

Trauma Response

Sexual violence is a form of trauma. In general, trauma is defined as any real or perceived threat to life, physical or psychological safety, or social belonging. Understanding some of the ways that our brains and our bodies are programmed to automatically respond to trauma may be helpful in understanding some of your own responses to sexual violence. Everybody's reaction is different. Some survivors might feel shocked or ashamed at their reaction to a traumatic event, however it is important to understand that no one can "choose" their trauma response, it is an automatic reaction that is based in a neurobiological response.

The Brain and Trauma

1. The "**Doing Brain**", called the amygdala, is part of the brain located in the limbic system which is where our brain's response to threats, extreme danger, and intense emotion occurs. This part of the brain is designed to act as a "smoke alarm" that goes off when the brain thinks we are in danger.
2. The "**Thinking Brain**," called the pre-frontal cortex or cerebrum, helps us plan, problem-solve, analyze rationally, and make thoughtful decisions.

When the "Doing Brain" alerts us there is a danger present, the "Thinking Brain" will investigate to determine if the danger is real. If the "Thinking Brain" thinks you are in danger, it will send a message to the "Doing Brain" to confirm that the danger is real. The "Thinking Brain" will then shut down to let the "Doing Brain" take over, and do whatever it needs to help us keep safe. When the "Doing Brain" takes over to keep us safe during a traumatic event, there are three main responses: *fight, flight, or freeze*.

Fight: In the face of a traumatic event, a person fights back. This may look like physical or verbal resistance.

Flight: In response to trauma, a person's reaction is to flee the situation. The body mobilizes to leave the traumatic experience.

Freeze: In response to a trauma, a person may have a physical reaction of "shutting down." This may include spacing out, completing losing memory of an event, or being immobilized and unable to move.

Sometimes survivors may feel confused by their "in the moment" response to sexual violence. Understanding our brain's programmed, neurobiological responses to a traumatic event can help survivors to understand that during a trauma response we are completely unable to think and plan logically because our brain has gone into "survival mode."

Sources:

Trauma Informed Care: Best Practices and Protocols for Ohio's Domestic Violence Programs by Sonia D. Ferencik, and Rachel Ramirez-Hammond ncdsv.org/images/ODVN_Trauma-InformedCareBestPracticesAndProtocols.pdf
The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault: Implications for Law Enforcement, Prosecution, and Victim Advocacy by Rebecca Campbell nij.ojp.gov/media/video/24056