
Recognizing Trauma and Connecting Older Victims with Services

Justin Ramsdell, Psy.D – Associate Professor, George Mason University



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If you have questions, I will be here all day.

- You can also email me at: jramsde2@gmu.edu

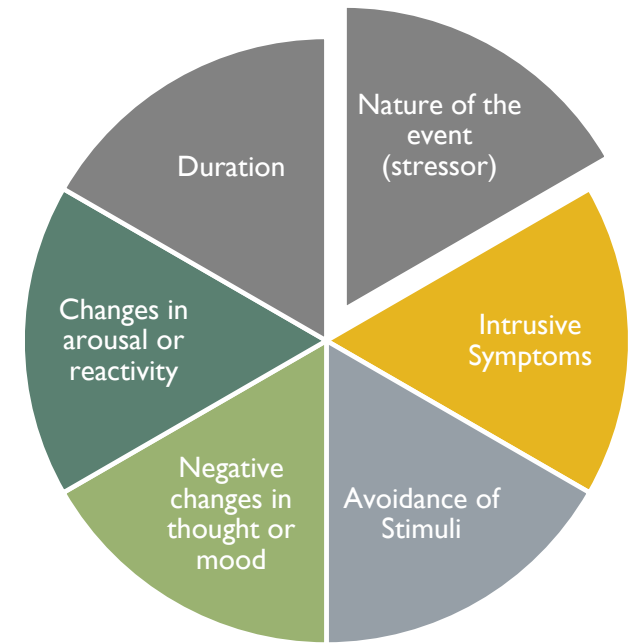
Recognizing Trauma

Before we dive into recognizing and addressing trauma in older adults, we need to take a step back and focus on the recognition of trauma in a more general sense.

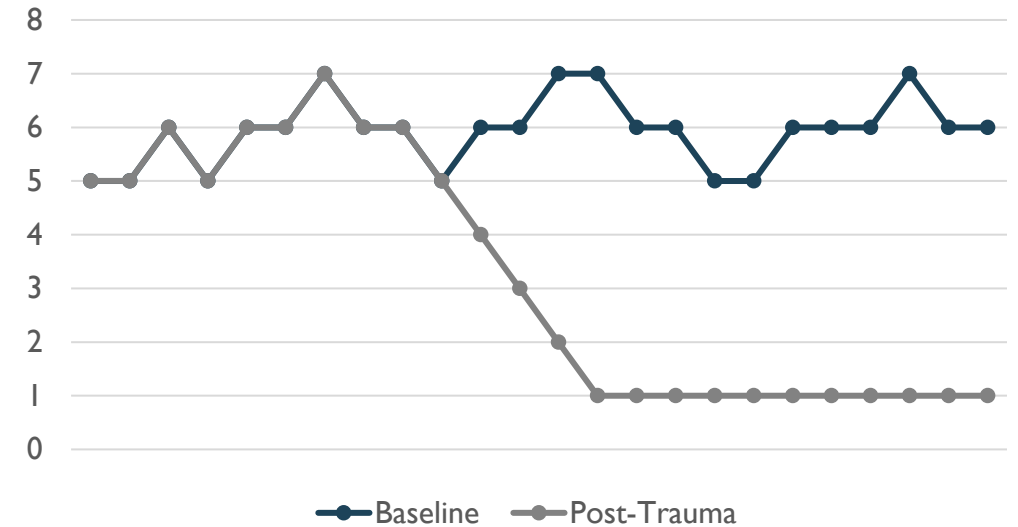


Recognizing trauma can be difficult since most assessments of trauma involve two things...

The presence of symptoms associated with PTSD



A change in baseline behavior



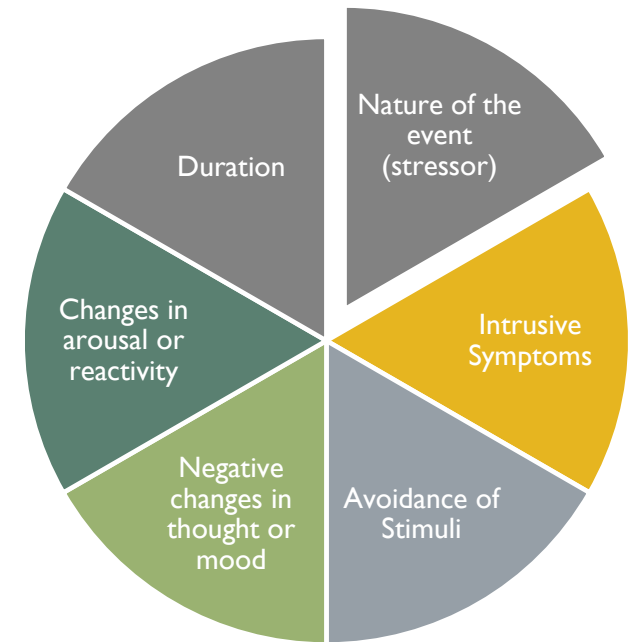
PTSD symptoms need to be identified by a clinician



