

# TRAUMA INFORMED RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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# COURSE OBJECTIVES

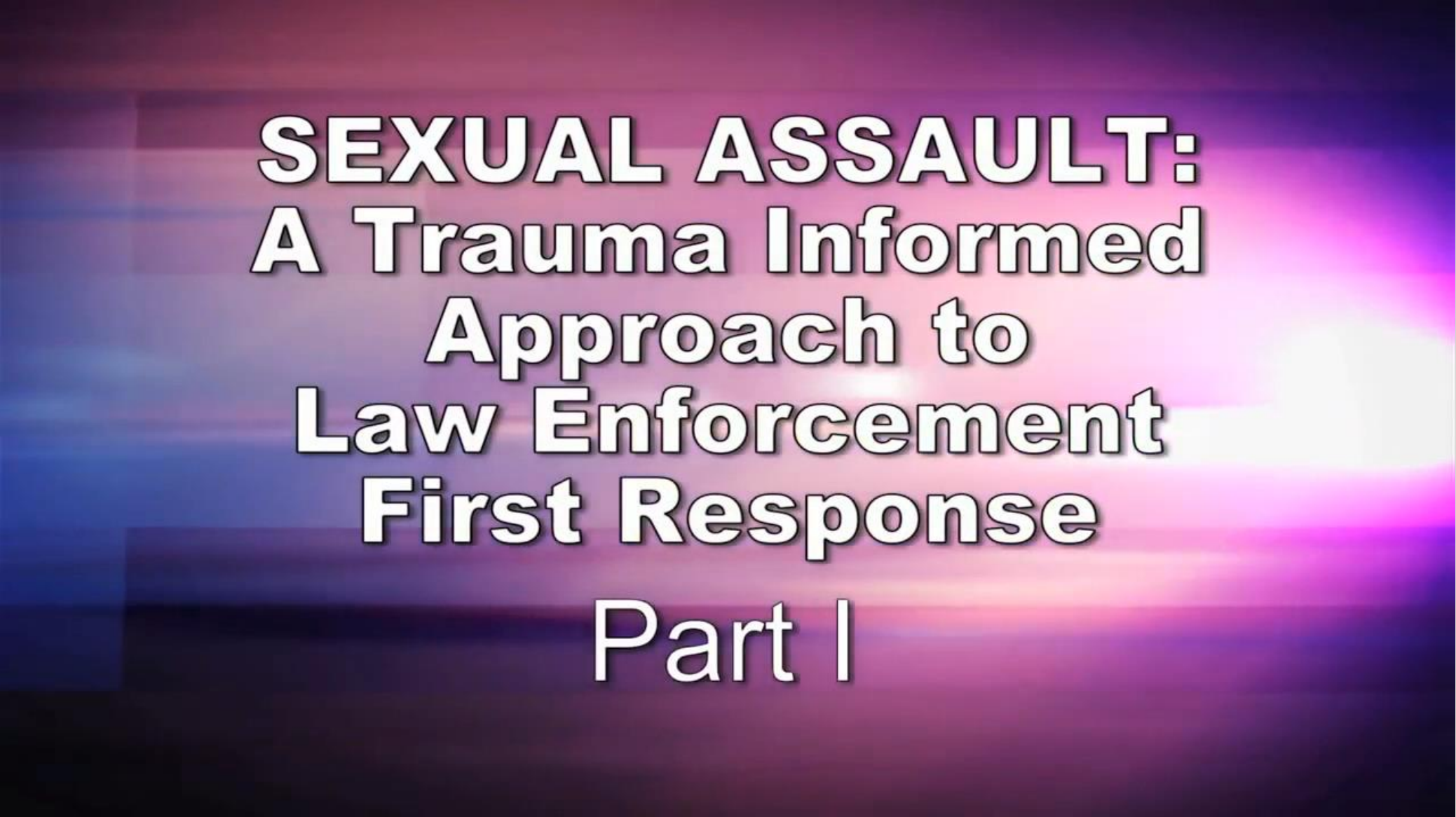
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- Define the term “trauma informed”
- Define trauma
- Explain how trauma affects the brain
- Explain how memory can be changed through trauma
- Give examples of how to interview a sexual assault survivor

Being “trauma informed” means being empathetic and laying aside all expectations of how someone should to react to their experience.








**SEXUAL ASSAULT:  
A Trauma Informed  
Approach to  
Law Enforcement  
First Response  
Part I**

Sexual Assault: A Trauma Informed Approach to Law Enforcement Response, Part I -Michigan Department of Human Services



# WHAT IS TRAUMA?

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- Negative event
- Physical
- Psychological
- Could occur from witnessing an event

# HOW CAN TRAUMA AFFECT THE BRAIN?

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- Immediately after trauma shock and denial are typical

