

# Impact of Trauma: Sexual Assault

3

## Trauma- Informed Lens & Response

# Learning Objectives



Understand that people react differently to trauma and no one reaction is “normal”



Describe how trauma impacts memory, reactions, and behavior



Apply your understanding of trauma to conduct interviews that obtain additional information and evidence



Observe, explain, and document signs of trauma as evidence



# Why learn about trauma?

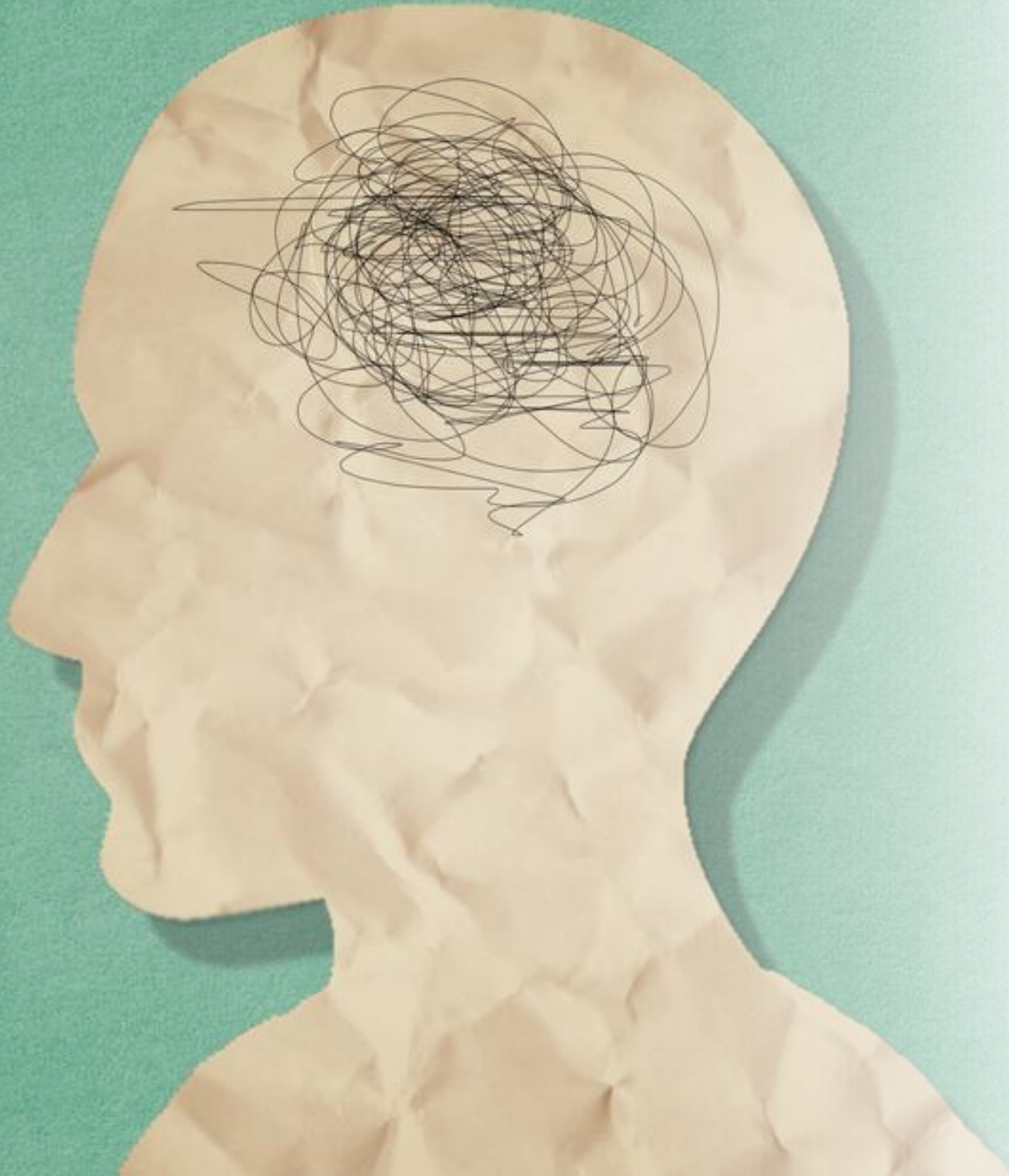
- **Understand victim behavior**
- **Gather more accurate and thorough evidence by phrasing questions in a more trauma-informed way**
- **Improve victim's ability to remember and recall details**
- **Minimize the likelihood of retraumatizing the victim**
- **Promote victim healing and empowerment**
- **Support victims and hold offenders accountable**