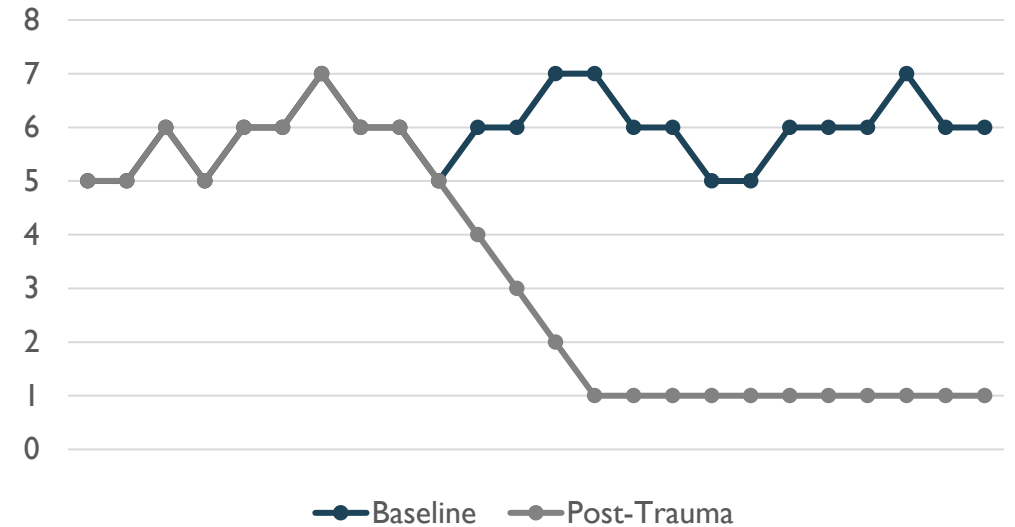
Identifying changes in baseline behavior requires previous interaction or second-hand report



The presence of symptoms associated with PTSD



A change in baseline behavior

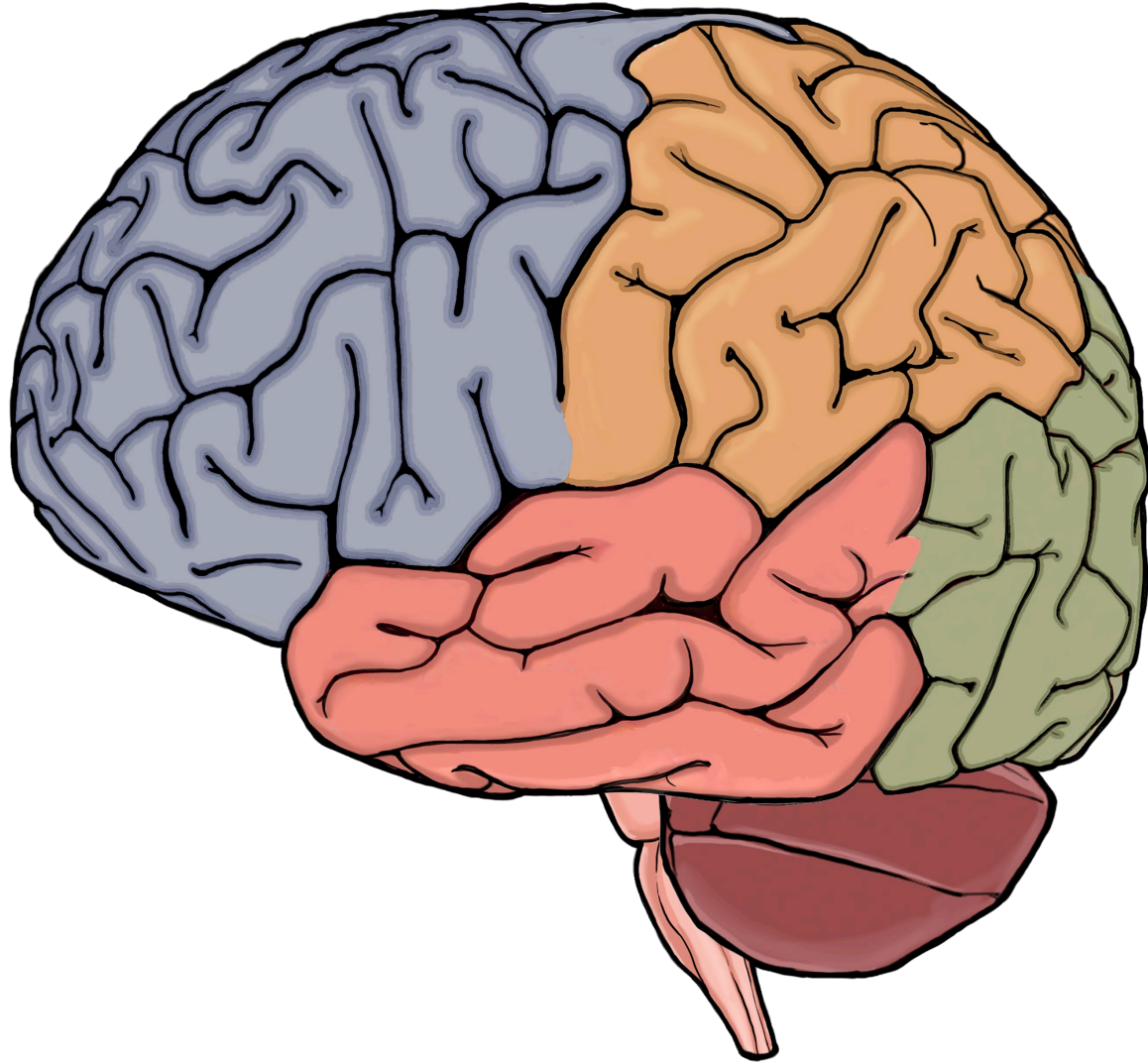


Commonalities

However, there are some aspects of trauma that are common for all individuals.