Irritability

Shame

Hopelessness

Depression

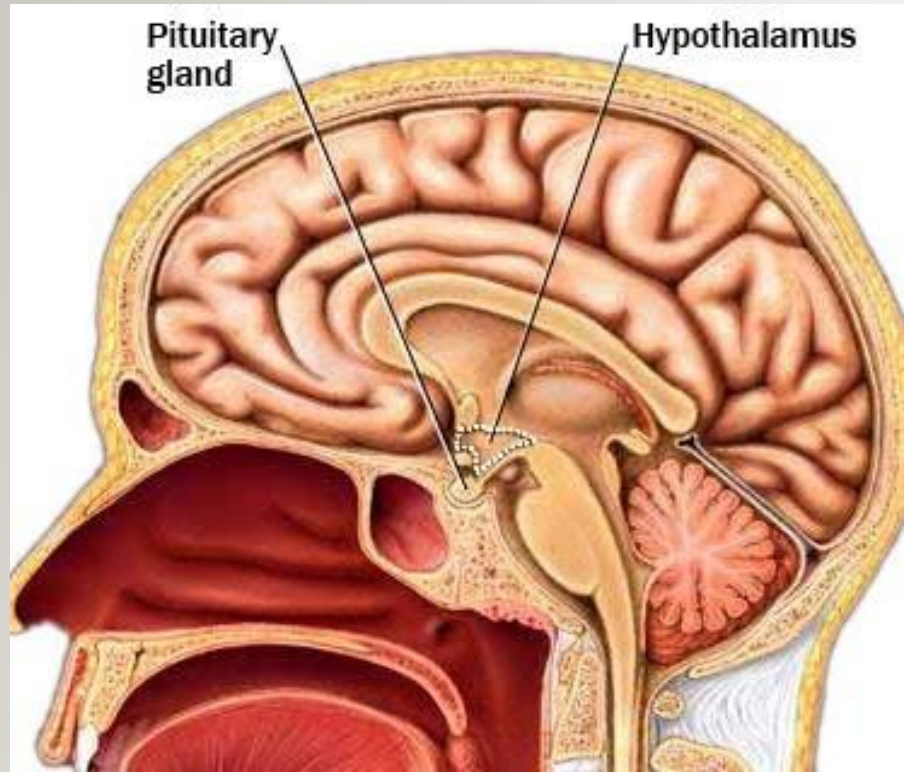
Insomnia

Self harm

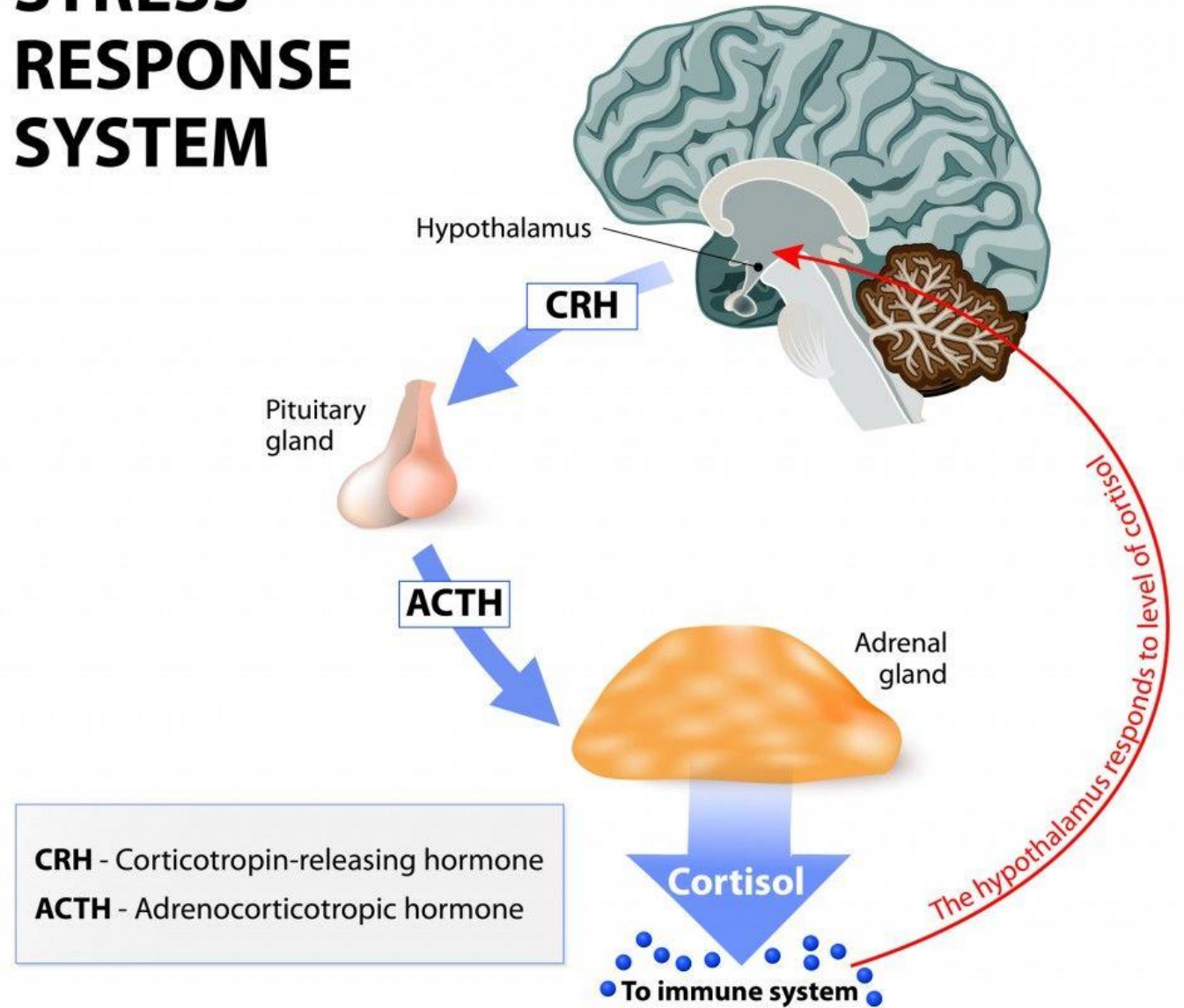
Drug abuse

Eating disorders





# STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM



# IN RESPONSE TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS, ADRENALS CAN SECRETE

- Catecholamine- adrenaline & dopamine, responsible for fight or flight
- Cortisol- steroid hormone, gives energy
- Opiates- endorphins, released because of pain
- Oxytocin- modulates fear and anxiety

HORMONES RELEASED DURING TRAUMA			
CATECHOLAMINES	CORTISOL	OPIATES	OXYTOCIN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*adrenaline</li><li>*help with <b>FIGHT</b> so the body can fight back against the traumatic event</li><li>*can also help with <b>FLIGHT</b> to try to run from the threat</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*affects the amount of energy the body has for its reaction</li><li>* <b>FIGHT</b> or <b>FLIGHT</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*body's natural morphine</li><li>*to counteract physical pain that may accompany emotional pain</li><li>*could tie into <b>FREEZE</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*increase positive feelings</li><li>*to counteract physical pain that may accompany emotional pain</li><li>*could tie into <b>FREEZE</b></li></ul>

All are necessary, naturally produced self preservation hormones





The Fight Flight Freeze Response YouTube





Prank Backfires- moronmedia, courtesy YouTube



Iguana vs Snakes- Planet Earth II







Purpose of Freeze Reaction- YouTube





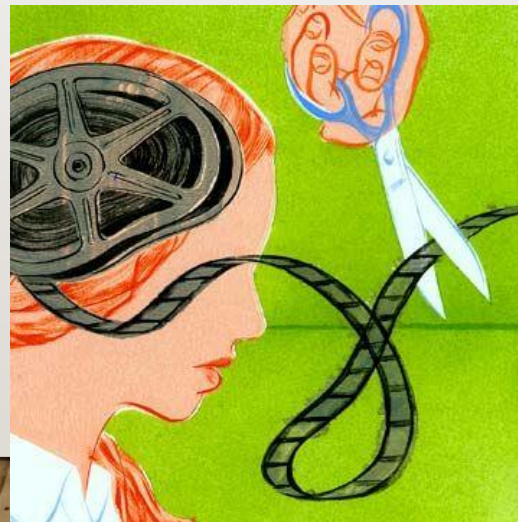
Sexual Assault: A Trauma Informed Approach to Law Enforcement Response, Part 2 -Michigan Department of Human Services



The person's initial reaction to trauma is the **fastest and most automatic reaction** the body or brain can do to prevent further harm, without consulting the 'logical' part of the brain. Thus, their reactions might later "make no sense" to other people or even themselves, and at times can be completely counterintuitive.

The way the body reacts to protect itself is also the **most damaging to the parts of the brain** that are in charge of recording everything.