# Trauma Defined

- Trauma is an *emotional response* to an abnormal event.
  - Examples: Sexual assault, domestic violence, natural disaster, vehicle accident, incarceration, childhood abuse or neglect, divorce, serious illness or injury, death of loved one, community violence, war, etc.
- Results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning.
- Responses may follow immediately after the event or manifest later and can last for months or years.





# Trauma Defined

SAMHSA defines trauma as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing.”



Beyond the Call: Officer risks life to stop arsonist



# BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY



RIGHT NOW MIAMI 83° ORLANDO 78° TAMPA 80°

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# Group Discussion

- What did the officer remember and mis-remember?
- How did the officer react when describing what he did?



# Trauma and the Mind

**The Brain Science of Trauma**



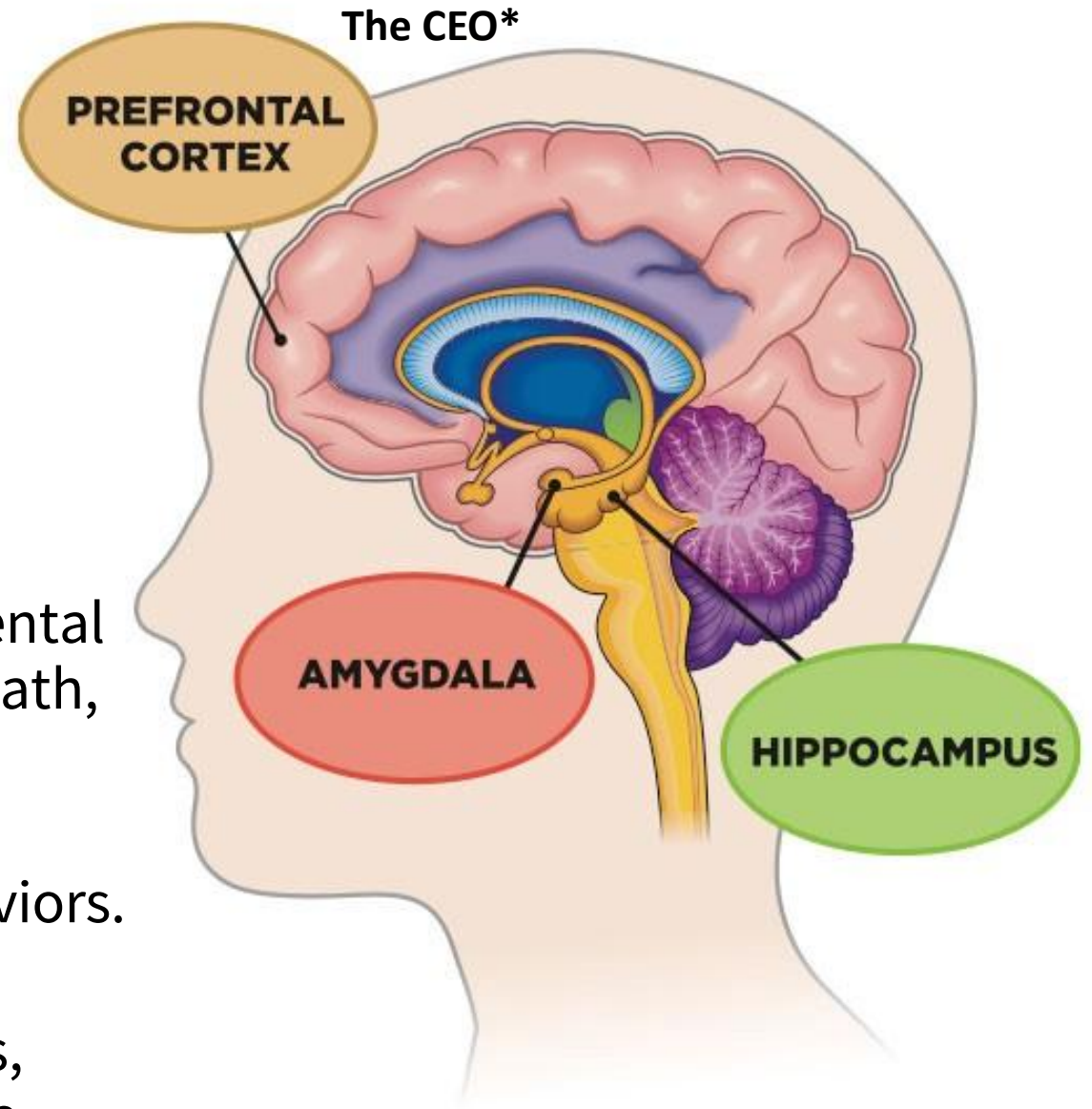
# Understanding Trauma

- Traumatic events physically affect our brain.
- During a traumatic event, the chemicals in our brain will be off balance.
- Brain chemicals influence perception, reaction, and memory.
- During a traumatic event complex thought and memory processing are impaired.
- We do not control how our brain and body respond to trauma.



