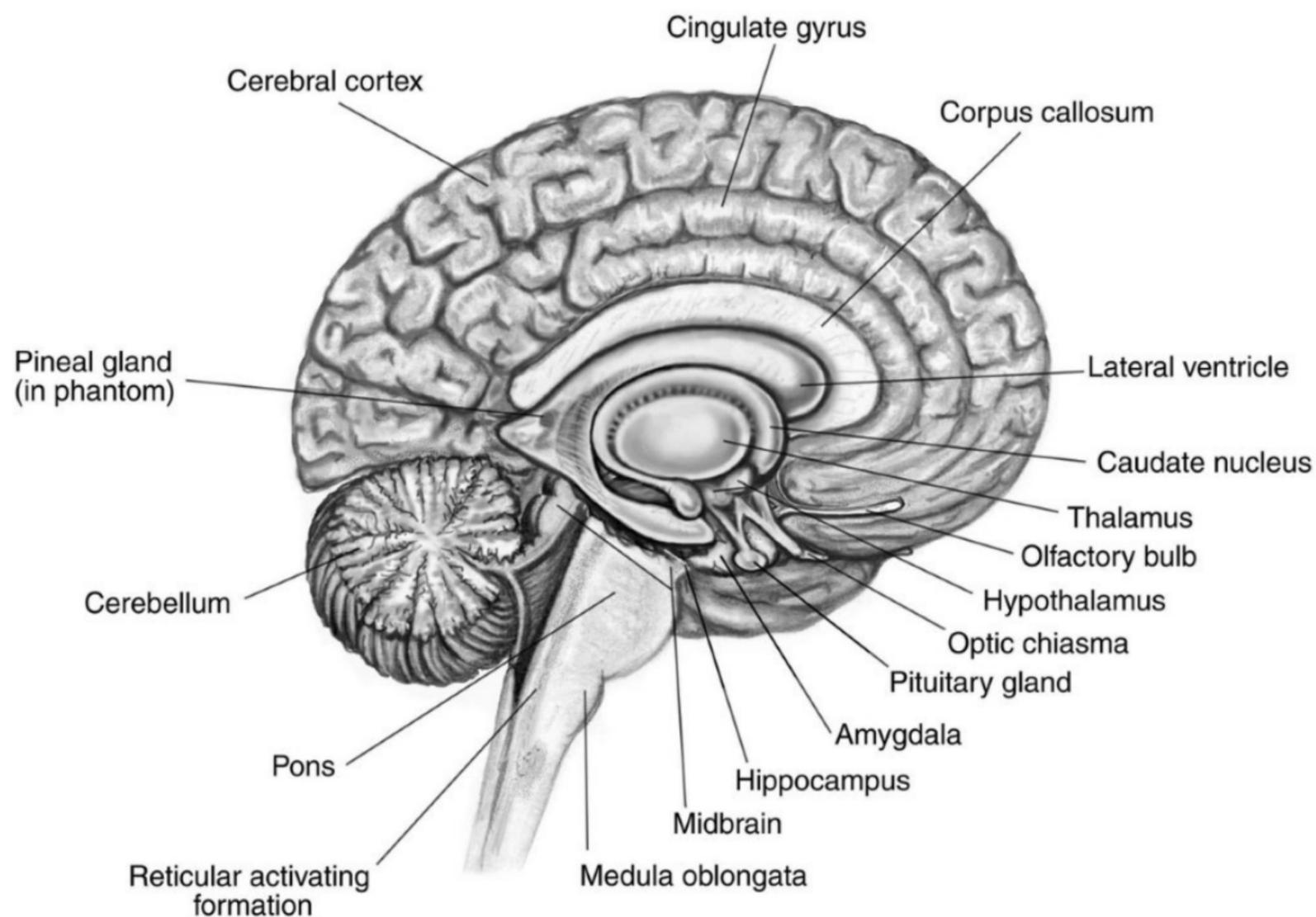


Trauma and The Brain: Questions and Answers for Survivors of Sexual Assault



SASSMM

Sexual Assault Support Services
of Midcoast Maine

Why didn't I fight back?

Most people do not fight back during an assault. There are many reasons why someone might not fight back. When you are afraid, your brain starts thinking about strategies to keep your body safe that don't involve struggling or fighting and limits "rational" thoughts. These natural strategies in your brain come from a long time ago when humans were prey. Humans would act like animals who freeze or "play dead" when they are afraid so that an attacker will not keep hurting them. Think about how rabbits or squirrels freeze when they get scared so that attackers won't pay attention to them. In many situations, for both humans and animals, it is more dangerous to fight back when being attacked, because the attacker might respond with more violence. Your brain and your body did exactly what you needed to survive.

