

WORKING WITH CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS:

Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma

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Michigan State University



MAY 26, 2014

Nigeria's Stolen Girls / Botched Executions / Plus: My Kid Hates
Frozen by Joel Stein

TIME



THE CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY ELIZA GRAY



NOT ALONE

The First Report of the White House Task Force to
Protect Students From Sexual Assault

April 2014

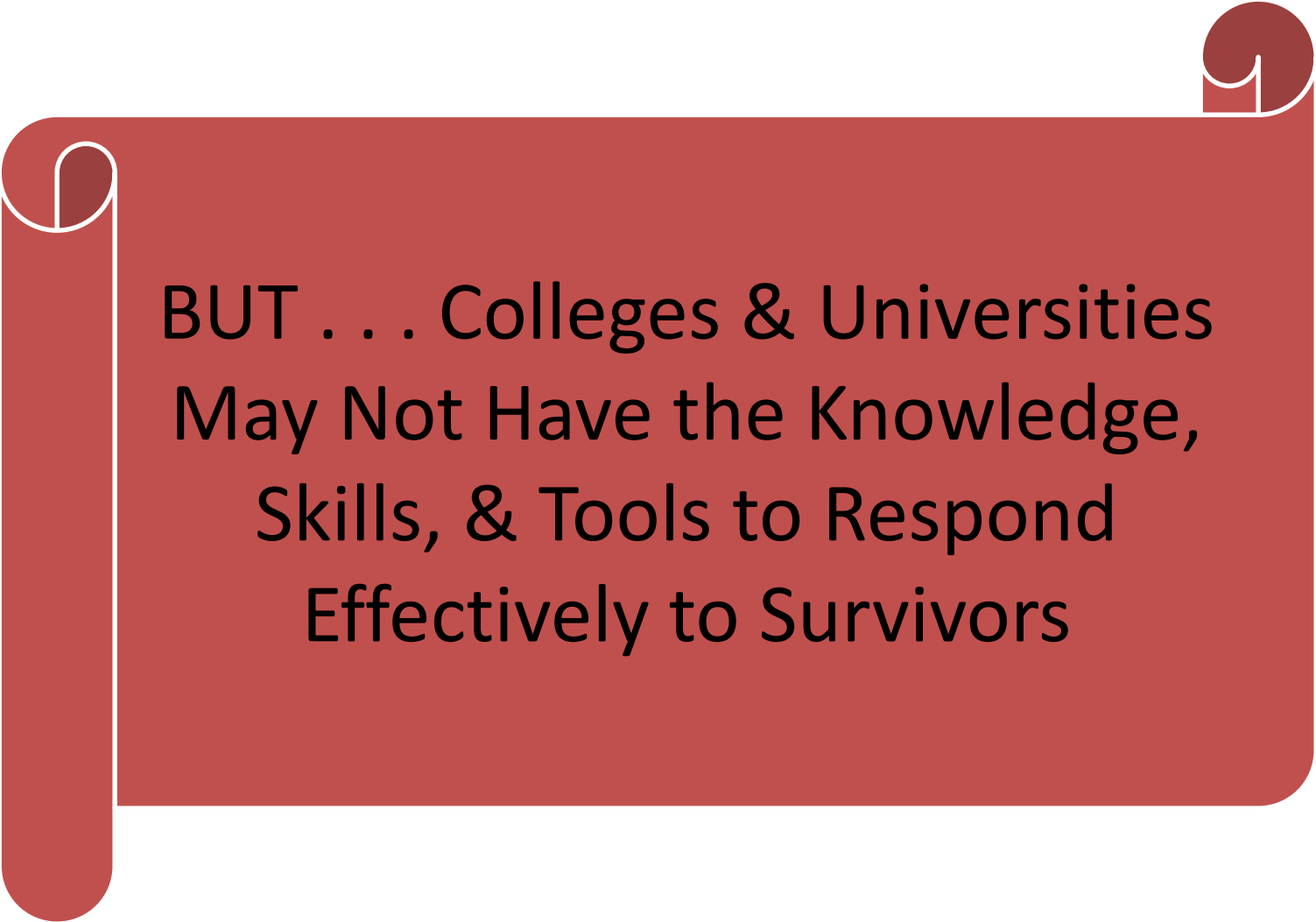


U.S. Department of Education Releases List of Higher Education Institutions with Open Title IX Sexual Violence Investigations

MAY 1, 2014

A decorative red scroll graphic with a white outline, featuring a vertical bar on the left and a circular element at the top right.

Colleges & Universities Have
A Legal Obligation To Protect
And Help Their Students

A large red graphic element resembling a scroll, with a white outline of a scroll edge on the left and top. The text is centered within the red area.

BUT . . . Colleges & Universities
May Not Have the Knowledge,
Skills, & Tools to Respond
Effectively to Survivors

Today's Presentation

- Describe how the brain & body react to trauma
- Describe how the brain & body react to SEXUAL ASSAULT
- Discuss implications & take home lessons

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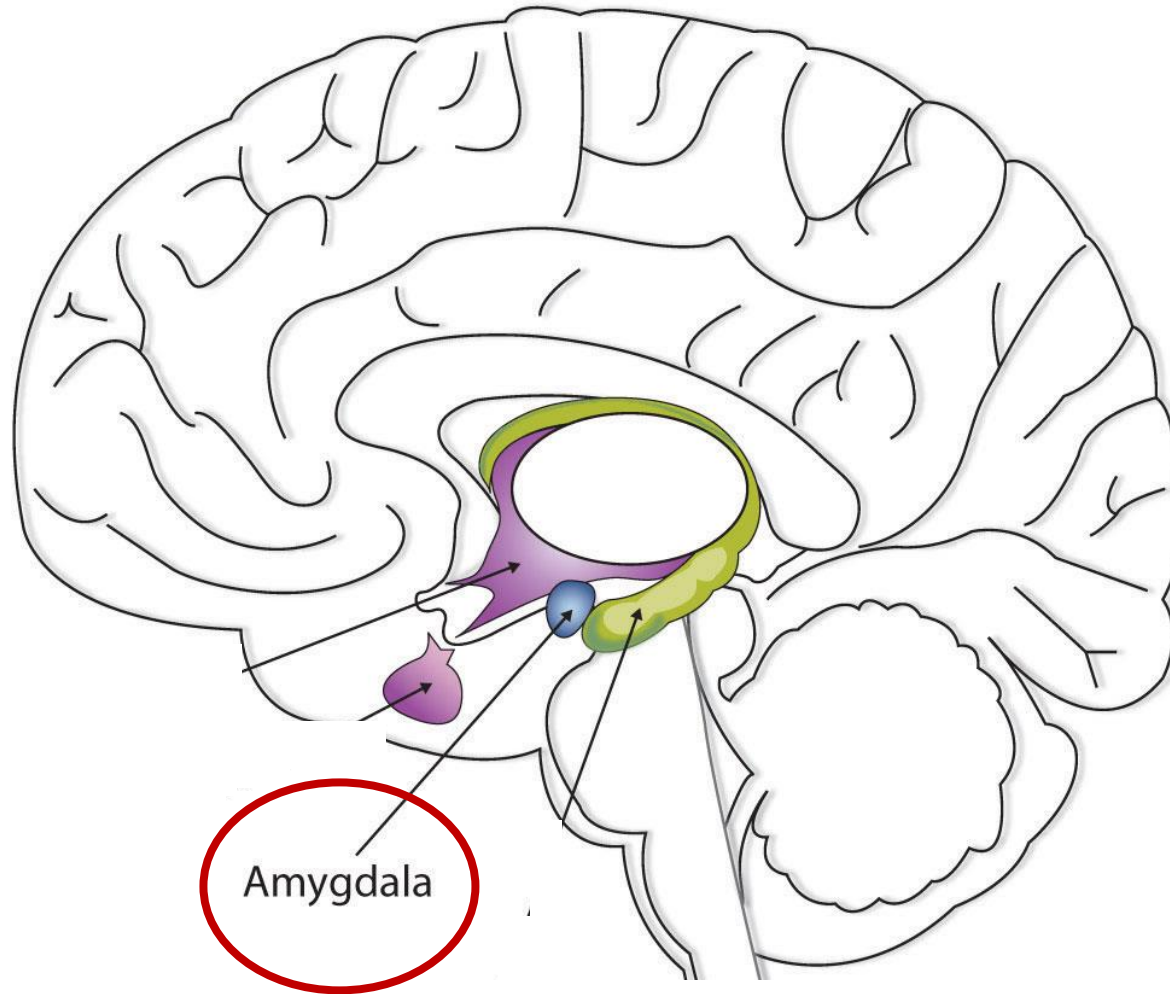
**THE SCIENCE
BEHIND TRAUMA**