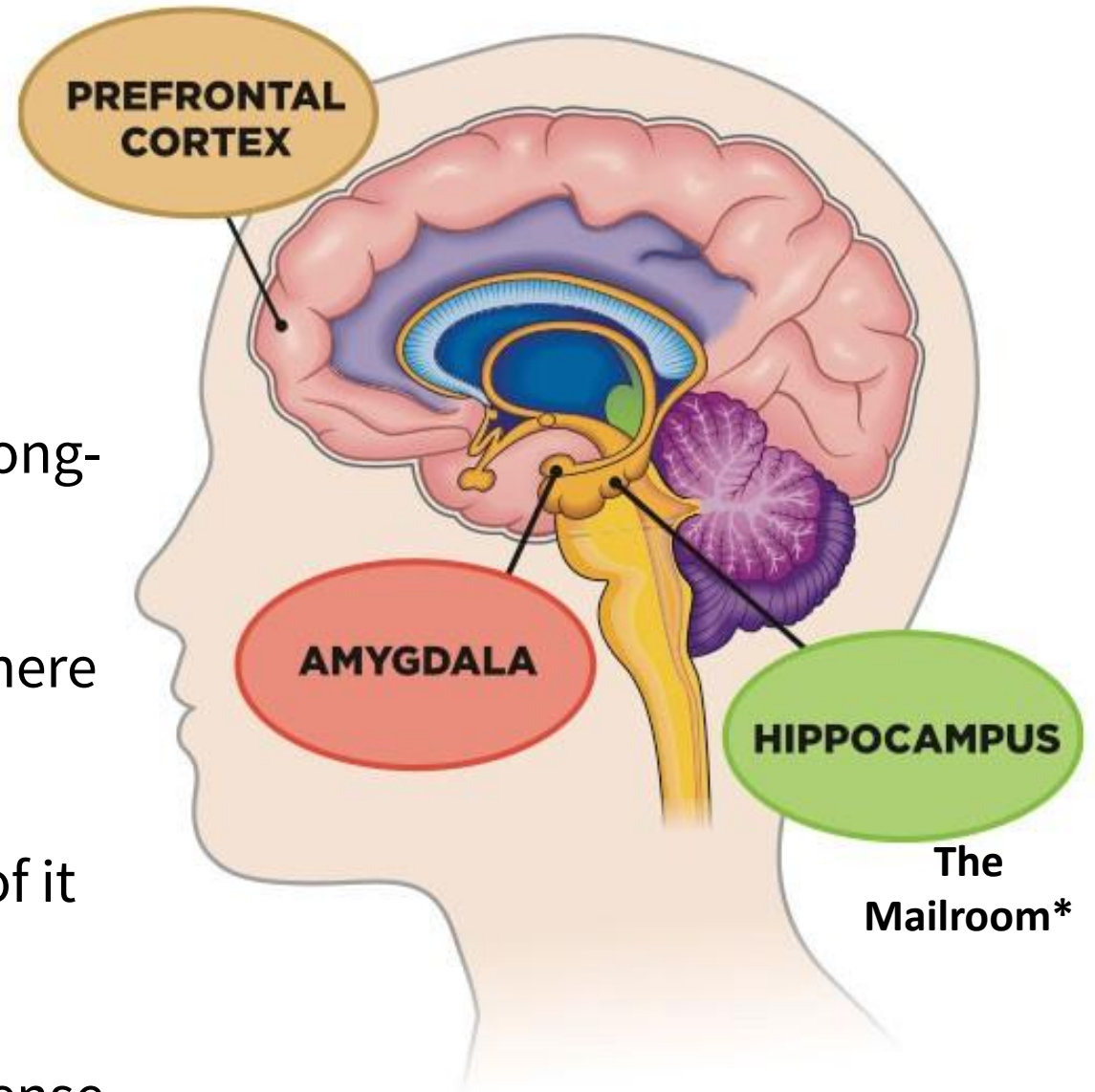
# Prefrontal Cortex

- In charge of executive functions like planning, decision making, and logic.
- Working-memory:
  - Holds info temporarily for immediate mental tasks—like problem solving (i.e., quick math, traffic routes).
- Emotional Regulation:
  - Manages emotional responses and behaviors.
- Personality & Behavior:
  - Develops complex attitudes, motivations, and foresight, contributing to who we are.