Thus, their memories will be **extremely emotional and episodic** and will not follow the usual "first this, then that, who/what/where/why/when."





This means people **think they're lying** when they later can't answer even seemingly simple questions like, "Well, what did he look like?"

This also means that the victim/survivor is **incapable of accessing the more "logical" options** during an assault, let alone even begin to act on them.

Like tonic immobility, this is not something the victim/survivor **chooses** to happen or even something they have any amount of control over. It's a totally normal mammalian response to fear or threat.

**Their body and brain are both on autopilot and those two functions are working against each other in the rush to protect their life.**

When the amygdala is in control, it knows only emotional and sensory information. When the hippocampus tries to record the information but is compromised by hormonal releases, the emotions and senses are scattered all around and turned into disconnected flashes.

**It is like someone took pieces of a disconnected story, ripped the paper apart, tossed the pieces into the wind in handfuls in different directions at different times, where it was thrown all around and scattered across miles, and then later they were asked to gather all the pieces and put it together into a coherent and chronological story. Even the pieces that can be reassembled will still be stained with the intensity of the emotions so even thinking of them can be traumatizing.**

The information will come slowly over time as the brain tries to make sense of the experience but some things were just not recorded at all in the first place so can't be recovered, or may be more difficult to recover, because it was the amygdala in charge at the time and it didn't care about telling a story about it later; **it cared about staying alive.**

# OFFICER INVOLVED SHOOTINGS: TRAUMA

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## **Officer:**

“I don’t remember pulling my weapon”

“I don’t remember squeezing off the first 5-6 shots.”

“I had a vision of my wife at my funeral.”

## **Victim/Survivor:**

“Not exactly sure what happened.”

“I really don’t know how long it lasted.”