**BETTER INFORMED
BETTER RESPONSE**

The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault



Our Story Begins Here

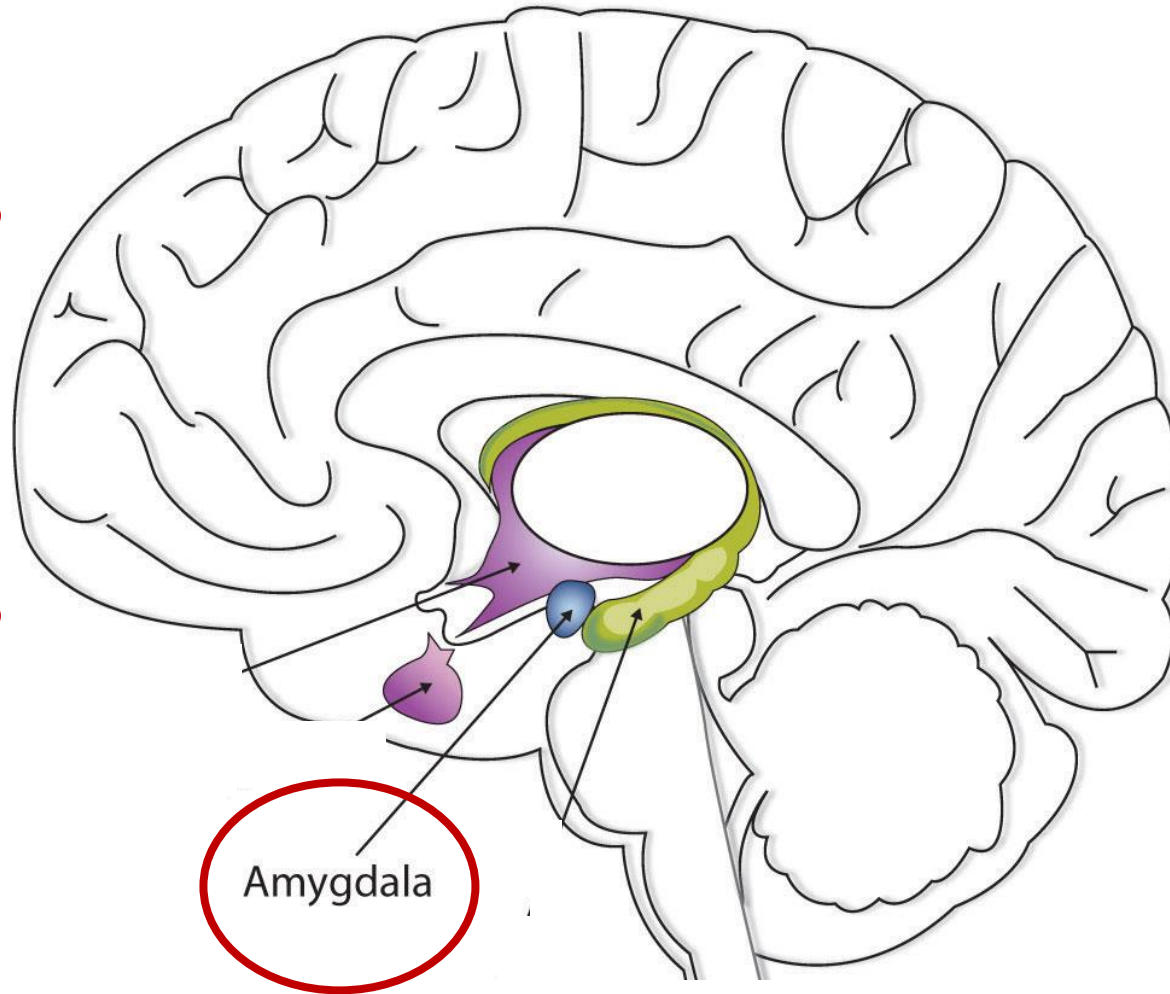


One inch, almond-shaped

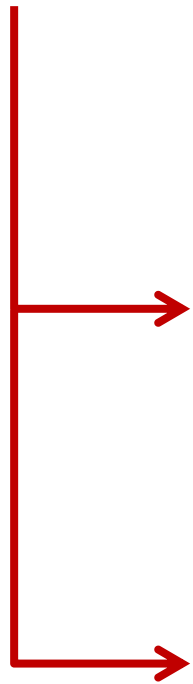
Two Key Functions

**PROCESSES
EMOTIONAL
REACTIONS**

**PROCESSES
MEMORIES**

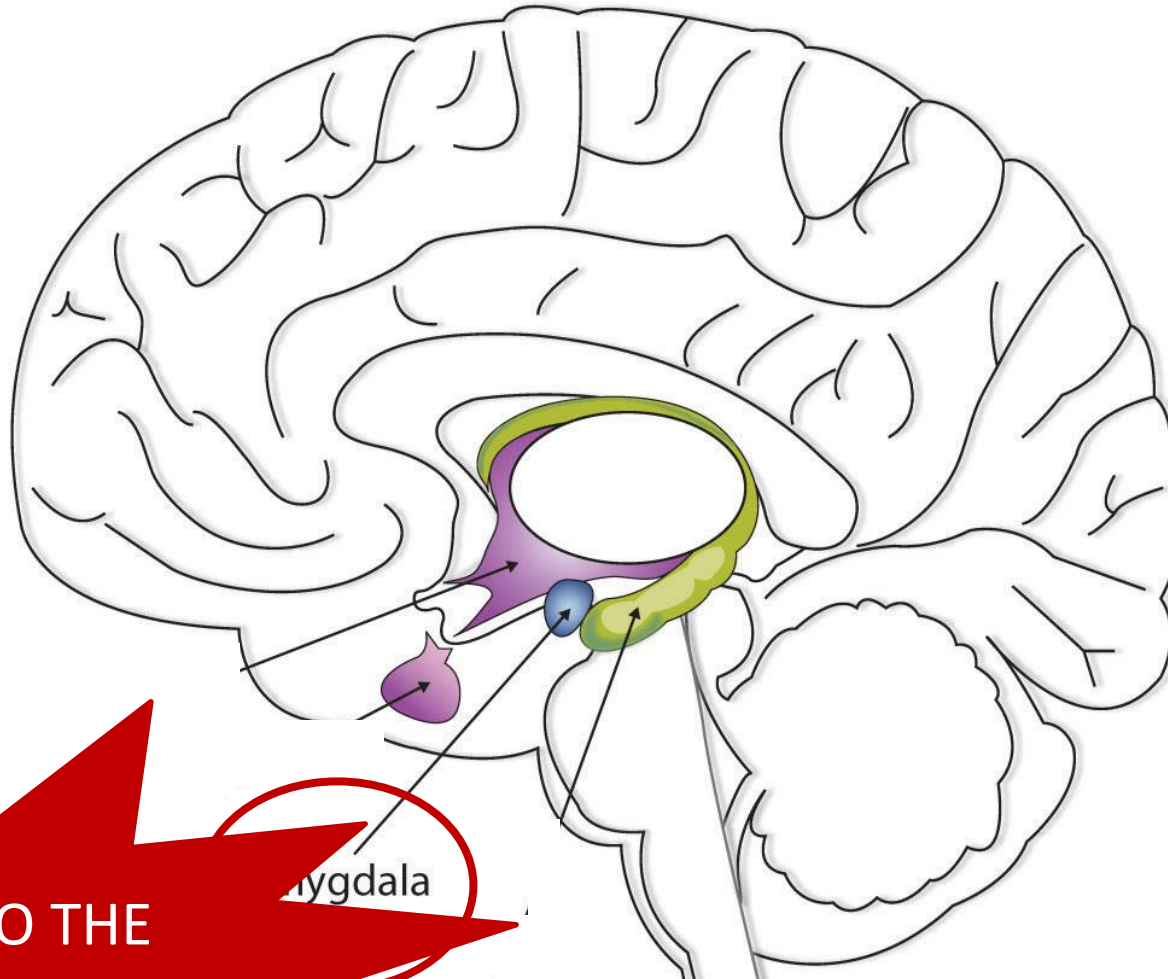


Two Key Functions



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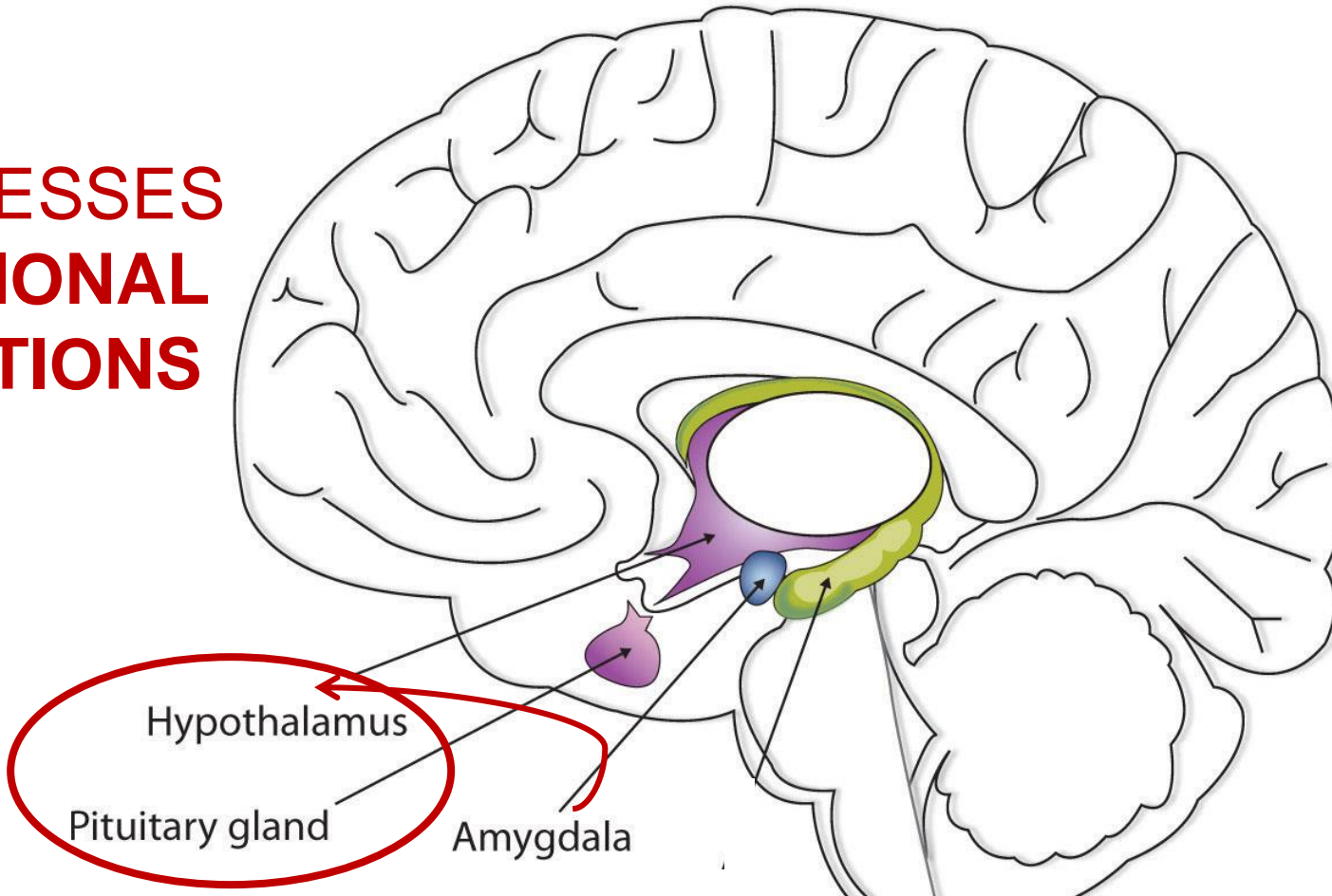
amygdala