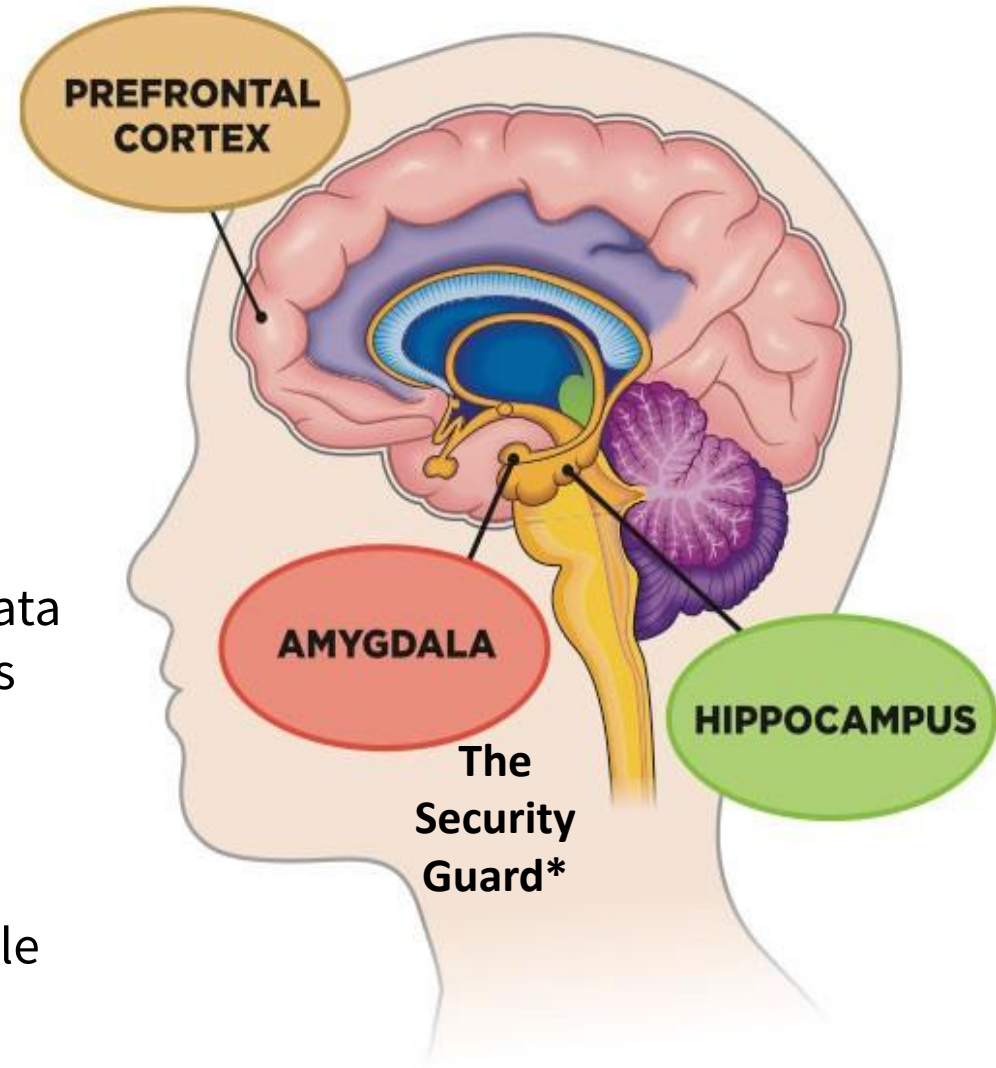
# Hippocampus

- In charge of memory and learning.
- Memory consolidation:
  - Converts short-term memories into long-term ones.
- Spatial navigation:
  - Allows individuals to keep track of where objects are in the environment.
- Memory encoding:
  - Where we take info and make sense of it or “label” it before filing away.
- Time perception:
  - Links time with location, creating a sense of life's timeline.



# Amygdala

- Threat detector\*
  - Fight-or-flight responses to ensure survival
  - Activated in a life-threatening event\*
    - Real or perceived
- Sensory gateway:
  - Filters and evaluates rapidly incoming sensory data for emotional significance often before conscious awareness.
- Emotional salience:
  - Tags sensory information with emotion, making certain sights, sounds, or smells more memorable or impactful (e.g., a scary music intro).
