

## Understanding Victims: Common Responses to Trauma

### What is trauma?

- ⦿ Trauma is an emotional or psychological injury, usually resulting from an extremely stressful or life-threatening situation rendering the person temporarily helpless, and breaking past ordinary coping and defense mechanisms (Childhood Traumas: An Outline and Overview, pg. 11).

### The brain in trauma:

- ⦿ When under trauma, the brain creates stress hormones which trigger the brain's fight, flight or freeze response.
- ⦿ When under high stress, a part of the brain called the hippocampus, works to record and document stressful events. **When the stress occurs for an extended period of time, the hippocampus stops recording, but emotionally the event keeps occurring therefore, leading to a recall of the event emotionally with no recollection of the actual experience.**
- ⦿ While under high stress, the brain works to regulate and protect, by shutting down the hippocampus, limiting the amount of information allowed to be processed into memory. The result then, is that the traumatic information becomes stuck in the amygdale- which performs a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions, explaining the **high level of emotions with no ability to recall specifics of the event (gaps in the victim's story).**
- ⦿ **Dissociation-** is an altered state of consciousness characterized by partial or complete disruption of the normal integration of a person's normal conscious or psychological functioning. Dissociation is a defense mechanism commonly used by victims of trauma to avoid emotional pain and suffering. This is a noticeable reaction we most often see when a victim is under high stress related to the trauma, where the **victim appears to be physically present but is unresponsive (this may occur often during forensic interviewing).**

### **Other common responses to trauma:**

- ⦿ Shaky, unstable and dissociative
- ⦿ Inability to recall a important aspects of the traumatic event
- ⦿ Recurrent intrusive distressing recollections of the event, this includes recurrent distressing dreams
- ⦿ Agitated or hesitant, untrusting
- ⦿ Overpowering need to please
- ⦿ Highly stressed and overwhelmed (unsure of options and confused about what is happening within the system)- This leads to the victim feeling helpless and in need of specific direction.
- ⦿ Feeling out of control or “going crazy,” these reactions are post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- ⦿ Victims who feel out of control may often create more drama because they are not used to a life without it. Taking control of creating drama helps the victim feel like they have at least some fragment of control in their lives.
- ⦿ Acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring.
- ⦿ Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, activities, places or people that trigger the event
- ⦿ Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- ⦿ Irritability or outbursts of anger
- ⦿ Difficulty concentrating
- ⦿ Hypervigilance - an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors with the purpose to detect threats
- ⦿ Exaggerated startle response
- ⦿ Feelings of despair and hopelessness