**THREATS TO THE
SURVIVAL OF THE
ORGANISM**

Two Key Functions



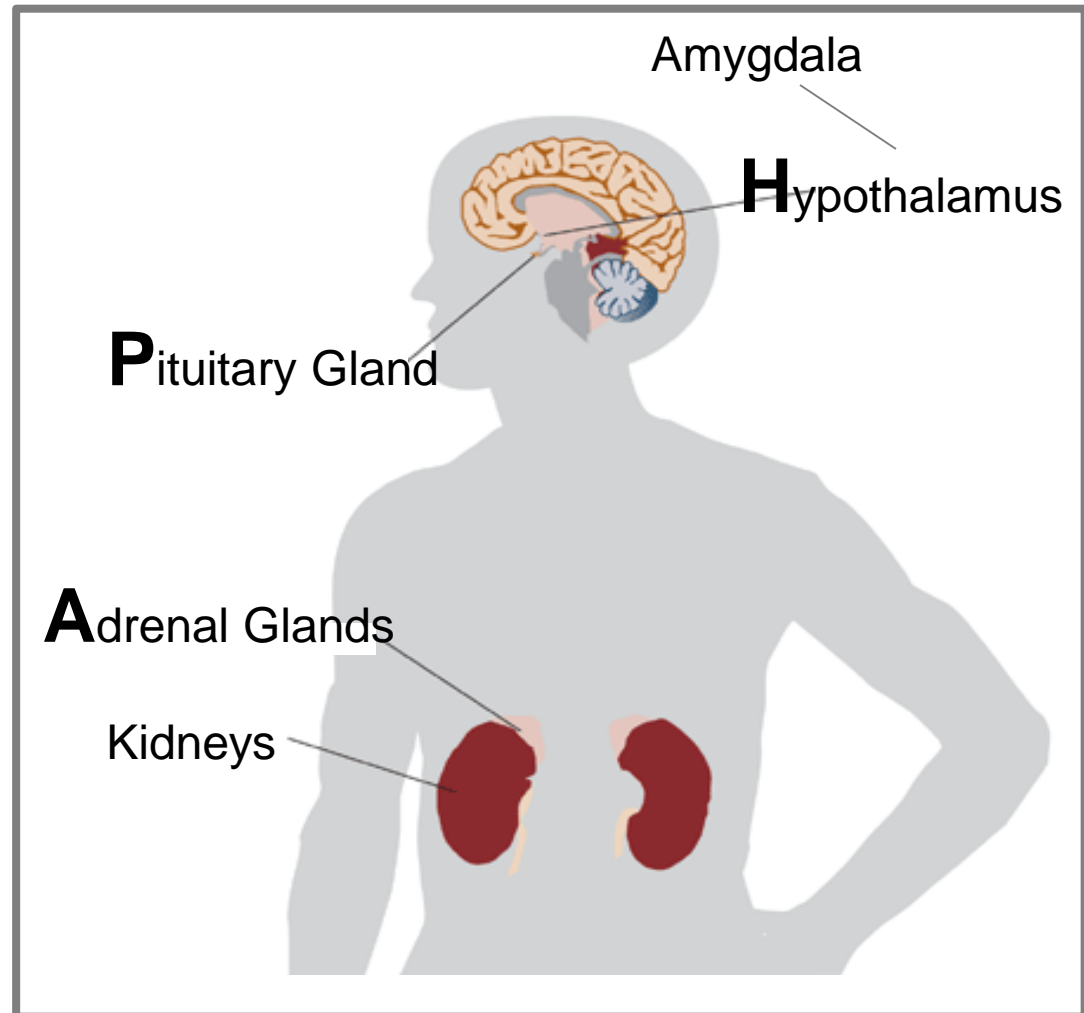
**PROCESSES
EMOTIONAL
REACTIONS**



Emotional Processing of Trauma

HPA Axis

Balances body following stress by releasing of various hormones/chemicals



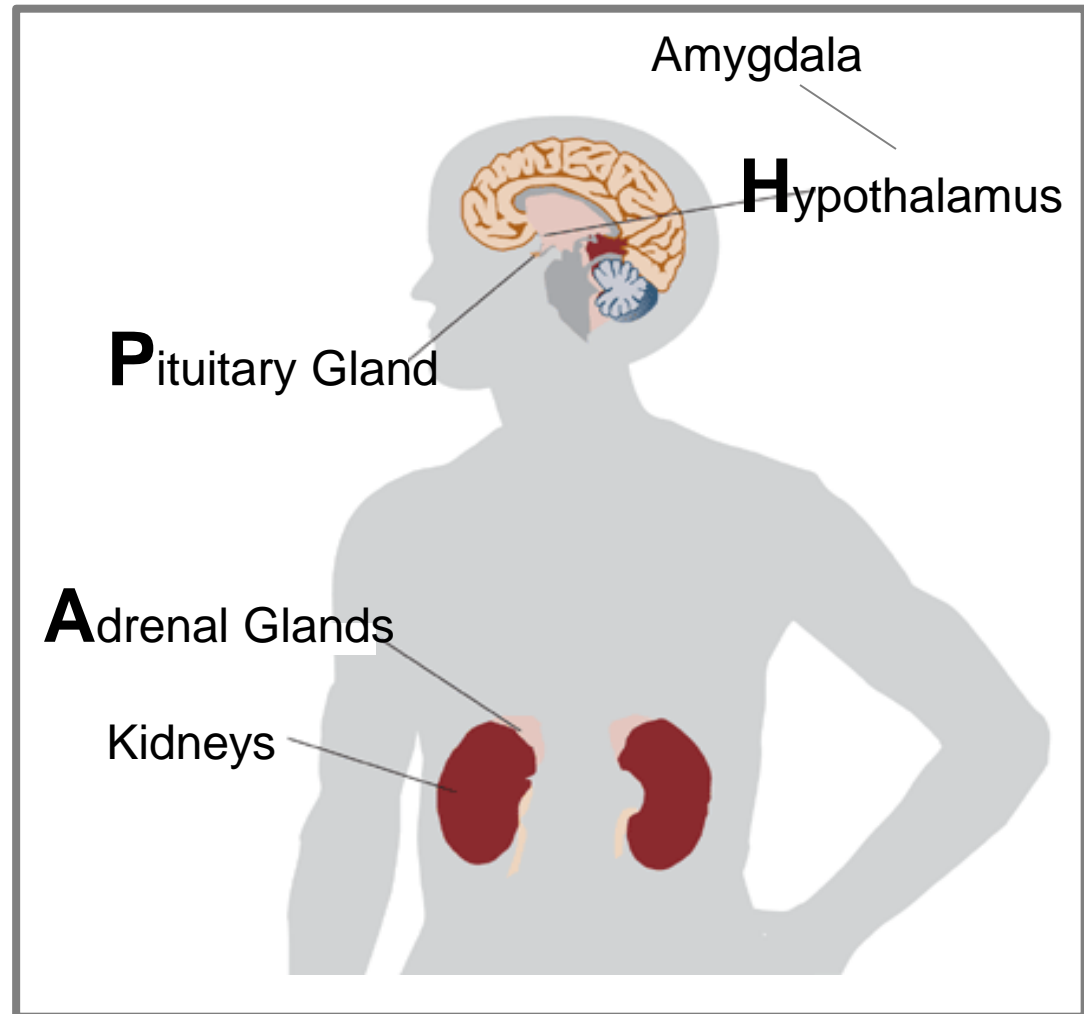
Emotional Processing of Trauma

Catecholamines: Fight or flight response

Cortisol: Energy available

Opioids: Prevent pain

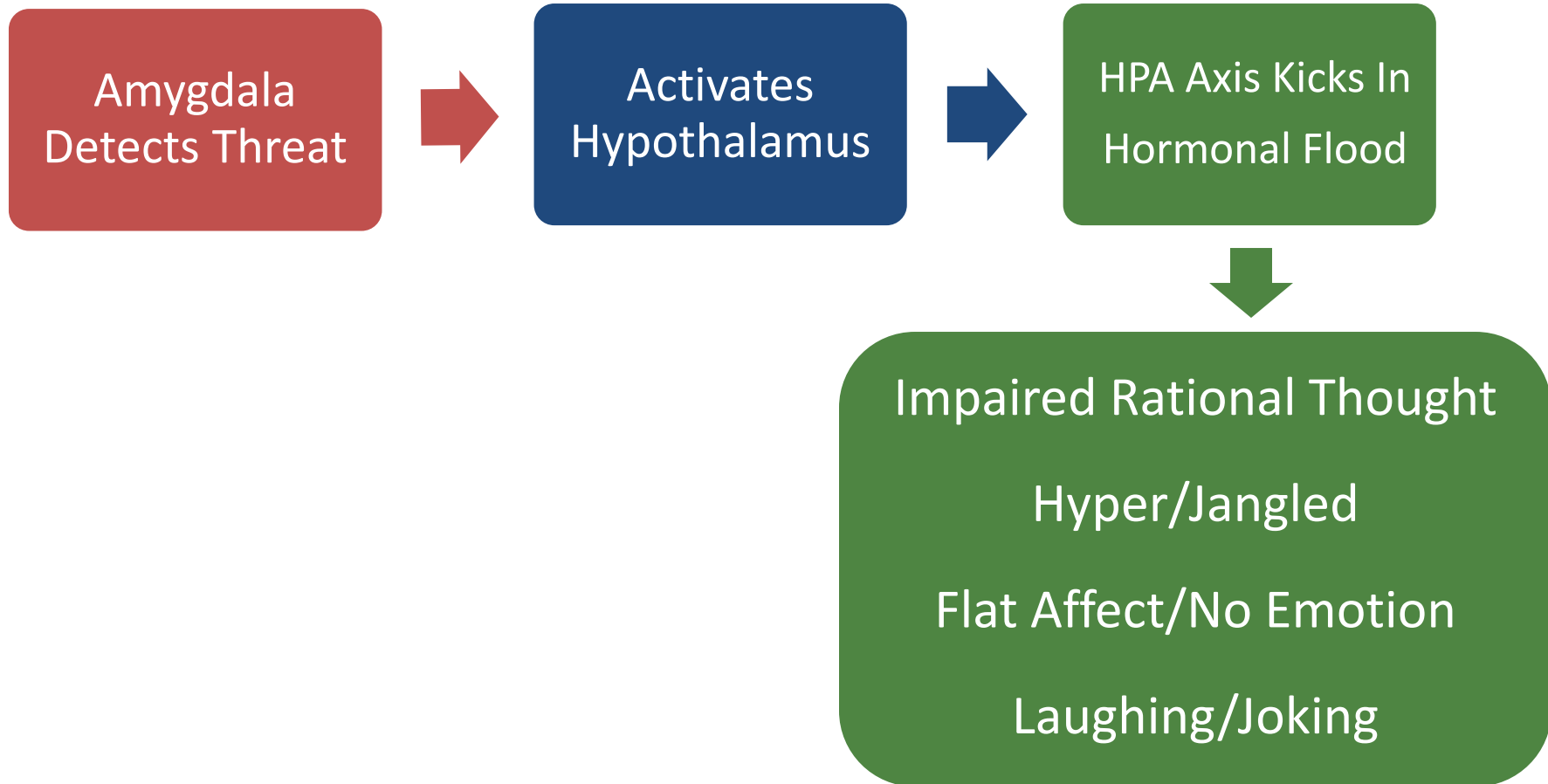
Oxytocin: Promotes good feelings



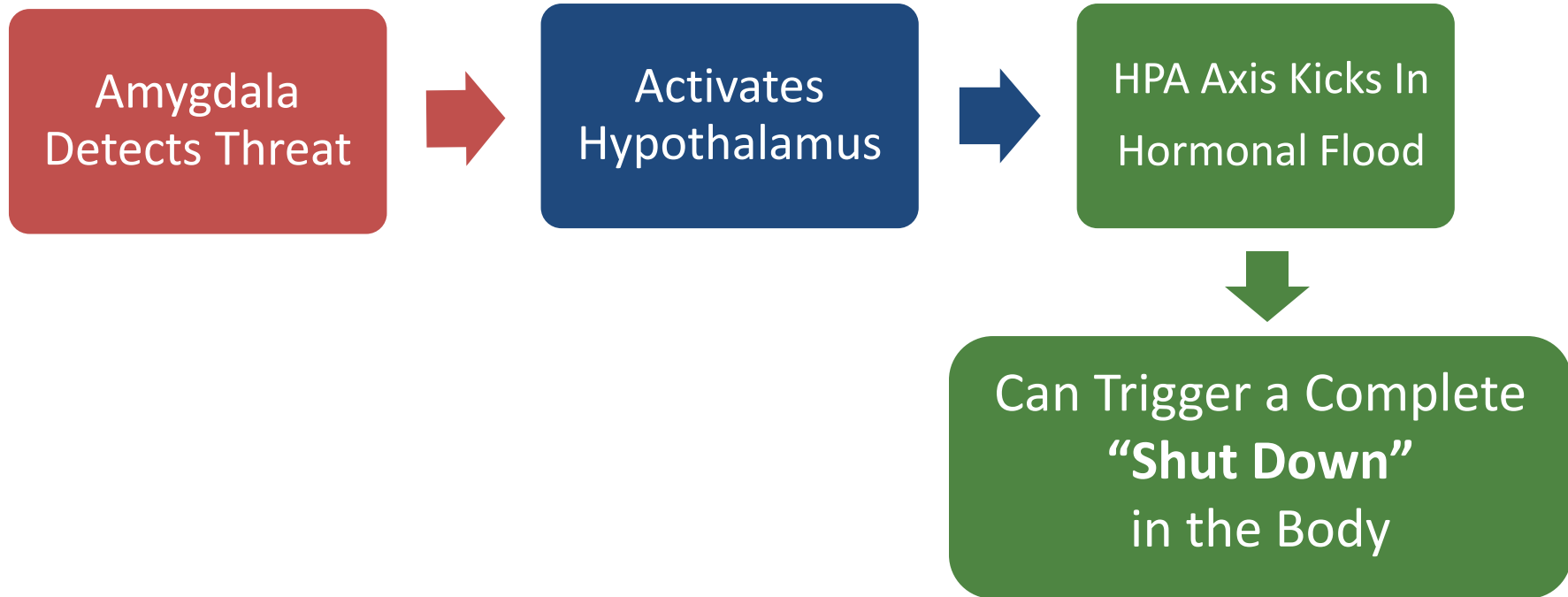
What Happens During A Sexual Assault



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Tonic Immobility (TI)

- AKA: “Rape-induced paralysis”
- Autonomic (uncontrollable) mammalian response in extremely fearful situations
- Increased breathing, eye closure, paralysis
- 12-50% rape victims experience tonic immobility

I was terrified.
I couldn't do anything and
I didn't know why.

I didn't want to tell no one because what
would I be able to say . . .

No, I didn't fight back.
No, I didn't yell for help.
I just laid there.
Wondering if I was going to die.

Take Home: Victims' Emotions & Behaviors

- HPA Axis activation elevated for 96 hours post-assault (**AND** whenever memory is re-activated)
 - Flat affect, “strange” emotions, emotional swings
 - Irritable, argumentative, and difficulty concentrating
 - Headaches, body pain, stomach/GI distress
 - Increase alcohol & drug use (self medicating behaviors)

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**THERE ARE
NEUROBIOLOGICAL
REASONS WHY VICTIMS
BEHAVE THE WAY THE DO**