- Activates HPA axis:
  - Stress hormone release



***“You have to engage their feelings to get to the facts.”***



# Trauma and the Brain

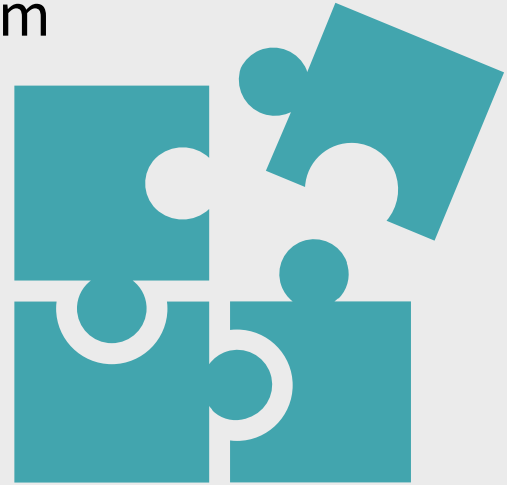


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# Trauma Memory Functioning

- When memory input is through the lens of trauma, the highlights will be sensory detail.
- Brain is focused on what is believed to be central to survival.
- Facts expected by investigators might not be what the victim was paying attention to.
- Specific small details that might not seem evidentiary in nature may corroborate the victim's account.
  - Ex: Pacman, 87654 sticker
- Questions like “what happened first” and “what happened next” may be fruitless.
  - Consider instead: “What were you feeling at the time?”
    - *Afraid, scared, confused, I thought I was going to die...*
    - “What had you afraid or confused?”