“I kinda just blanked out/ I went somewhere else.”



# ACTIVITY

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- Each puzzle contains a few sentences that mimic what may be disclosed in an interview
- Working with your group, put the puzzle together

## **What this highlights-**

- Trauma distorts the memory- the information is there, but processing it and reporting it can be fragmented and nonlinear

# WHY THE FOCUS ON TRAUMA

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- The victims first impression matters
- Delayed reporting, inability to recall details and sequence of events is a common result of trauma
- Impacts of trauma can last a lifetime
- Trauma manifestation is often misinterpreted as lying
- Understanding the impact of trauma promotes:
  - Victim healing
  - Better interviews
  - Greater offender accountability

# HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS THE INVESTIGATION

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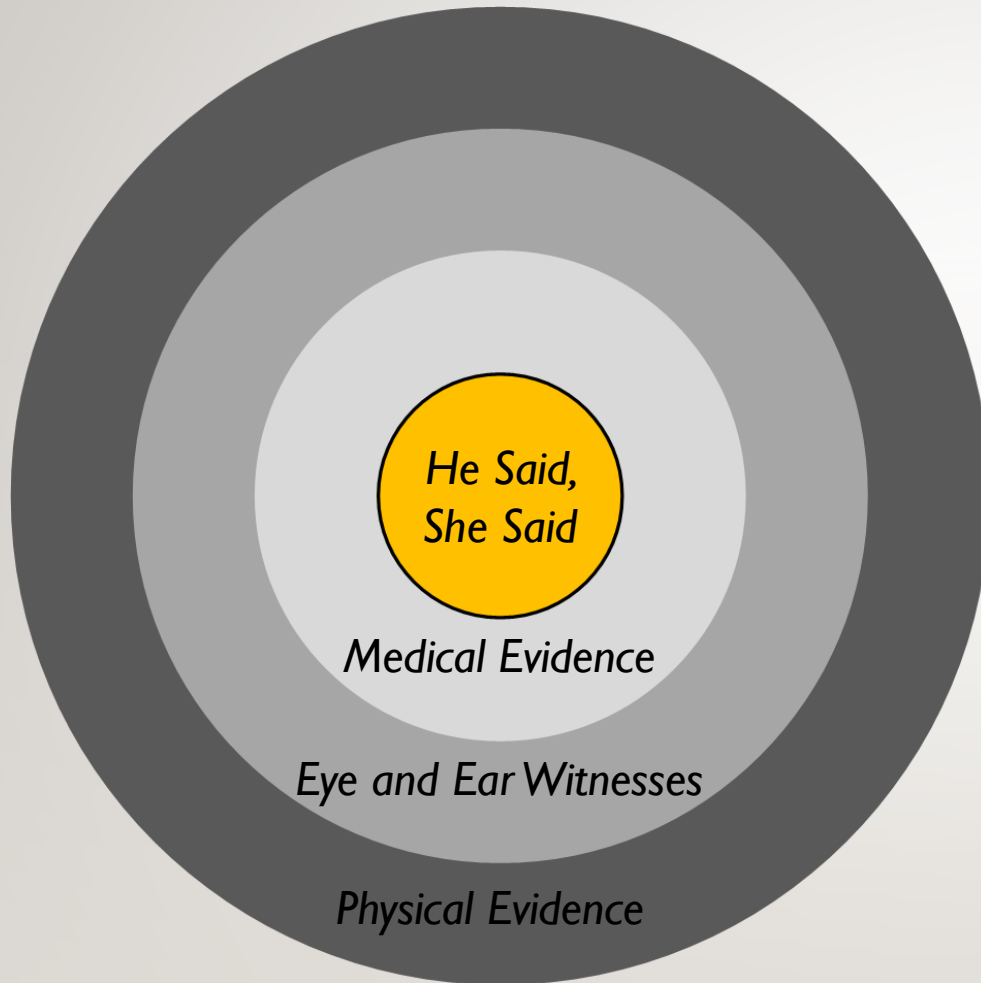
**Victims may experience certain responses during and after the assault:**

- Traumatic memory is fragmented, non linear narrative often appears as lying
- Inappropriate affect, lack of emotion, often appears as lying
- Sensory memories may be more detailed
- Most victims report after some delay



# REALITIES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATIONS

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- Alcohol is often used to facilitate the assault
- The effects of alcohol and drugs mimic the effects of trauma on the brain
- The effects of alcohol and drugs can magnify the effects of trauma on the brain

# HOW TO APPROACH SEXUAL VIOLENCE INVESTIGATIONS

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- If possible, let survivor recount their account with minimal interruption
  - Clarify information and ask questions when they are done
- Ask open ended questions
- Do not expect or force a chronological timeline of events
- Ask sensory questions
- Do not focus investigation on prosecution aspect of case

Are you setting out to prove  
him/her wrong or are you  
setting out to help this person?