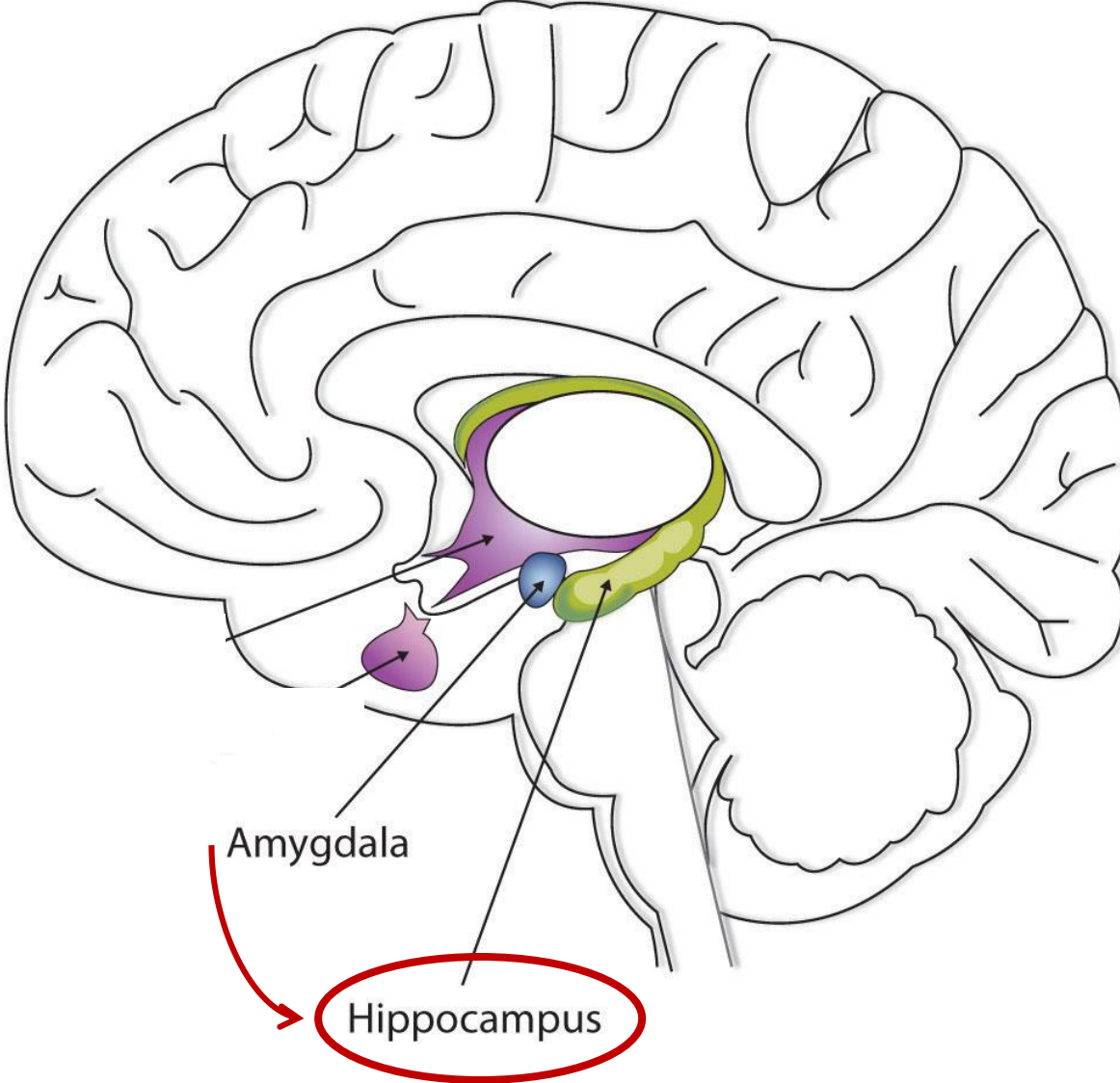
THESE ARE SIGNS OF TRAUMA

Take Home: Victims' Emotions & Behaviors

- Provide *caring emotional* support → bring down the HPA
- Provide *informational* support → give options & give victims time to make decisions
- Connect victims to advocacy & support services → make specific referrals (“by name”)

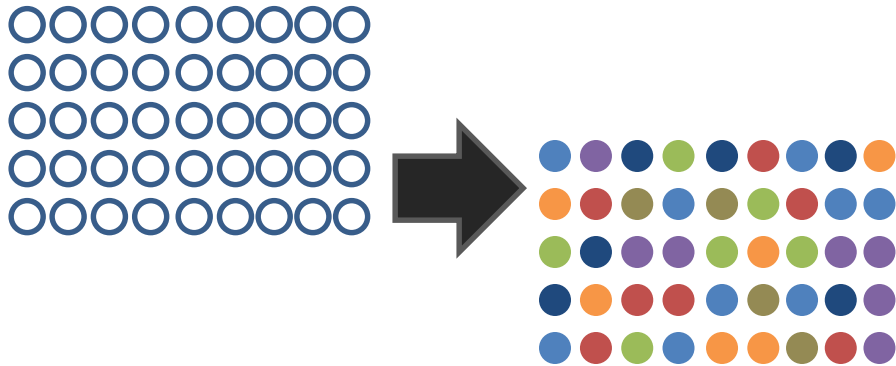
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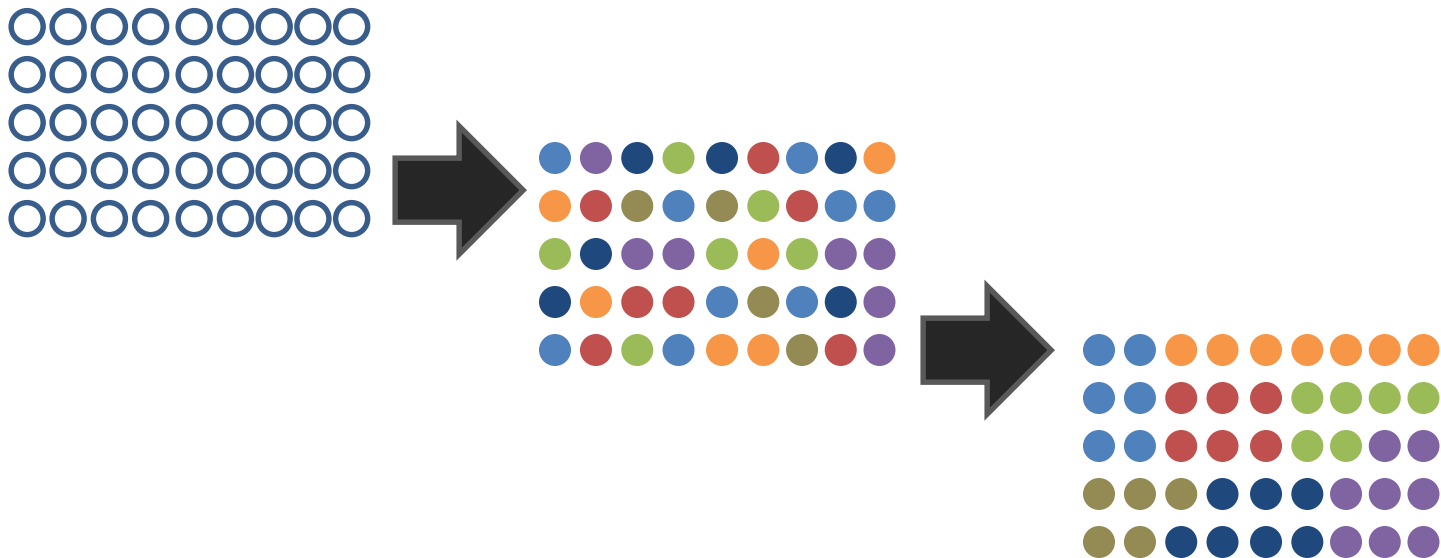