# Trauma and the Body

**The Physical Bodily Response to Trauma**





# Survival Reflexes in the Body



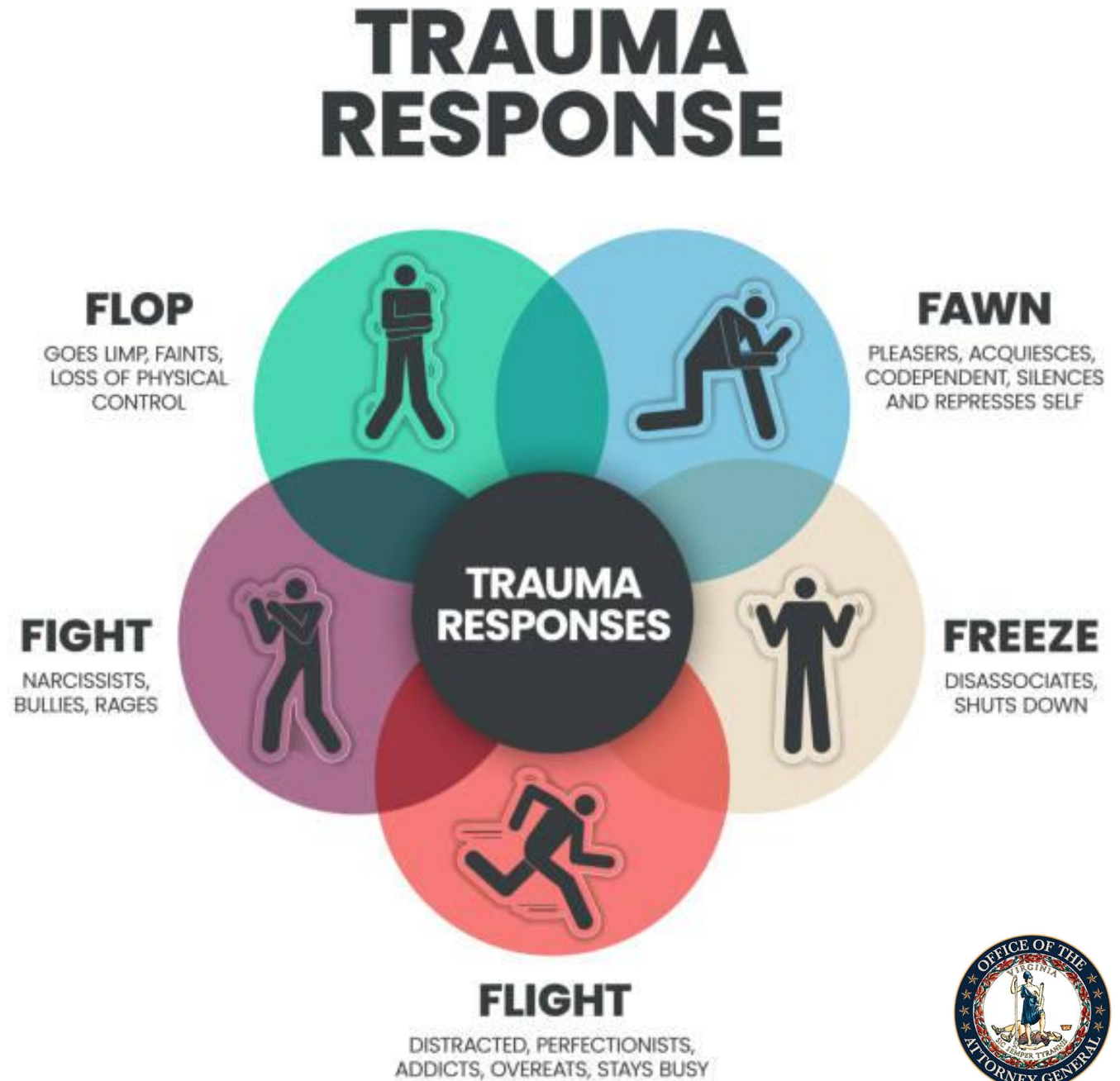
HUGE Snake SCARY!!!

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# The Trauma Responses

- Formerly limited to “fight or flight”, and later “fight, flight or freeze.”
- These are not one and done, those experiencing trauma can respond in a multitude of ways for the duration of the traumatic event.
- Escape or mitigate injury – brain makes subconscious decisions around survival and lessening physical and psychological injury.



# The Body Responds: Fight and Flight



# The Body Responds: Freeze

- May be referred to as “Tonic Immobility” or “Rape Induced Paralysis.”
- This is often the first response, no matter how brief, allows the body time to prepare for action
- The body will experience hormone surge, racing heart, increased blood pressure, hyperventilation



# Tonic Immobility or Freeze: Example



# The Body Responds: Shutdown

- May also be referred to as “Feigned Death” or “Collapsed Immobility” or “Flop.”
- When escape is, or appears to be, impossible, the body reacts drastically to survive by reducing physical and/or psychological harm.
- This is caused by a decrease in cerebral blood flow to the brain.