Why couldn't I move?

Lots of people feel like they cannot move during an assault. There are medical reasons for why this happens. One reason is “tonic immobility” which means that your body got really stiff and couldn't move. Another reason is “collapsed immobility” which means you feel faint and your body will go limp or you might even pass out. These body responses usually happen when someone is scared and feels like they cannot get away (or that trying to get away would be really dangerous). All animals, including humans, do this in order to survive an attack. It is your body's way of keeping you safe.

Why do I feel so numb and disconnected from other people?

To connect with other people, you need to feel emotions like love and trust. A scary or traumatic experience can change parts of your brain so that it's hard to feel these kinds of happy emotions. After an attack, your brain is constantly looking for danger to keep you safe. While your brain is focused on your safety, it can make it harder to feel happiness, love, or trust. One way to help reconnect with the people around you is to work with a trauma-informed therapist to help you feel safe in your relationships with other people.

I tried counseling, but it didn't help. What do I do now?

Everyone heals in different ways. A sexual assault can have long-term effects on your brain. A trauma-informed counselor understands how the brain changes because of a scary or traumatic experience and will give you tools to help you heal. For some people, traditional counseling (called talk therapy) can bring back memories of the assault, but does not help fix the changes that your brain has gone through. If talk therapy doesn't work for you, there are non-traditional types of therapy that you can try. These include: art therapy, journaling, yoga, meditation, exercise, emotional freedom technique, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), internal family systems therapy, family constellation therapy, and other mindfulness practices.

How do I reconnect with who I was before the assault?

After you experience a trauma, it can be really hard to feel connected with yourself. One thing that can help is to find activities or hobbies that you really enjoyed before your assault. Even though you might not feel the same joy from those activities or hobbies now, your brain will slowly learn how to feel connected to them again and get enjoyment out of them. Traditional and non-traditional therapy, patience, mindfulness, and safe places to experience new things are all helpful in reconnecting with yourself.

Why has this assault affected me so much?

Sexual assault, or any traumatic experience, can have huge impact on the brain—especially to systems in your brain that deal with fear, anxiety, depression, and memories. An assault can have an effect on all parts of your life. People who have been assaulted often have higher rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, addiction, and suicidal thoughts. These feelings can lead to a disconnect between you and the people you love and trust, which makes getting support even harder.

Connecting with other survivors, working with a trauma-informed therapist, or contacting your local sexual assault support center can help you feel safe and supported.

Why can't I remember much of what happened? Why did memories come back months/years later?

Scary or traumatic memories are kept in your brain differently than happy memories. When you experience something scary, the bad memories are stored in a special part of your brain. This part of your brain is deeply connected to emotions, sights, sounds, and touch. This means that scary memories are less connected to language, logic, and words. During an attack, your brain skips past all of your normal ways of reacting and storing memories and enters into the "fight, flight, or freeze" mode. Without words or language to access these scary memories, your brain cannot remember things the same way as happy or non-scary memories. Instead, you might experience these memories as flashbacks that can happen unexpectedly—sometimes activated by a sight, smell, taste, sound, feeling, or something else that reminds your brain and body of the attack. When you have flashbacks, your memories are not in your control. You might experience these flashbacks daily, or you might have them months or even years after your attack.

Why do I sometimes feel like it's happening all over again?

We remember scary or “traumatic” memories so strongly because of the stress chemicals that are released in the brain during an attack. Even if you cannot remember all of the details, certain feelings or sensations can make your body and brain react as if the assault is happening again. This happens because your body is trying to protect you. It is trying to prepare you in case you need to respond to an attack—even if there is no threat of an attack happening. To protect you, your brain activates something called a “fight, flight, or freeze” response. This makes the logical part of your brain turn off so that it cannot tell if you are in danger of an attack or in fear because of your memories. You might react to certain feelings or sensations in the same way you would respond to an attack —by fighting back, running away, or freezing.

Why am I so jumpy and easily startled?

Experiencing a sexual assault activates something called the “startle response” in your brain. After an attack, your brain is ready to respond in case there is another attack. It is regularly checking your feelings and the world around you for any threat or danger so that it can respond immediately. Your brain is trying to find the danger before it gets too close to make sure that you are safe.