How Memory Usually Works

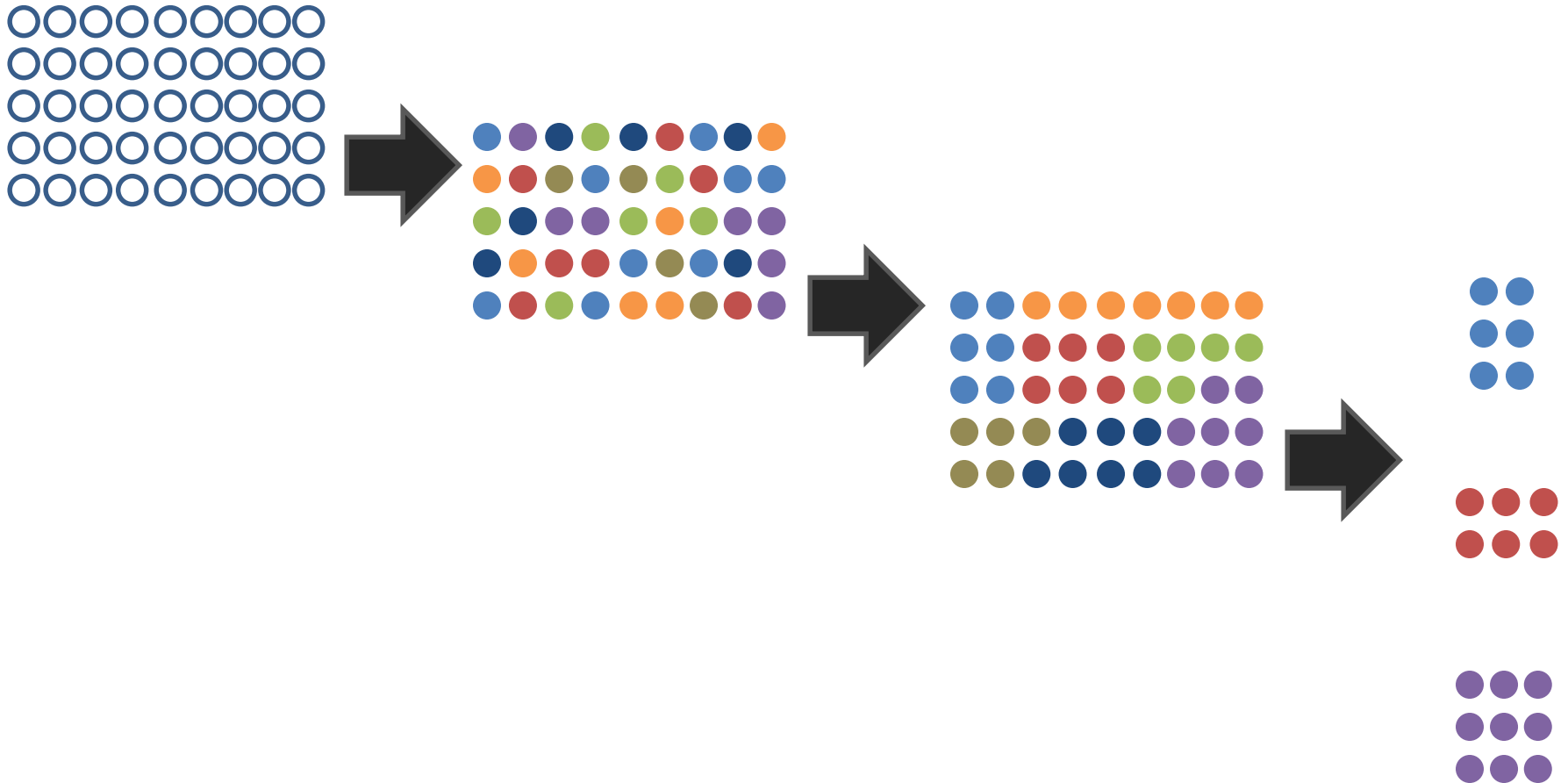
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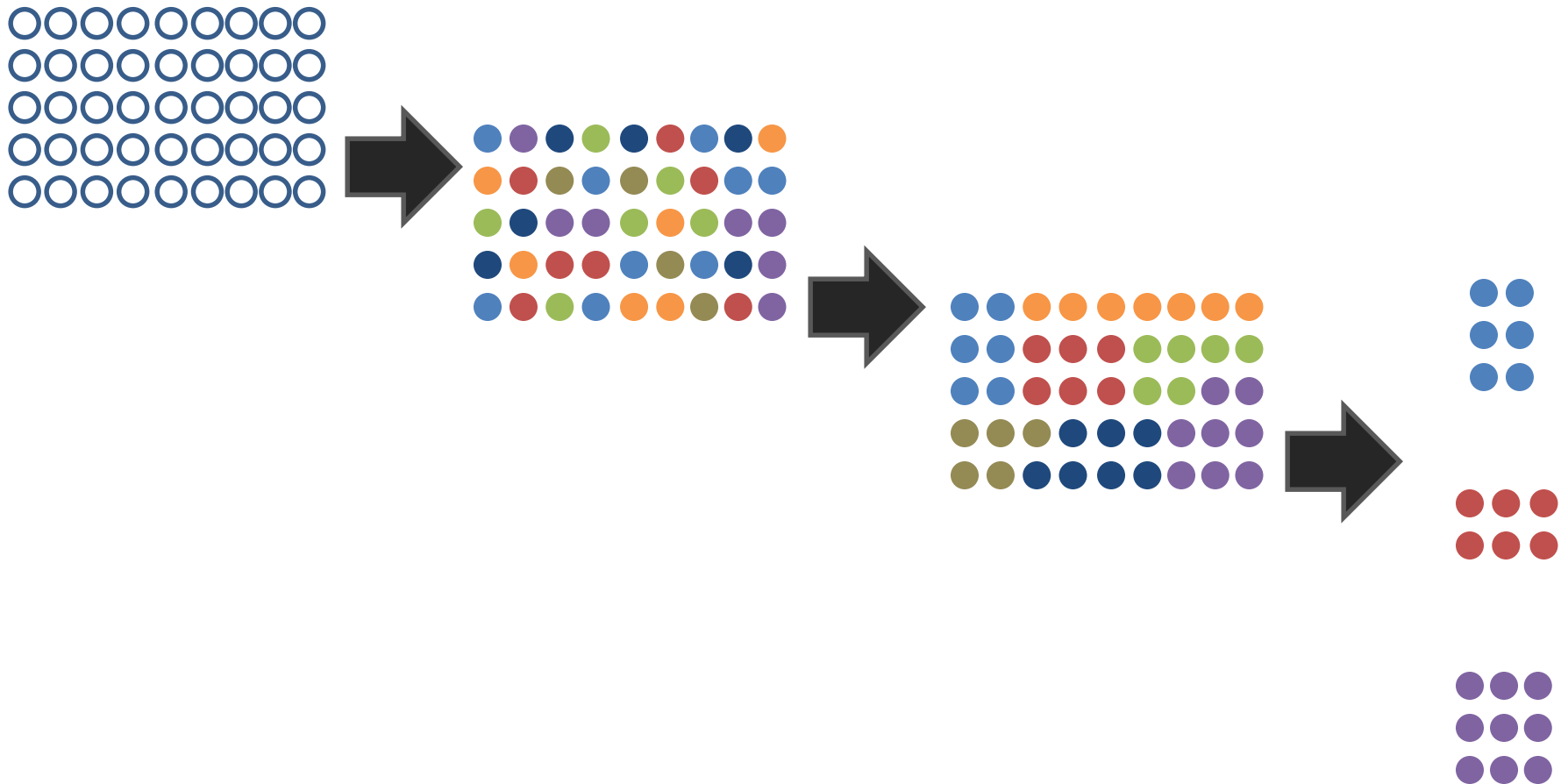
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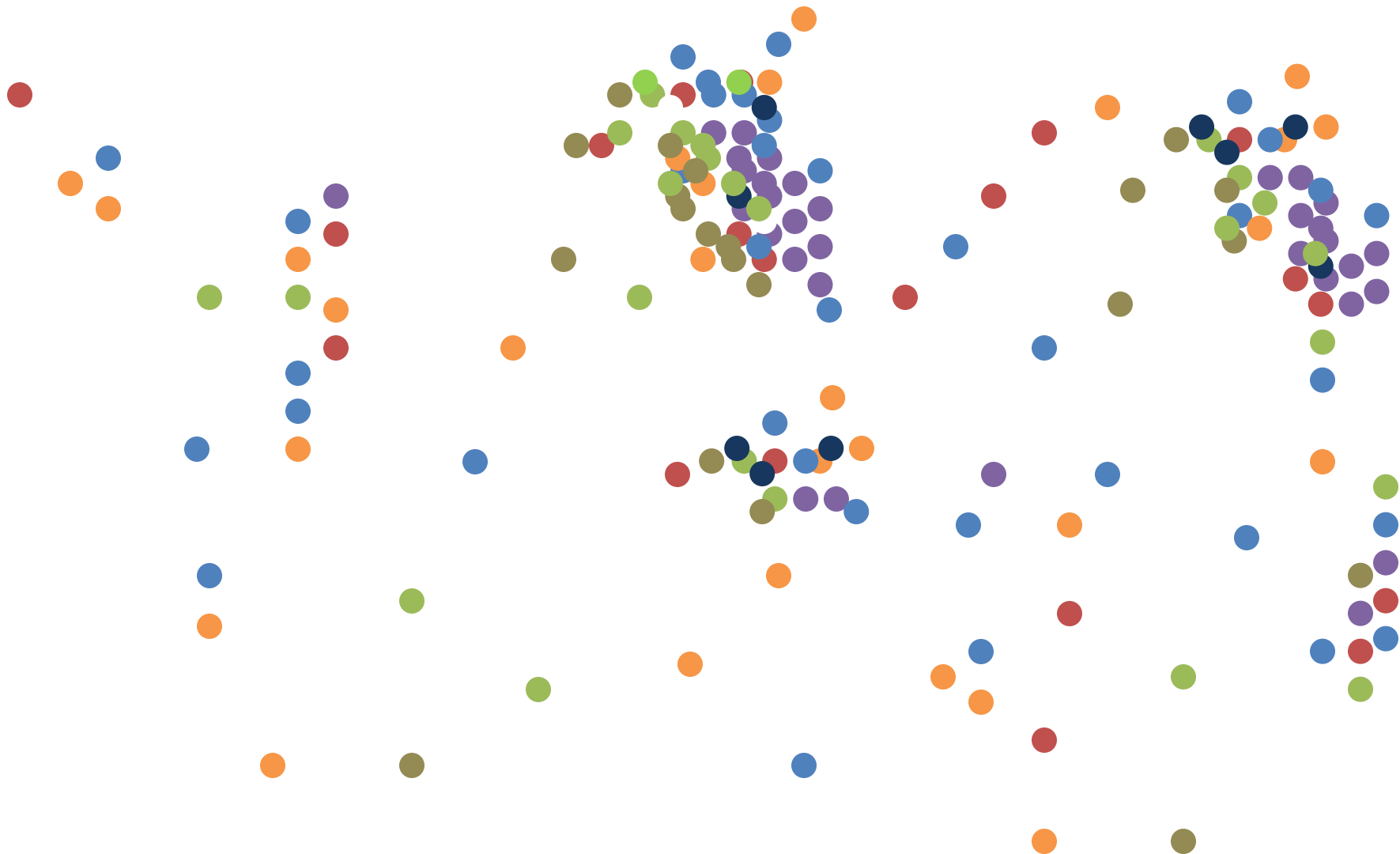


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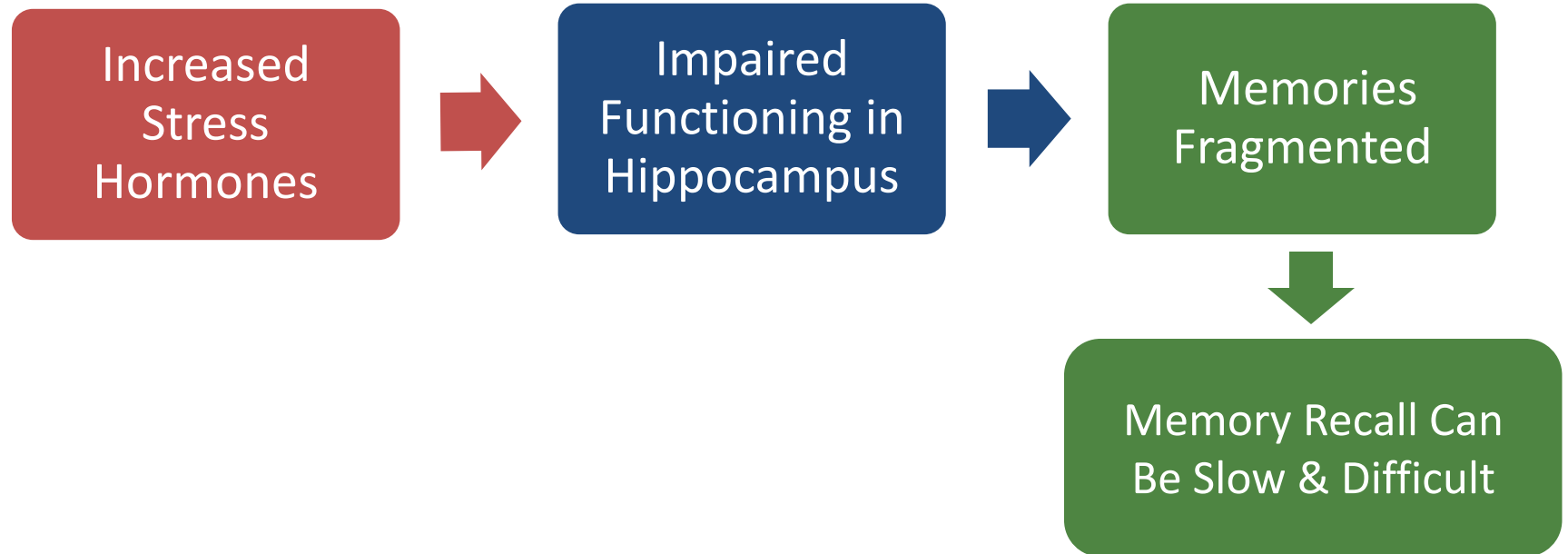
BUT Trauma Hormones Mess This Up