# Collapsed Immobility or Shutdown: Example



# Freeze/Tonic Immobility

## VS.

# Shutdown/Collapsed Immobility

<p>I.e., Rape-induced paralysis Ex: Deer</p>	<p><u>Common Statements:</u></p>	<p>I.e., Flop, Feigned Death Ex: Opossum</p>
<p>“I felt frozen. I was cold.”</p>	<p>“I just laid there.”</p>	<p>“I felt [physically] weak.”</p>
<p><b>HYPERarousal state.</b> Muscles are tense and full of energy but can’t release it. Body is stiff.</p>	<p>“I wanted to leave, run away, scream but I couldn’t.”</p>	<p><b>HYPOarousal state.</b> Muscles are flaccid and loose. Body is in a rag-doll state.</p>
<p>Sudden onset and abrupt termination</p>	<p>“I wasn’t able to move.”</p>	<p>Immobile and collapsed. Loss of consciousness.</p>
<p>Symptoms include feeling cold, clammy and shaking</p>	<p>“I felt stuck.”</p>	<p>Survivor may feel like they were under the influence although they were not. Groggy.</p>



# Mitigate the Harm: Fawn

- Fawn: Trying to please others to avoid conflict or harm.
  - The goal is to minimize violence to self or others.
  - Submitting, negotiating, acquiescing to demands.
- Often seen in DV/IPV situations where the abused person **learns** to “accommodate” the aggressor to avoid harm or further harm from befalling them (or their loved one/s).



# Post Assault

- After the traumatic event, the victim may continue to try to minimize the trauma and harm they experienced, whether consciously or subconsciously.
- The victim may disengage from the criminal justice process to avoid revisiting the trauma.
- The victim may continue to engage with the perpetrator because they fear the consequences if they don't.
- The victim may be numb to the situation, they can't believe it happened, or they are in denial that it was rape.



# Post Assault

- Out of balance hormone levels may take up to 96 hours to return to normal.
- A victim's body is still in 'survival mode' for the duration of the hormone imbalance.
- Hormone levels may become out of balance again when a victim is recounting the events, or when a victim has a "flash back" - commonly brought on by sensory triggers.
- For victims of long-term abuse, hormone levels have been disrupted for so long that they may never return to normal; this victim will live in a state of hyper-aware survival mode. Prime example: domestic violence victims



# Post Assault

Physiological changes in the body can cause a variety of lasting reactions:

- Lack of emotion, flat affect
  - Smiling, laughing
  - Upset, crying
- Shock, numbness
  - Confusion
- Anger
- Isolation
- Depression
- Manic Behavior
- “Fake it ‘til you make it”

