



D18 Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviews – A Conversation With the Brainstem

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The goal of this presentation is to familiarize the attendees with the impact of physical and emotional trauma on a victim's ability to accurately recall key data points needed in criminal investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an understanding of how trauma victims undergo physiological changes in the brain stem during trauma which causes memory and recall to be reduced.

Trauma victims undergo a process many professionals and victims do not commonly understand. Most criminal justice professionals have been trained to believe when an individual experiences a troubling event, particularly, emotional or physical trauma, the cognitive brain records the vast majority of the event including: who, what, where, why, when, and how, as well as peripheral information. Therefore, when the criminal justice system responds to the report of a crime, most professionals are trained to obtain this type information. Sadly, collecting information about the event in this manner actually inhibits memory and the accuracy of the details provided. Trauma victims do not record the experience in the same way most non-trauma victims do. Research shows that the body and brain react to and record trauma in an entirely different way than we have been led to believe. When trauma occurs, the cognitive brain frequently shuts down leaving the brainstem to experience and record the event. The brainstem does a great job recording experiential and sensory information but does not record traditional investigative information very well. Most of our interview techniques have been developed to interview the cognitive brain and obtain cognitive information such as the color of shirt, description of the suspect, time frame, and other important information. Some victims are capable of providing this information in a limited fashion. However, most trauma victims are not only unable to accurately provide this type of information, but when asked to do so often inadvertently provide inaccurate information and details which causes the fact finder to become suspicious of the information provided. The vast majority of our training and experience has caused us to focus on the cognitive brain. Research clearly shows the cognitive brain is not generally involved in recording the experience when a victim is experiencing trauma, whether physical (i.e., a sexual assault) or emotional (i.e., witnessing a horrific death). We must develop and implement proven methods to properly interview the brain stem. This innovative and revolutionary interview technique is a way to interview the brain stem in a manner that not only reduces the inaccuracy of the information provided but greatly enhances understanding of the experience, increasing the likelihood of a better understanding of the event and ultimately, the collection of better investigative information. This interview technique revolutionizes the manner in which forensic physiological evidence is identified and collected. The Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview has already been proven to be a game changer in the investigation and prosecution of many forms of violence including child abuse, adult sexual abuse, and domestic violence. This technique enhances crime scene investigation by enabling trauma victims to recall critical information in a more thorough manner than traditional interview techniques.

This interview technique draws on the best practices of child forensic interviews, critical incident stress management, and motivational interview techniques combining them into a simple three pronged approach to unlock the trauma experience in a way we can better understand.

Trauma, Memory, Physiological Evidence