

# TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE TO SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATIONS

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# What is Trauma?

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- **Experiencing too much, too fast, too soon** in such a way that one's ability to cope is overwhelmed.
- Leaves one feeling **powerless, out of control** and/or **severely disconnected** from oneself, family, community, and/or beliefs.
- Trauma is about experiencing an overwhelming **loss** of:
  - Power
  - Control
  - Connectedness





# Trauma After the Trauma

## Initial Report

- “Alleged.....”
- Inconsistencies
- Questions regarding fighting back
- Perceived judgement
- No injuries?



# What Our Biases Mistakenly Tell Us

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- “She didn’t scream”
- “She didn’t run out”
- “He just laid there and let it happen”
- “She didn’t call right away”
- “She can’t recall FACTS”
- “She has NO visible injuries”





Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy



Being easily startled

## Byproducts of Trauma

- Numbness
- Detachment
- Absence of emotional responsiveness
- Reduced awareness of surroundings
- Dissociation
- Increased anxiety/arousal
- Triggers



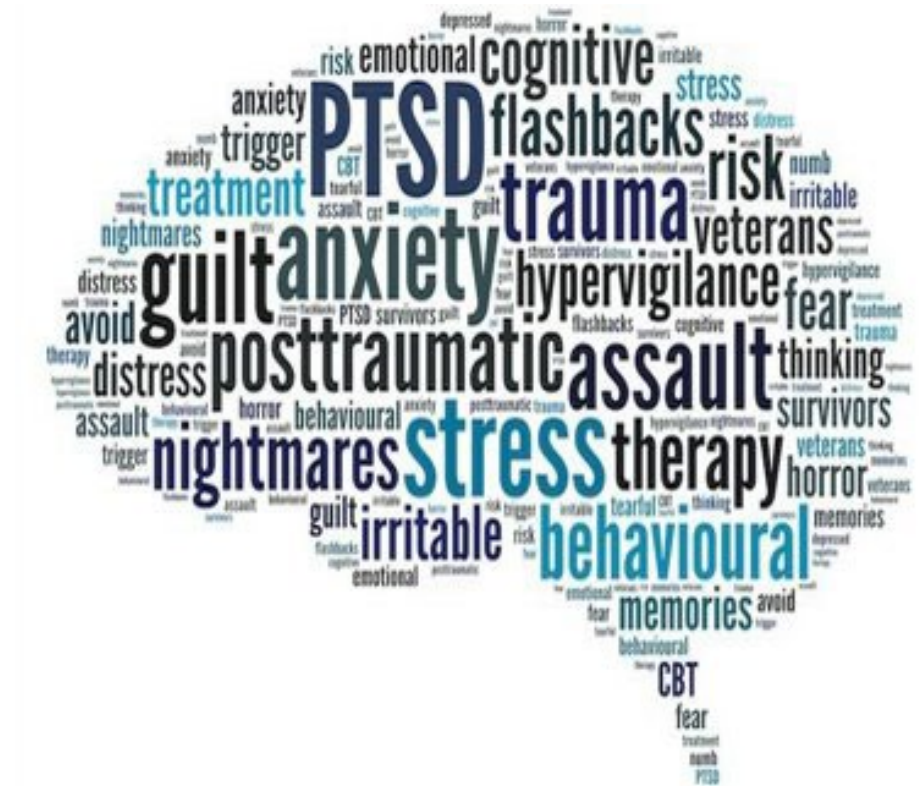
Feeling emotionally numb



Flashbacks that include physical symptoms like a racing heart

# Why Does Trauma Matter?

- The victim/survivor's first impression matters
- Understanding the impact of victim trauma promotes:
  - victim healing = more reporting
  - better interviews & investigations
  - greater offender accountability = public safety
- Not understanding leads to bad outcomes and potentially long-term, devastating consequences for victim and community



# Automatic Traumatic Response

- Each person's response to being victimized is unique to them
- Many victims do not physically resist
- Trauma responses are an automatic survival response — the person has no conscious control over their response, and responses include:



FIGHT



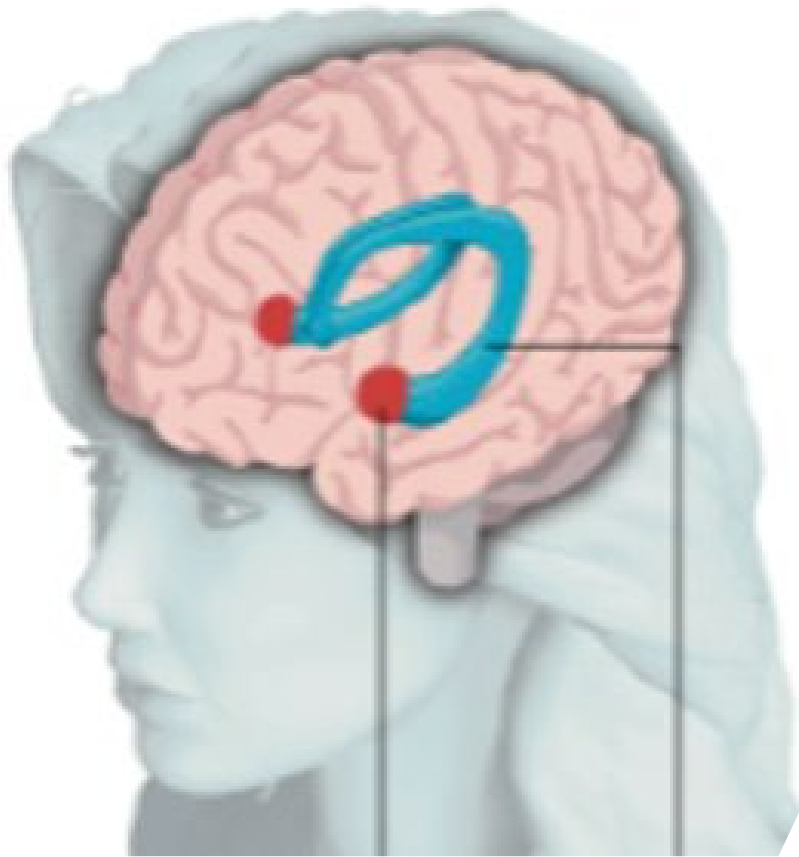
FLIGHT



FREEZE

# Traumatic Memories

*Stress hormones activate a structure on each side of the brain called the amygdala. Each amygdala plays a crucial role in storing memories of emotional events, primarily by influencing another brain structure called the hippocampus.*



# Trauma and “Credibility”

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**Victims may experience certain responses during and after the assault:**

- Traumatic Memory is fragmented, can't provide narrative – misinterpreted as lying
- Demeanor: Lack of emotion, or odd or inappropriate affect –misinterpreted as lying or “not being upset”
- Sensory memories may be more detailed



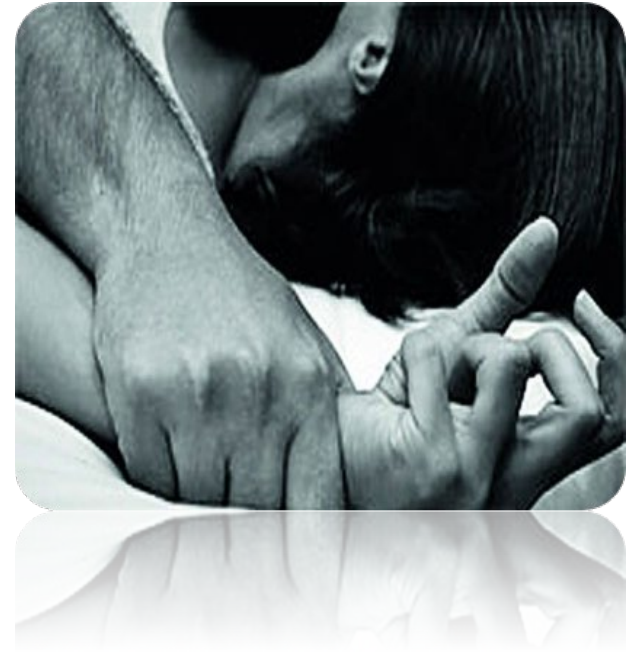
# The Body Responds: Fight-Flight-Freeze

- Preparing for “fight” or “flight”
- Hormones surge— increased heart rate & blood pressure, hyperventilation, glucose to major muscles
- Digestive and immune systems shut down to conserve energy for fight or flight
- Rational thought impaired
- Super-focus on sensory details, other details ignored
- Chemicals released— numbing, spacey effect



# The Body Responds: Negotiate and Dissociate

- Talk way out
- Stall
- Scream
- Bargain
- Joke
- Feign illness
- Threaten
- Flatter
- Wandering



# Perpetrators Response

- Not in danger, traumatized or stressed?
- Victim fights fiercely or possibility of being caught
- Prefrontal cortex in control
- Plan of action, with practiced strategies and tactics
- Thoughts and actions may be planned, practiced and even habitual
- Many are repeat offenders



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# Trauma's Impact on Investigations

- Victims may experience certain responses during and after the assault:
- A range of emotions-fear, self blame, shame
- Disastrous disclosures and victim blaming:
  - Why did you...?
  - Why didn't you...?
- Could result in victim not sharing all information – "saving face"



# Interviewing Victims After Trauma

- Be Patient!
- Disclosure is a process not an event
- Empower
- Phrase questions to put control in victim's hands
  - “What are you able to tell me about.....?”
  - “Where would you like to begin?”
- Allow victim to give statement in their own words
- Do not ask questions that start with “why”



# Trauma-informed Practices

The interview is a way to allow the victim to express what their experience was rather than just what they remember or don't remember. Capturing the **trauma** and the **sensory and peripheral details** of the event is **compelling evidence**.



# CONTACT INFORMATION

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