TCA § 38-3-123 Prohibition Against Requiring Victims of Sexual Offenses to Submit to Polygraph

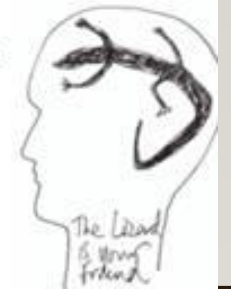
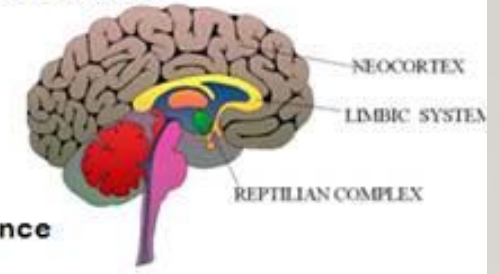


# FETI

Russell Strand, US Army Military  
Police School

## A Paradigm Shift... Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview

- Acknowledge their trauma/pain/difficult situation
  - What are you **able** to tell me about your **experience**?
    - Tell me more about ... or that...
  - What was your thought process during this experience?
  - What were your reactions to this experience
    - Physically
    - Emotionally
  - What are you **able** to remember about...the 5 senses
  - What was the most difficult part of this experience for you?
  - Clarify other information and details...after you **facilitate** all you can about the **"experience"**



# TRAUMA INFORMED VICTIM INTERVIEWS

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Initial interview- document initial disclosure, brief interview to assist in the investigation

Formal interview- following one, or preferably two sleep cycles and capturing the victims experience

# HOW IT LOOKS

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# TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW REALIZES

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- Disclosure is a process, not an event
- Delayed reporting, inability to recall details and sequence is common
- Victim may remember additional details over time, keep options open for further disclosures
- Traumatic memory is stored in the brain differently

# VICTIM INTERVIEW

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## **Things to consider:**

- Are you prepared?
- Timing
- Location
- Advocate

# STARTING THE INTERVIEW

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- Introduce yourself
- Commend and reassure
- Use victim empowerment
- Explain process
- Listen and address concerns
- Acknowledge the difficulty of the conversation
- Establish common language
- Give permission for later disclosure
- Introduce note taking or recording device
- Encourage victim statement in their own words



# INTERVIEW

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- Avoid leading questions- use open ended questions
  - “What are you able to tell me about your experience?”
  - “Where would you like to begin?”
- Avoid victim blaming tone and language
- Have the patience to allow victim to give uninterrupted statement
- Demonstrate active listening- reassure

After establishing victims experience:

- Seek clarification of facts and information to determine elements of offense and possible evidence

# DOCUMENTING THE EXPERIENCE

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**The goal of an investigation is to document the victim's experience. Listen for:**

- What did no look like?
- What did the absence of yes look like?
- What did fear feel like?

# IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

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**Some terms used inadvertently minimize/dismiss the violence and blame the victim:**

- “Peeping tom” vs. “Stalker”
- “Uncooperative” vs. “Reluctant”
- “Story” vs. “Account”



# GETTING DETAILS FROM THE SENSES

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## **Following the victim's uninterrupted narrative:**

- What are you able to tell me about...
  - What did you see?
  - What did you hear?
  - What did you taste?
  - What did you smell?
  - What did you feel?

# CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCE

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## **What are you able to tell me about...**

- ...how that made you feel?
- ...when you felt that way, what did you think was occurring?
- ...your thought process when it was occurring?
- Tell me more about...
- ...other things about that moment that stand out in your mind?

**Thinking/ feeling questions help answer the why did/why didn't**



# CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCE

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## **Document traumatic impact:**

What are you able to tell me about...

- ...your reactions to this experience physically?
- ...your reactions to this experience emotionally?
- ...anything that may have changed for you since this experience?

**Reassure the victim throughout this line of questioning**

# CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCE

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## **Document traumatic impact:**

What are you able to tell me about...

- ...any smells, images, or sounds that keep coming back?
- ...any reoccurring thoughts?
- ...your habits compared to before? (eating, drinking, sleeping)
- ...anything you avoid now that you didn't before?
- Since the event- have the people in your life expressed concerns?



# CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCE

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## **What are you able to tell me about...**

- ...what did the suspect say; threats, tone, language, etc.?
- ...how did the suspect appear; expression, demeanor, posture?
- ...what did the suspect touch, smoke, drink, lick, etc.?
- ...any communication after; calls, texts, social media, other people?

# GETTING NEEDED INFORMATION

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- “What happened?”
  - “What are you able to tell me about your experience?”
- “Have you had sex with this person before?”
  - “In order to clarify previous encounters with the suspect, can you describe your relationship?”
- “Why didn’t you say no?”
  - “What did lack of consent or saying no look like to you?”
- “What were you wearing?”
  - “When I look at video footage, what will you be wearing so I can identify you?”

# CLARIFICATION

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**Some victims may provide information that is incomplete, inaccurate, or untrue:**

- Interview for clarification, don't interrogate
- What are you able to tell me about that?
- Can you help me understand...?
- Can you tell me your thought process when...?
- Can you tell me what you were thinking at that point?

**Reassure victim, acknowledge the difficulty**



# SERIAL NATURE OF OFFENDERS

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- **What are you able to tell me about...**
- Suspects conduct with other potential victims?
- ...any previous conduct?
  - Controlling, threatening, frightening behavior
  - Abuse, harassment, stalking
  - Physical assault, injury



# CONCLUDING THE INTERVIEW

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- What else would you like for me to know?
- Is there anything you thought we would discuss that we haven't?
- After speaking about the incident, are there any new details you can recall?