**There is no one way people react to trauma**



# Possible Long-Term Consequences

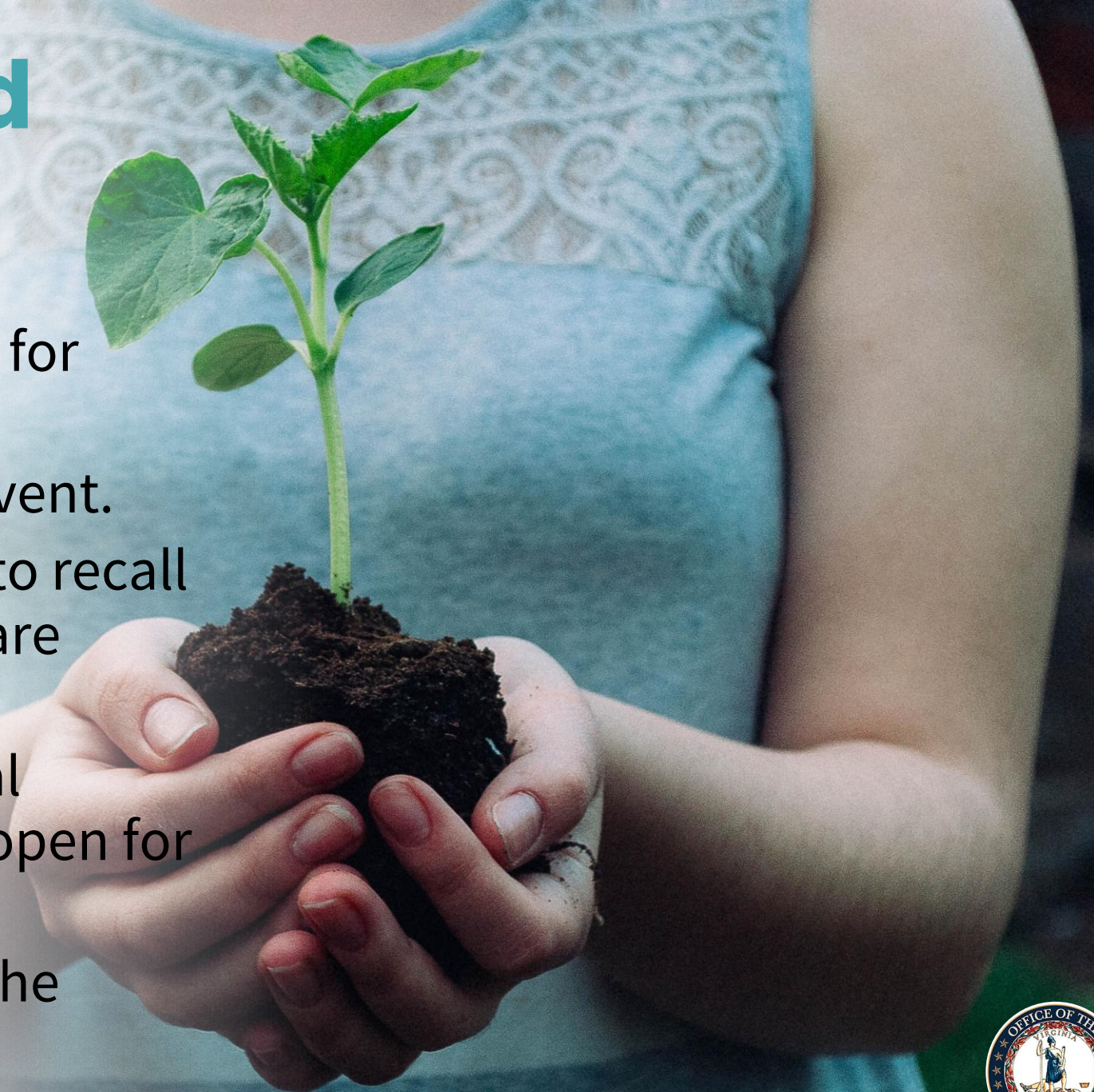
- Emotional dysregulation
- Depression
- Dissociation and emotional numbing
- Anger /aggression
- Self-harm
- Anxiety disorders (phobias, panic, etc)
- Substance and behavioral addictions
- Relationship problems, disconnection, isolation
- Eating problems
- Sleep problems
- PTSD



# Trauma-Informed Interviews

Recognize and consider:

- Victims remain in survival mode for long after the event (~96 hours)
- Disclosure is a process, not an event.
- Delayed reporting and inability to recall details and sequence of events are common results of trauma.
- Victim may remember additional details over time, keep options open for continued disclosures.
- Traumatic memory is stored in the brain differently.



# Summary: Impact of Trauma

Trauma alters the brain:

- Chemical imbalance in the brain influences perception, reaction, behavior, demeanor, and memory.
- Memory is stored improperly.
- Delayed reporting and inability to recall details and sequences of events are common.
- We do not control how the brain and body respond to trauma.
- Impacts of trauma are often misinterpreted as not telling the truth by law enforcement, family, friends, and society.



# Summary:

## Trauma-Informed Approach

Trauma affects our response, investigation, interview, and cold case follow-up:

- Disclosure is a process, not an event.
- Victims may or may not remember additional details over time – provide options for continued disclosures.
- The interview allows victims to express their experience, not just what they remember or do not remember.
- Capturing the trauma and the sensory and peripheral details of the event is compelling evidence.



# Summary:

## Trauma-Informed Approach

- Better interviews and investigations lead to more offender accountability and, ultimately, better public safety and relationships with the community.
- “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.*





**Questions?**



Have  
a  
Break