Addressing the Effects of Trauma: Delayed Reporting, Inconsistent Statements and Other Complications

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Adapted from

Trauma to Trial

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Can we explain why…

- there may be a delay in reporting
- a report or disclosure was made to someone other than law enforcement
- the victim seems indifferent to injuries, pain
- a victim may be vague about details
- the narrative seems illogical, inconsistent
- the victim behaves in a way that does not make sense ???

Mediating Factors in Trauma Response

- Prior experience of trauma
  - Ex. Childhood abuse, other incidents of IPV
- Pre-existing psychological distress
- Nature of the attack
- Relationship to perpetrator
- Support system
- Prior beliefs held by victim
- Culture
- Other life experiences and stressors
- Remember …each person's reactions will be unique

Response to Sexual Assault

- The Biophysical Dimension
- The Psychological Dimension
- The Social/Societal Dimension

The Biophysical Response

- Information Processing
- Cognitive and Other Functions

Key Players in Information Processing

- Central Nervous System
  - Brain, Spinal cord
    - Limbic System
    - Guides the emotions & behavior necessary for survival
      - Involved in the storage and retrieval of memory

Key Players in Information Processing

- Peripheral Nervous System
  - Responsible for incoming sensory information
    - Somatic Nervous System (skeletal muscles)
    - Autonomic Nervous System
      - Parasympathetic NS
        - Active during non-emergency situations
      - Sympathetic NS
        - Discharges Stress Hormones in times of imminent threat

Information Processing

- Perceptions are delivered to the brain through the basic senses.
- Assessment and triage conducted to determine what needs to be sent to other specialized regions for processing.
- Memories of ordinary events are temporarily stored in the limbic system

Information Processing

- Sensory input is matched against previously stored patterns and stored accordingly
  - Unessential stimuli filtered out
  - Once established, they are not part of conscious memory
- Normally, experiences are coded in a parallel process
  - Cognitive/factual/spatial in one area and emotion stored in another
- As the brain processes, aspects are transferred elsewhere for long term storage

When there is input that is unknown, novel, threatening….

- An initial alarm response begins-sympathetic nervous system is engaged
  - Hormones released, leading to the defensive responses of fight, flight, freeze
  - Primitive initial response, prior to cognitive processing or interpretation of the event
- Freeze reaction
  - Primitive response
  - May also occur when fight or flight is not possible
  - Tonic immobility – "playing dead".
    - May be seen in the apparent extreme passivity during an assault.
    - Motor skill impairment may negatively impact fight or flight
    - May lose ability to speak

When there is input that is unknown, novel, threatening….

- Brain tunes into what provides the most relevant information
  - More attention paid to the threatening aspects than other aspects of event
    - ‘Weapon focus’
  - May lose ability to problem solve
  - Experience perceptual narrowing

Perceptual Narrowing/ Tunnel Vision

- One or more of the senses may limit or exclude input, or narrow the focus.
  - Often the visual system is the one that is actively processing incoming information
- Focus only on what is most important, necessary for survival
  - This will limit the details recalled in a traumatic event
- Hearing may be skewed
  - Attend to those words, tone of voice and body movements that seems life-threatening.
  - Non-threatening words, tone of voice, body movements, may not be noticed.

Critical Incident Amnesia

- The narrowing of consciousness may evolve into amnesia for parts of the experience
  - Memories may be selectively accessible
  - Temporary loss of detailed memory about the events
- Individual may be unable to provide a coherent narrative of the incident, but may have an emotional ‘knowing’ of the event
  - Aware of associated perceptions, without being able to articulate the reasons for feeling or behaving a certain way
- May be interpreted as being untruthful about lack of memory

Coding and storage of traumatic information

- Memories of moderately stressful experiences seem to remain in the limbic system longer than neutral events
- When stress is high:
  - Episodic memories may stay in limbic system for some time, even indefinitely
  - Resulting memories may be different than those formed in ordinary circumstances
  - Survivor may avoid thinking & talking about event, which will delay or prevent processing
    - with processing, autobiographical or narrative memory usually, eventually, emerges (Nadel & Jacobs, 1998).

