

The Brain Under (Sexual) Attack

Why people don't fight, why memories are fragmentary – and some big implications.

Jim Hopper, PhD – December 14, 2017

Why don't many people fight or yell during sexually assaults, even rapes? Why are their memories so often fragmentary and confusing?



Is the brain's response to being attacked basically the same – whether it's sexual assault, physical assault, or enemy fire in military combat? Can sexual harassment also be stressful enough to significantly impact brain functioning?

The answers to these questions have huge implications for people who've been attacked sexually, for those who investigate, prosecute and adjudicate such crimes, for policy makers, and for everyone who knows or works with someone who's been sexually assaulted or harassed.

But do we really need to focus on the brain? Can't we just believe survivors, or at least conduct really good investigations, without knowing about the neurobiology of stress and trauma? In theory, maybe, but often the ways people report reacting to assaults can be baffling, even totally opposite of what we'd expect, and their memories can sound confused or unbelievable. Once we understand how the brain works when it's under attack, those behaviors and memories make much more sense.

That's why many sexual assault survivors, police officers, and prosecutors are finding that understanding what's happening in the brain during an assault is extremely clarifying and helpful. For many, it's a revelation that completely transforms how they understand, investigate, and prosecute sexual assaults.

Still, some fear that focusing on the brain can obscure important social and power dynamics. Of course, neurobiology doesn't explain everything about survivors' behaviors and memories. Yet understanding how human brains respond when attacked sheds light on accounts of sexual assault that – *because* of social, cultural, and political ignorance, oppression, and polarization – have been misunderstood and dismissed for far too long.

I find that by focusing on the brain, and staying grounded in the science, I'm able to point out practical implications and new practices that can truly change lives, institutions, and ultimately cultures. At least that's the feedback I've been getting for years now, and not only from feminist activists but also from police officers, military commanders, and many others.

Let's return to those key questions about why many people don't fight or yell, why memories can be fragmentary and incomplete, and whether those are totally normal brain-based responses. The answers,

it turns out, are the same in every culture. Around the world, the most common responses of people being sexual assaulted are basically the same.

Why? Because evolution sculpted them into our genes and brains – long before we were sophisticated enough to create cultures, long before we began to misunderstand and misjudge people with our culturally embedded beliefs about how women and men “should” respond during sexual assaults and remember them later.

This blog will introduce key “brain circuitries” affected by sexual assault (and military combat and any major attack or stress). I’ll explain how stress and trauma can rapidly and massively alter brain functioning, for example impairing rational brain regions, leaving only reflexes and habits. I’ll explain how stress and trauma can alter the way memories are encoded and stored, and why effective trauma-informed investigative interviewing methods are essential to treating victims justly, conducting fair investigations, and holding perpetrators accountable.

And of course, given the revolution and wrenching questions we’re all confronting just about every day now, I’ll shed light on issues dominating the headlines and blowing up in readers’ private lives.

Wherever you’re coming from, and whatever you’re trying to learn, or do, about sexual assault, I hope I’ve piqued your interest and that you’ll find my blog enlightening and useful.

For now you can learn from what I’ve already shared online, including [Sexual Assault & the Brain](#) on my website, pieces published by *The Washington Post* and *Time* on [Why many rape victims don’t fight or yell](#) and [Why rape and trauma survivors have fragmentary and incomplete memories](#), and my in-depth but highly-engaging YouTube video, [Neurobiology of Trauma & Sexual Assault](#).