# DEBRIEF

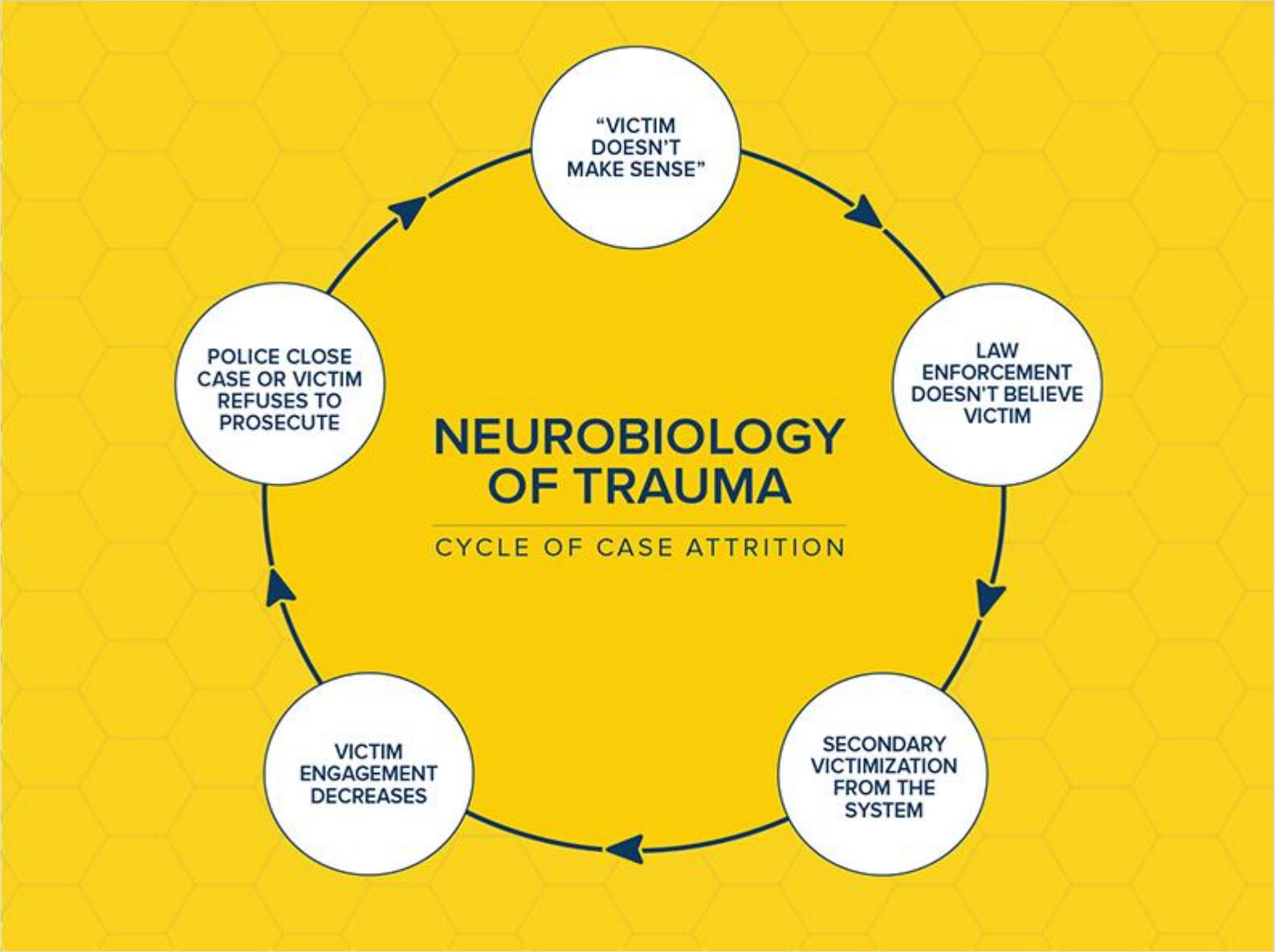
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- Interview is a process, write down new details as they come
- Next steps/ time line
- Safety planning/ interim actions
- As how they would like to be informed
- Work with advocate if requested

# BEST PRACTICES

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- Don't focus on the prosecution
- Don't ask the victim to sign a refusal to participate
- Consider a department policy on agency response & communicate what's expected of officers
- Sexual assault response checklist
- Be aware of particular issues that certain populations may face





# THINGS TO REMEMBER

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- Look at all evidence through a lens of totality
- Be frank
- Be respectful
- Be understanding

The goal is to develop a trauma informed interview that will capture the victim's experience- including the sensory and peripheral details, to help determine the elements of the offense.

