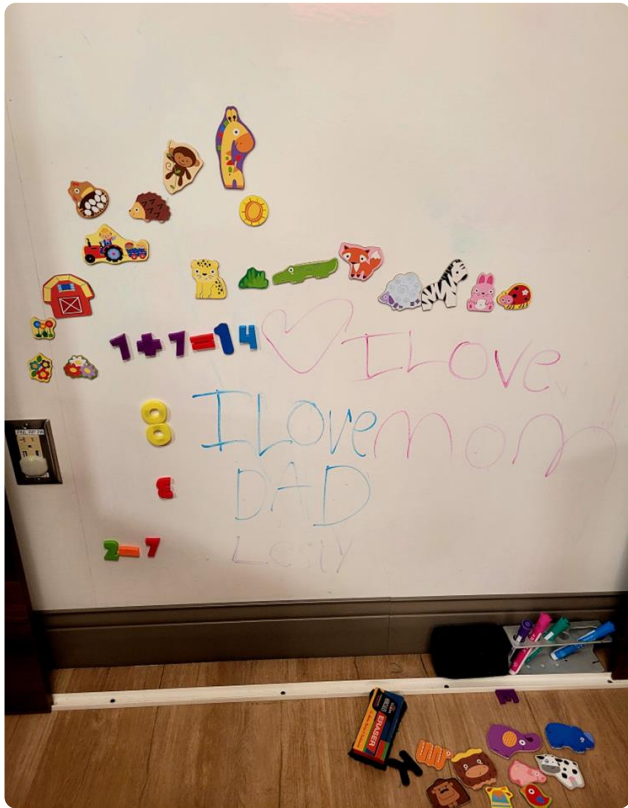
- **Do not use: *Victim never made any attempt to scream or get away***
- Use victim's exact wording: "I felt like a couldn't move. I was on autopilot, like it was happening to someone else."

Emotional memory establishes an element – fear, force, or coercion

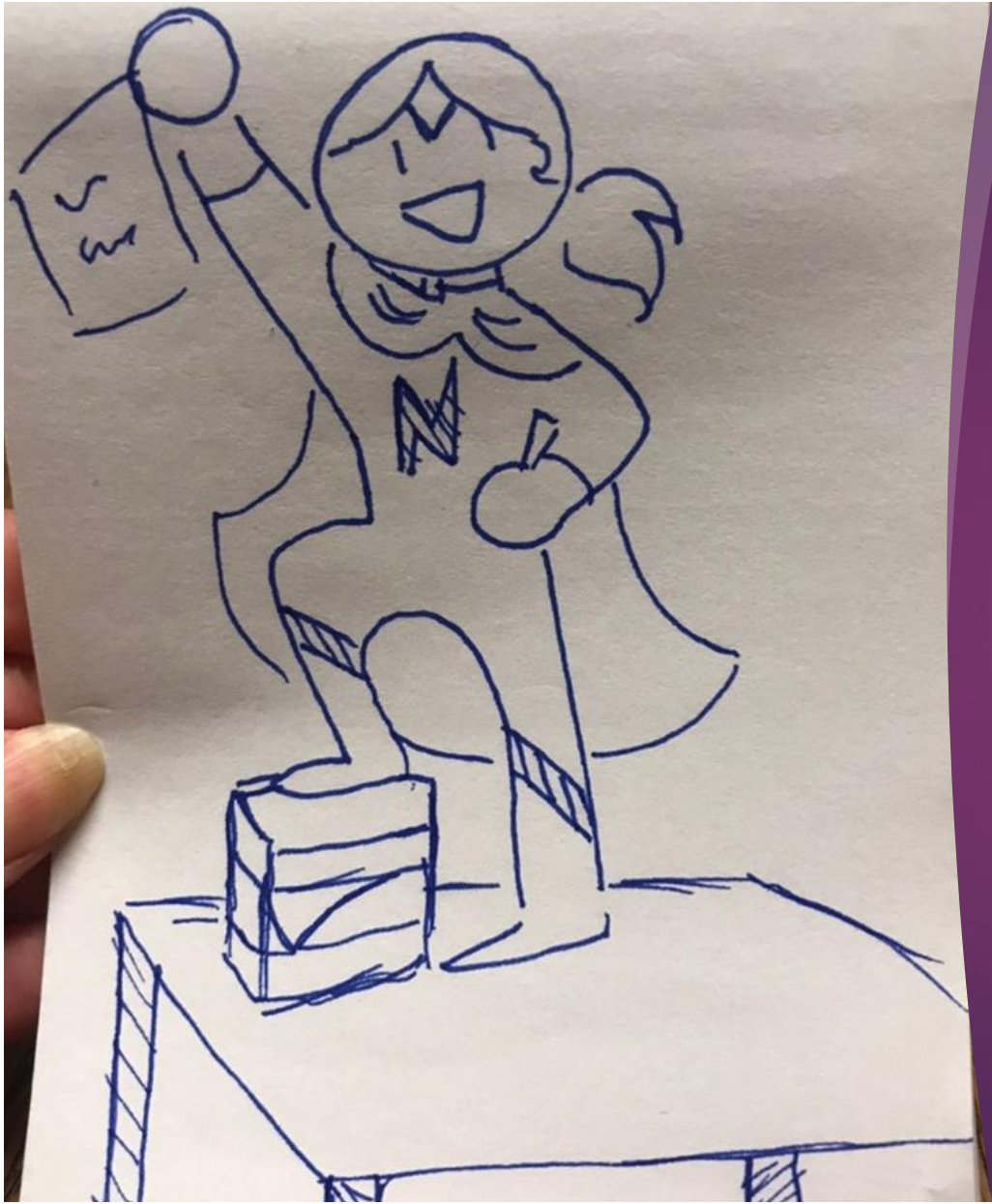
- **Do not use: *Victim stated she didn't do anything to stop him***
- Use the victim's exact wording: "When he climbed on top of me, I was afraid he was going to kill me."



Collaboration & Multidisciplinary Approach



Why Do
We Do
This
Work?



Victim Impact



Questions?

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