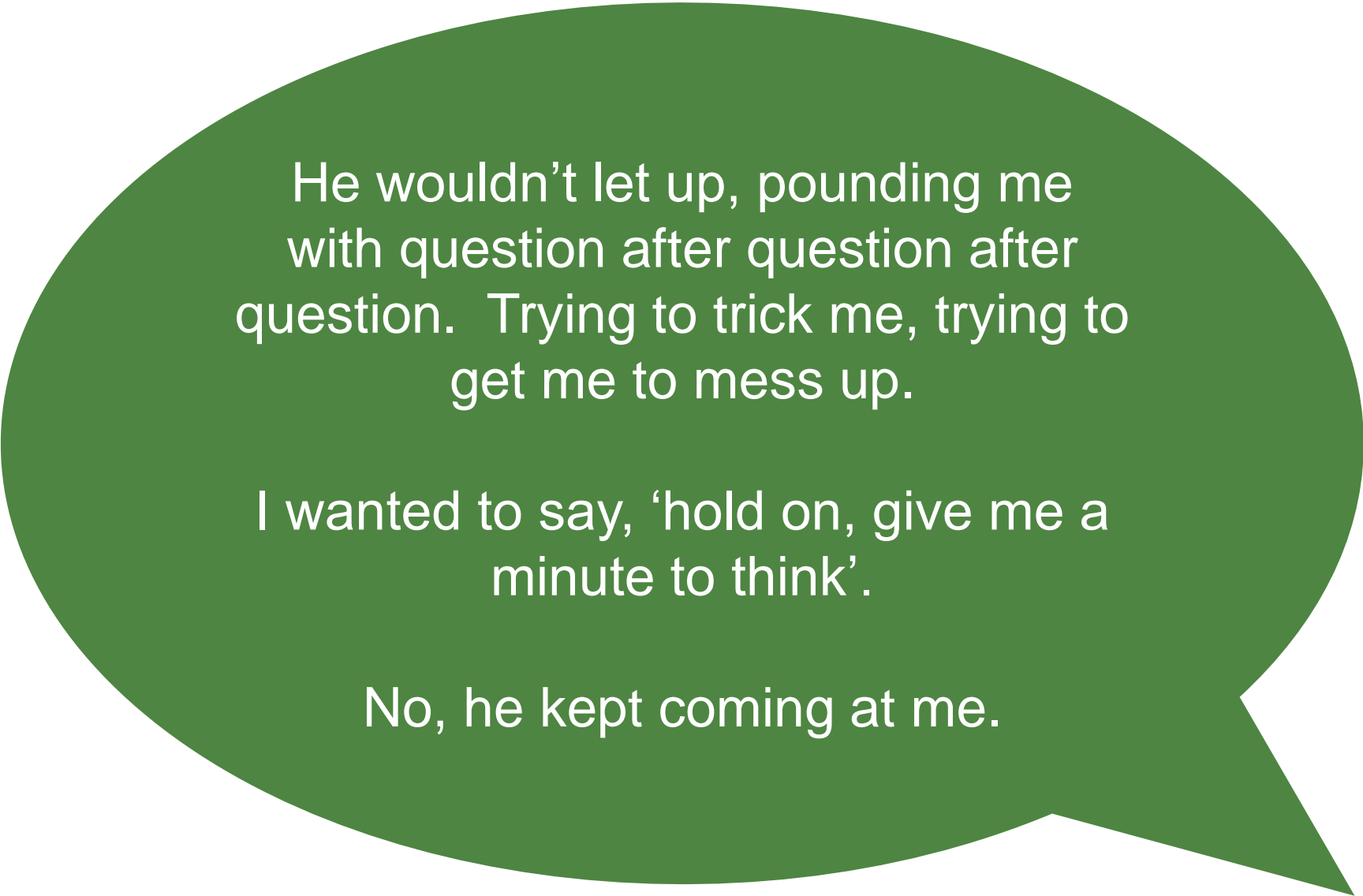




What Happens During A Sexual Assault

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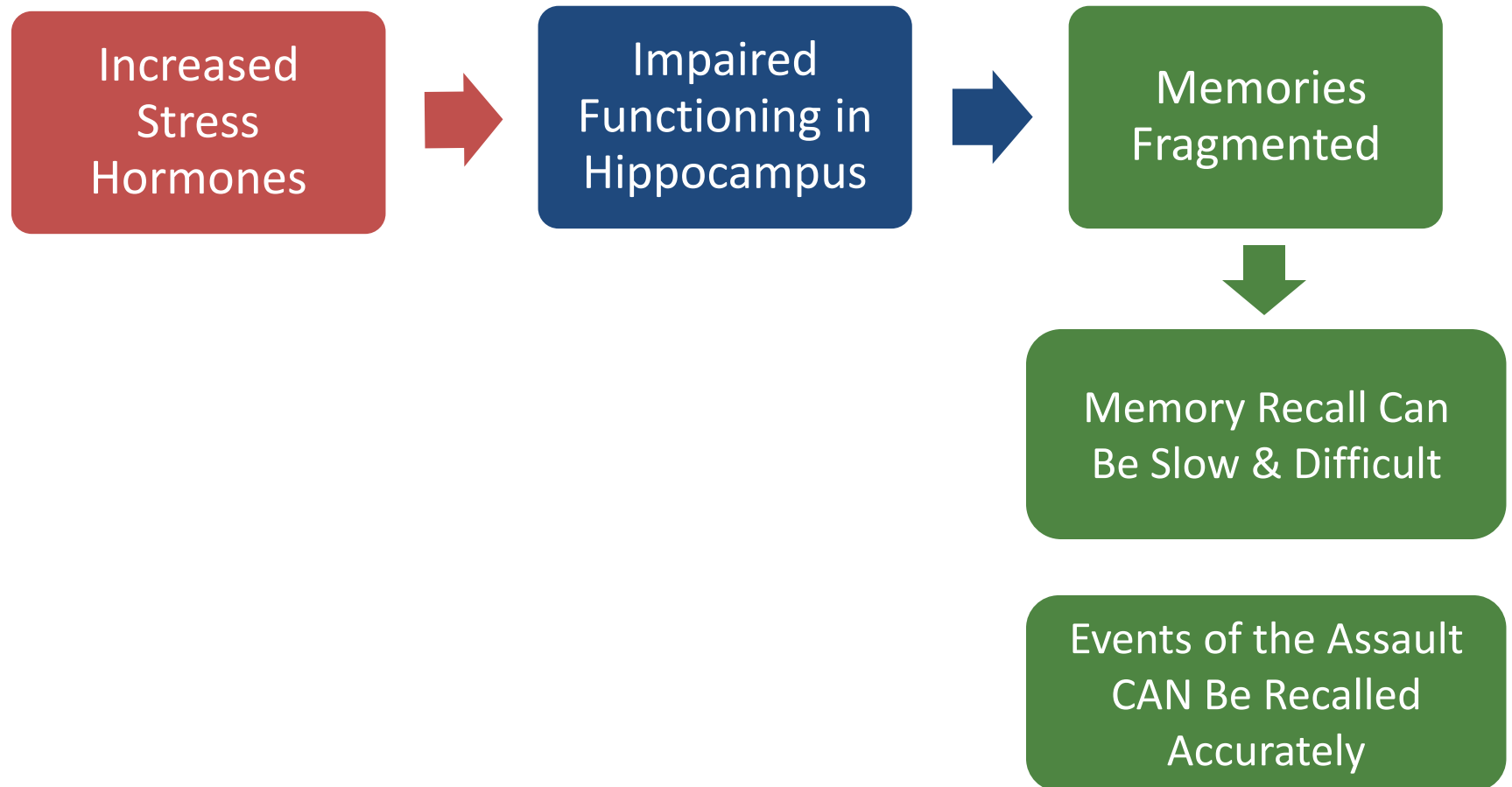


He wouldn't let up, pounding me with question after question after question. Trying to trick me, trying to get me to mess up.

I wanted to say, 'hold on, give me a minute to think'.