**There is no “normal” response**



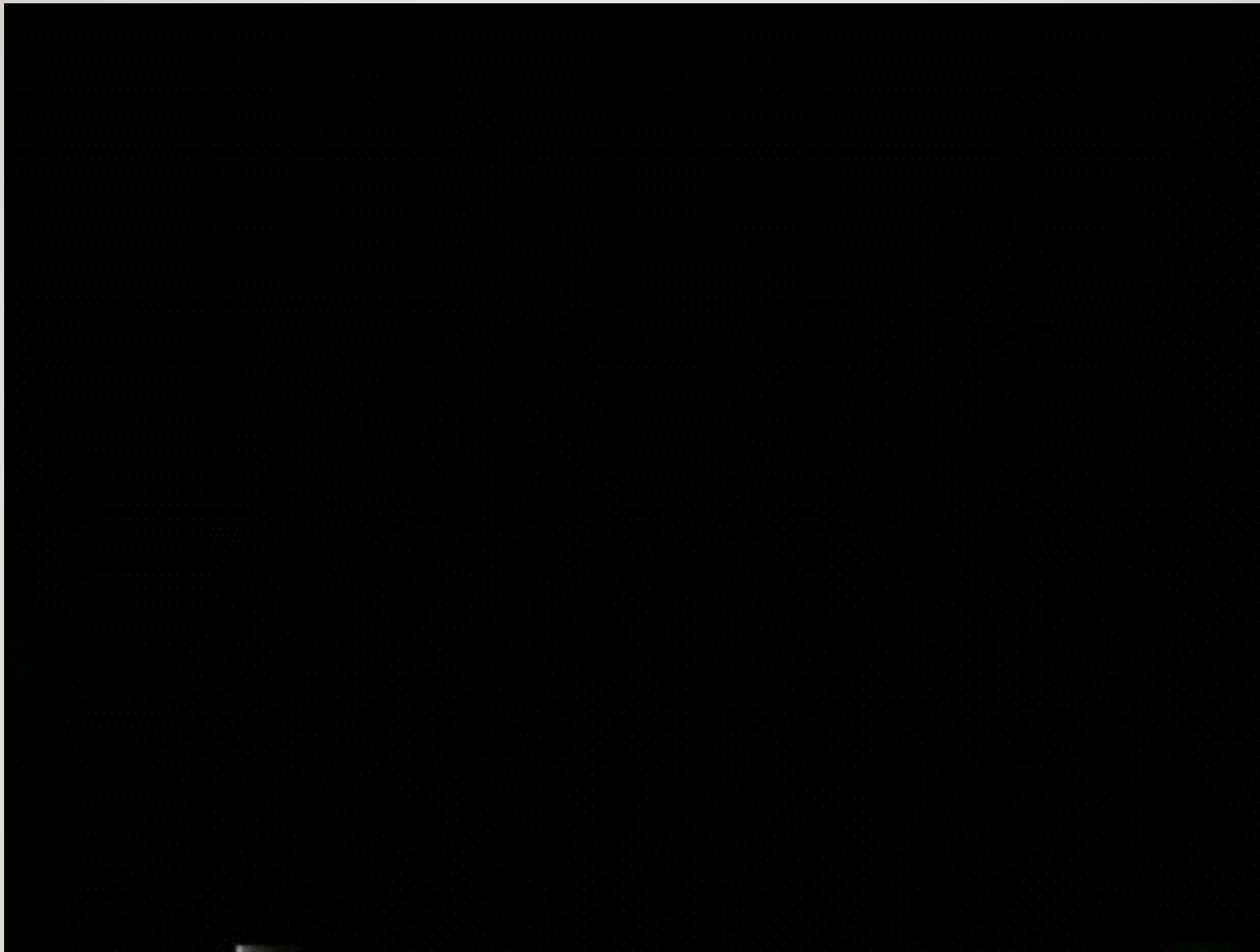
# BELIEVING THE VICTIM

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## **Two Step Analysis:**

Assuming the victim's account is 100% true, do the allegations constitute a violation?

Can you prove the victim's allegations?



The Undetected Rapist- David Lisak, Ph.D.



# SUSPECT

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- Key on minimization
- How they speak about the person
- Failure to perceive behavior as harmful
- Minimal empathy
- Trying to control the interview
- Be prepared to confront misdirection