Event coding and cognitive expression

- Traumatic memories may be initially organized on a nonverbal, perceptual level
  - Initially experienced as fragments of the event
- Narrative in a crisis is likely to be nonlinear, disorganized
  - Recall may be in partial descriptions, “flashbulb”
  - Description of trauma will follow a logic that makes sense to the victim, based on what is perceived to be important and what is recalled at the time.
    - Difficult to describe events in chronological fashion

Trauma and Dissociation

- Dissociation is a way of organizing, compartmentalizing information
- Mentally remove self from the situation-during or after the assault
- Often report alterations in the experience of time, place, and person, which gives a sense of unreality on the event
  - Many experience, out-of-body experiences, bewilderment, disorientation
  - May feel as though they are watching a movie about the event, rather than experiencing it firsthand
- Stress induced analgesia - Don't feel pain

Impact of Relationships

(Information Processing for Recent Sexual Trauma; Mechanic et al, 1998)

- Deficits/difficulties in recall were associated with lower perception of threat to life
  - Victims in higher life threat may attend more to the event. The situation may be immediately determined to be novel and threatening.
- May experience memory deficits for parts of experience
- Reported recovery of memory over time occurred with high frequency

Potential Impact on Reporting

- Biological processes need to return to steady state (or as close as possible)
  - Recall may improve after a rest
- Information needed for crime narrative, but not deemed important for survival by the brain, may not be immediately accessible
- At initial interview information may be missing, or confusing

Psychological Dimension

- Common Emotional Responses to Trauma
- Influence of Rape Beliefs

Psychological Responses to Trauma

- Reactions can be as individual as the person
- Coping strategies:
  - Constantly changing to meet external and internal demands
  - Designed to return body to homeostasis, and regain sense of control, safety, mastery

Common Emotional Reactions to Trauma

- Feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety/panic, grief/loss, fear, anger, shame, negative impact on self image
- Blame
  - Self – may result in leaving out parts of narrative
  - By others – fear of arrest

Common short-term psychological reactions to sexual trauma

- Cognitive impairment
  - Difficulty concentrating or remembering
  - Intrusive reactions
  - Disorientation, sense of disequilibrium
- Affective responses
  - Emotional swings…emotional numbing… mismatch with situation
- Avoidance reactions; thinking, triggers
- Shock, disbelief
  - Particularly if assailant is known & trusted
- Denial or minimization
  - – unacknowledged victim??

Psychological Needs

- Control: Of life, emotions, post assault activities
  - May manifest as behavior that appears reckless
  - May seek out assailant; reasons for assault, regain mastery
- Safety: Physical and emotional
  - Individual determination of who is safe (may not be law enforcement)
  - May retreat into self
  - Perceived safety issues may take time to emerge

Sexual Assault; Rape Beliefs

- Beliefs about sexual assault
  - Blitz assault by insane stranger with a weapon
  - Not 'real rape' if victim didn't fight back
- Beliefs about victim response
  - 'Should' appear distressed, or… 'it's not a big deal if it's someone you know'
- Discrepancy between beliefs and experience?
  - Does the belief change, or the definition of the event?
- Possible result:
  - Denial or minimization of the assault
  - Attempts made to explain event
  - May not acknowledge the experience as a sexual assault…unacknowledged victims

Unacknowledged Victims

(Koss, M. et al, 1988)

- Persons assaulted by an acquaintance were less likely to identify experience as rape, or to disclose
- In non-stranger situations, it may take longer to perceive that an interaction is progressing to assault
- Unacknowledged victims more likely to blame self
- Some continued to have sex with the perpetrator
  - supports their belief that it wasn't assault
- Acknowledged rape victims were more likely to press charges

Implications

- Concealing or inaccurately stating information
  - Desire to increase sense of credibility
    - Leave out information that would cast doubt
  - Concerned will be seen as contributing to the assault
    - Drug use, assault in context of prostitute/client relationship, minors, intimate relationship
- Don’t acknowledge experience as assault or abuse
- Need to establish safety and control first

Social Dimension

- Response from Social Supports
  - Adherence to rape beliefs by others
    - May explain incident in another way if discrepancy exists
    - May be angry at, blame, victim/survivor behavior
    - (on the other hand) May challenge victims' denial or distortions, and decrease use of avoidance strategies
  - May exert pressure to report/not report, leave/stay
  - May exert pressure to omit information that would reduce credibility, or implicate someone else

Disclosure

(Study by Starzynski et al, 2005)

- Negative social reactions to initial disclosure may discourage subsequent disclosures.
- *"There is "something unique about how society perceives sexual assault [that] may lead people to make negative responses to women disclosing these experiences."*
- This underreporting has the unintended effect of reinforcing society's views of what constitutes rape.

Implications

- Disclosure may be delayed due to influence of significant others
- Narrative may omit information:
  - to enhance their credibility
  - to avoid legal or other trouble
- Importance of helpful, non judgmental support
  - SA/DV advocate as neutral party
    - Importance of consistent, positive support

How might this influence law enforcement and prosecution response?

- Suggestions from Joanne Archambault, Bruce Siddel, IACP:
- Reduce the number of unnecessary professional contacts – i.e. reduce the number of interviews
- Initial report - just necessary information
- Comprehensive interview after 1 or 2 sleep cycles
  - Give victim time to rest, process, make necessary arrangements
- Engage positive supports (Ex. Advocate)
- Be aware of the impact of beliefs, victim blaming, environmental factors

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