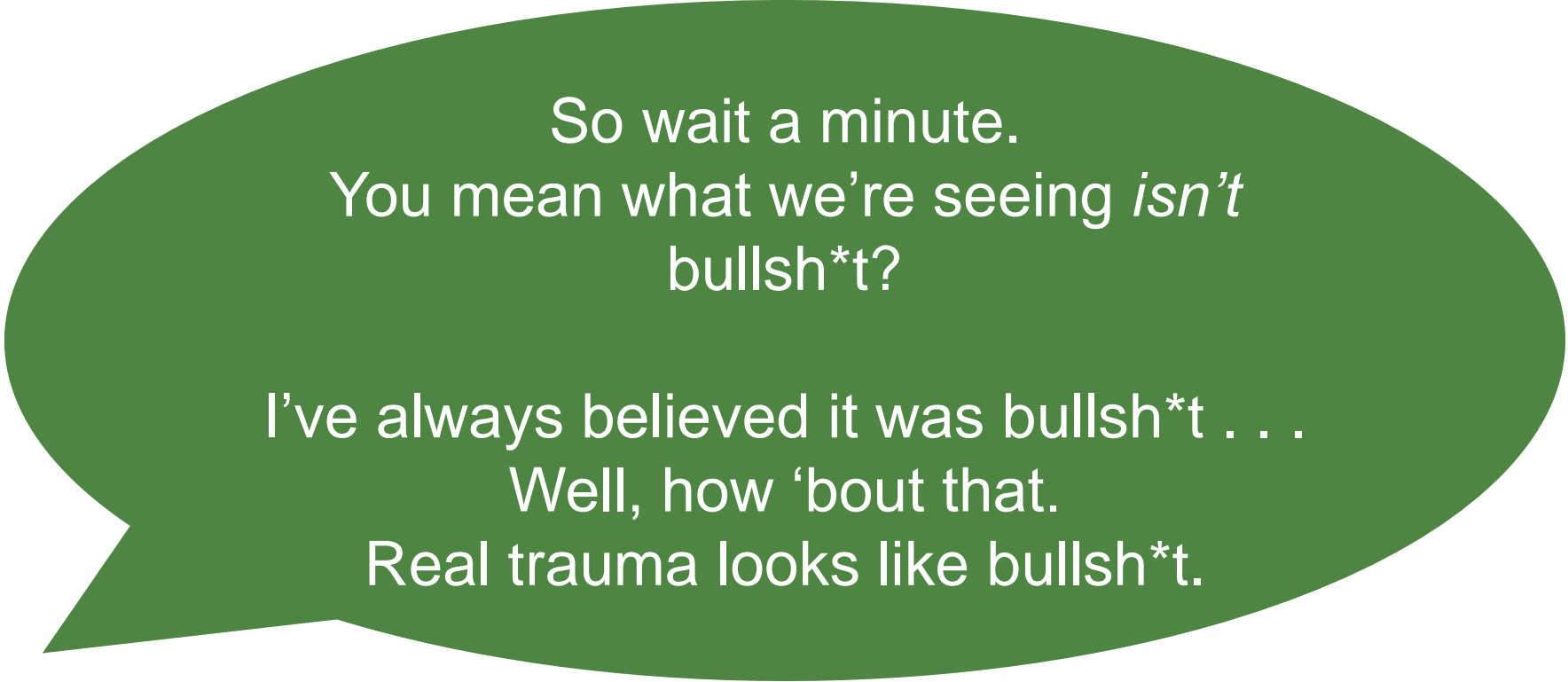
No, he kept coming at me.

What Happens During A Sexual Assault



Take Home: Victims' Memory

- Trauma hormones created fragmented memories
 - Story may come out fragmented or “sketchy”
 - The content of the memory is accurate, just may take some time and patience for it to come together
 - Misinterpreted as evasiveness or lying → police less likely to believe victims & less likely to investigate



So wait a minute.
You mean what we're seeing *isn't*
bullsh*t?

I've always believed it was bullsh*t . . .
Well, how 'bout that.
Real trauma looks like bullsh*t.

Sex Crimes Unit Detective, 8 Years Experience

Take Home: Victims' Memory

- Don't make victims tell their stories over and over
- Sleep helps memory consolidation → let them sleep!
- Memory will come together over time → patience
- Use trauma-informed interviewing methods

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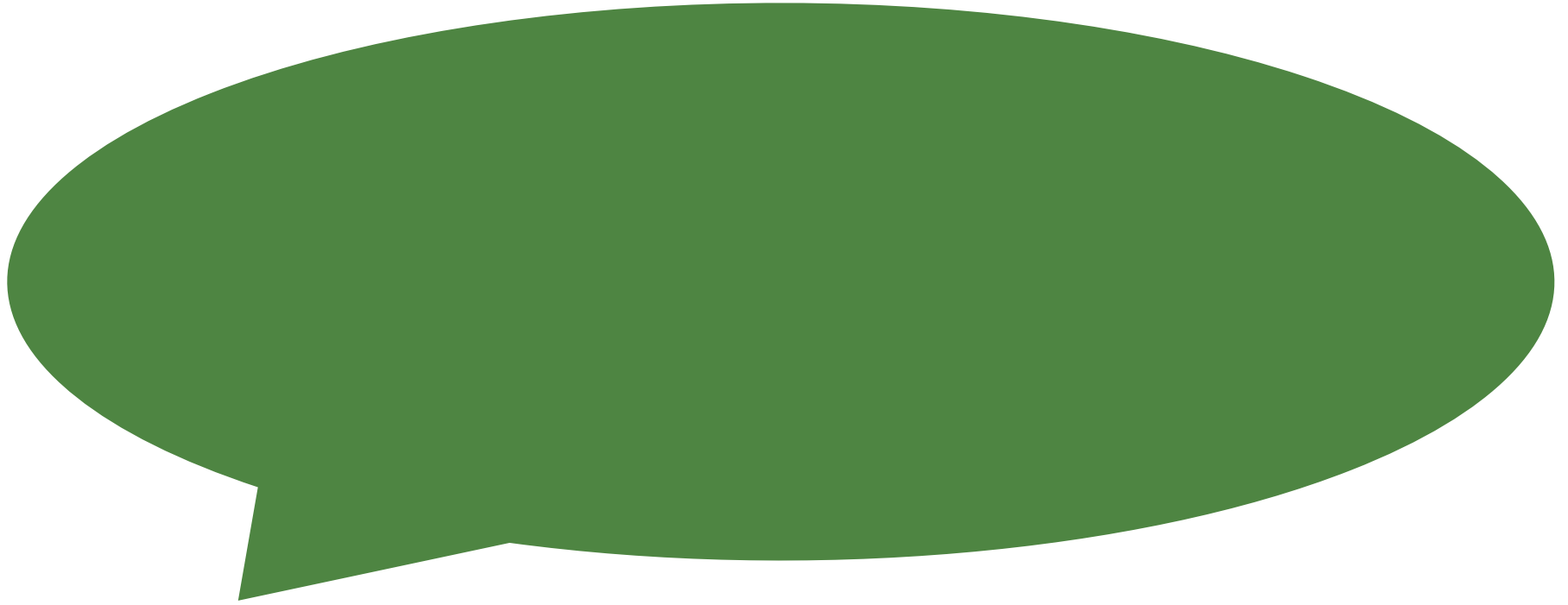
ADDITIONAL TRAINING

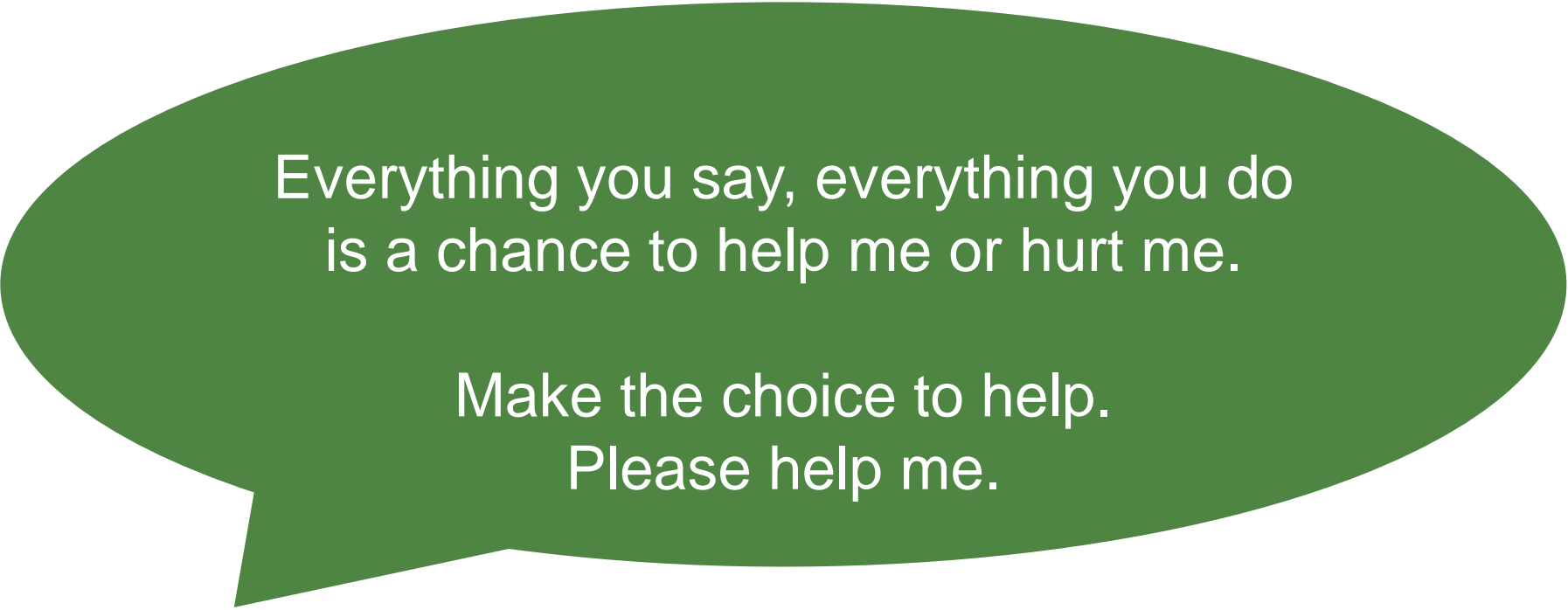
Conclusions

Concluding Thoughts

- Neurobiological reasons for victims' behavior
- New research findings can help improve investigations and victims' health outcomes
- We can USE these findings to create a

**VICTIM-CENTERED
TRAUMA-INFORMED
Campus Response to Sexual Assault**





Everything you say, everything you do
is a chance to help me or hurt me.

Make the choice to help.
Please help me.

THANK YOU !!

Questions & Discussion

rmc@msu.edu

National Criminal Justice Reference Service

www.ncjrs.gov

YouTube Video of Training

<http://youtu.be/gtWD1XJrhNo>