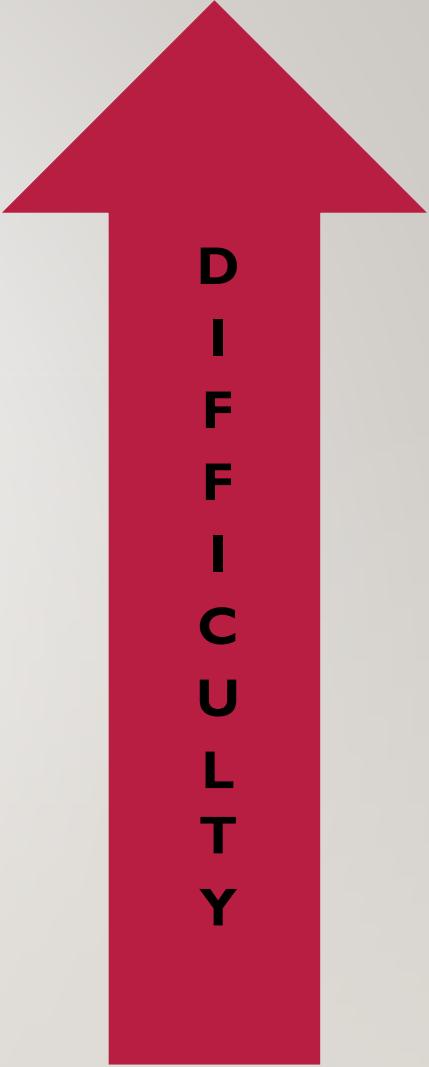
# PROVING ALLEGATIONS

RAPE BY  
FORCE OR  
THREAT OF  
FORCE

UNCONSCIOUS  
VICTIM

TOO DRUNK  
TO CONSENT

TYPE OF ALLEGATION



# ANALYZING YOUR CASE

ELEMENT(S)	WITNESS(ES)	EVIDENCE																		
<b>By Force</b>																				
<b>Intoxication to point where incapable of consent</b>																				
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# OFFENDER FOCUSED

Always attempt  
to interview

Did suspect  
know victim was  
drunk?

Why does  
suspect think  
the encounter  
was consensual?

Suspect's degree of intoxication, capacity to do other things

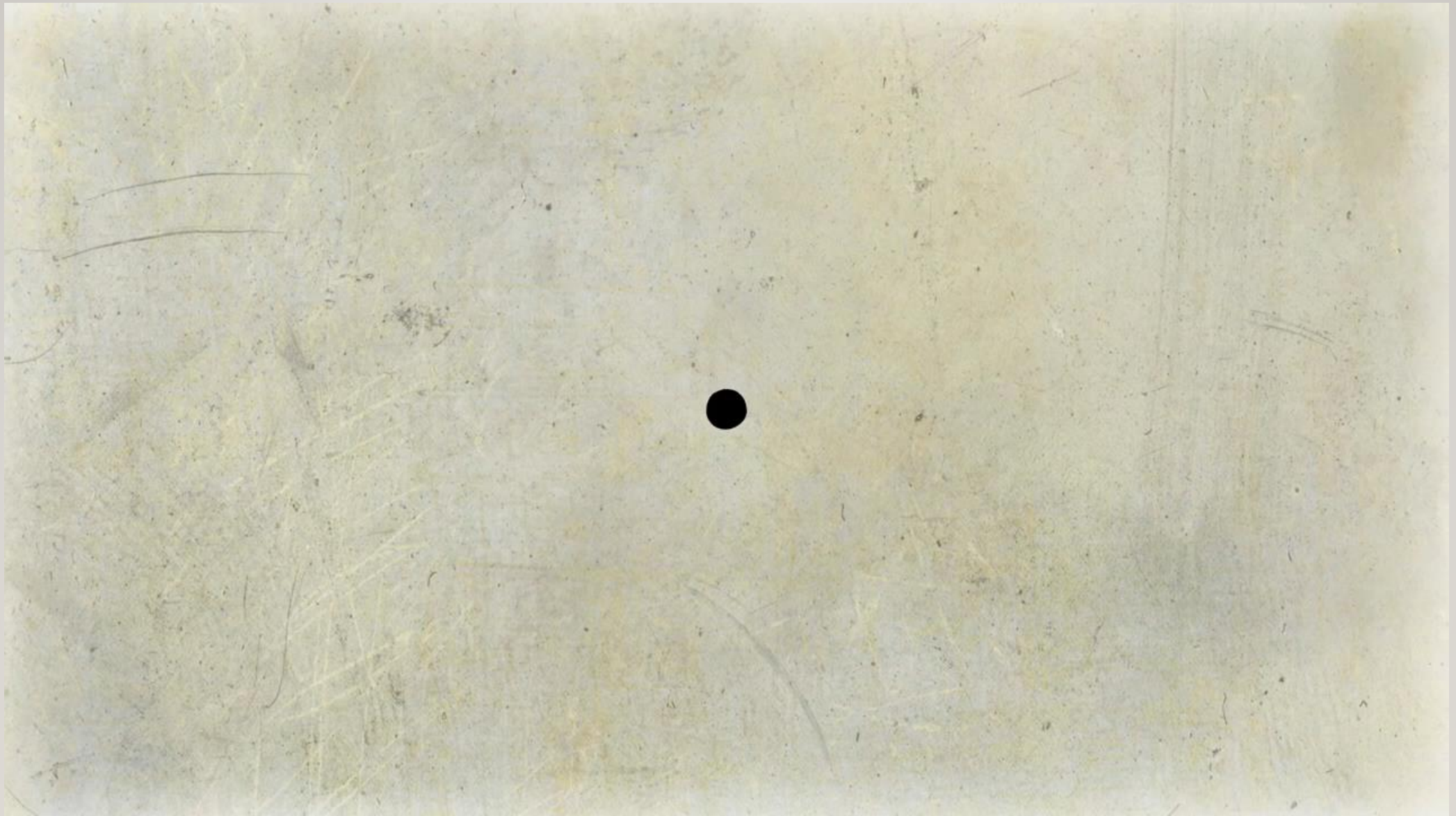
Planning,, manipulation, or attempts to deceive victim

Consider

Suspect's attempt to control the situation and overcome victim's will

Actions before and after





Brené Brown on Empathy



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