So, we need to talk about our brains...





It's Complicated...

- Approximately 80 billion neurons
- Resides in a layer of fluid in your skull
- Made up of about 3 pounds of protein and fat
- Partially runs on electricity
- Somehow responsible for:
 - Movement
 - Language
 - Planning
 - Creativity
 - Hopes
 - Fears
 - Etc.

Hypothalamic- Pituitary-Adrenal Axis (HPA Axis)

More commonly known as the
"Fight or Flight Response"

Hypothalamus



- Your brain's "Grand Central Station"
- Communicates with your endocrine system

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Pituitary Gland



- Remember this from junior high health?
- Also functions as a “master gland” informing other parts of the endocrine system

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Adrenal Gland



- Located on top of your kidneys
- Releases adrenaline/norepinephrine

Activation of the “HPA Axis”
results in the release of...

Adrenaline
(Epinephrine)

Increases physical
performance



Adrenaline

Increases blood pressure,
heart rate and respiration

Activation of the “HPA Axis”
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Opioids

Increases physical
performance

Decreases pain



Adrenaline

Increases blood pressure,
heart rate and respiration



Opioids

Decreases pain sensations

Activation of the "HPA Axis" results in the release of...

Adrenaline (Epinephrine)


Opioids

Cortisol


Increases physical performance

Decreases pain

Increases available glucose



Adrenaline
Increases blood pressure, heart rate and respiration



Opioids
Decreases pain sensations



Cortisol
Increases available glucose



Side Effects May Include...

You know that chemicals in the body don't just do one thing...

You have a television.

An excess of any chemical or medication in the body will have side effects.

Activation of the "HPA Axis" results in the release of...

Adrenaline (Epinephrine)

Opioids

Cortisol

Increases physical performance

Decreases pain

Increases available glucose

Difficulty with executive functioning

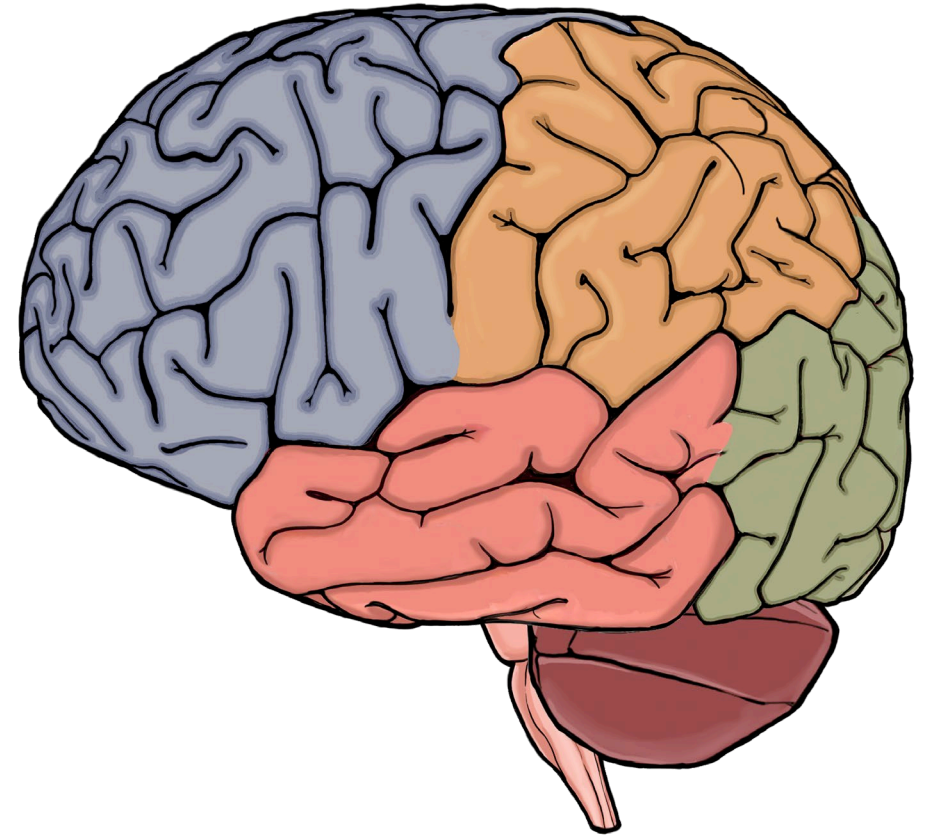


Adrenaline

The military knows this... that is why they conduct drills.

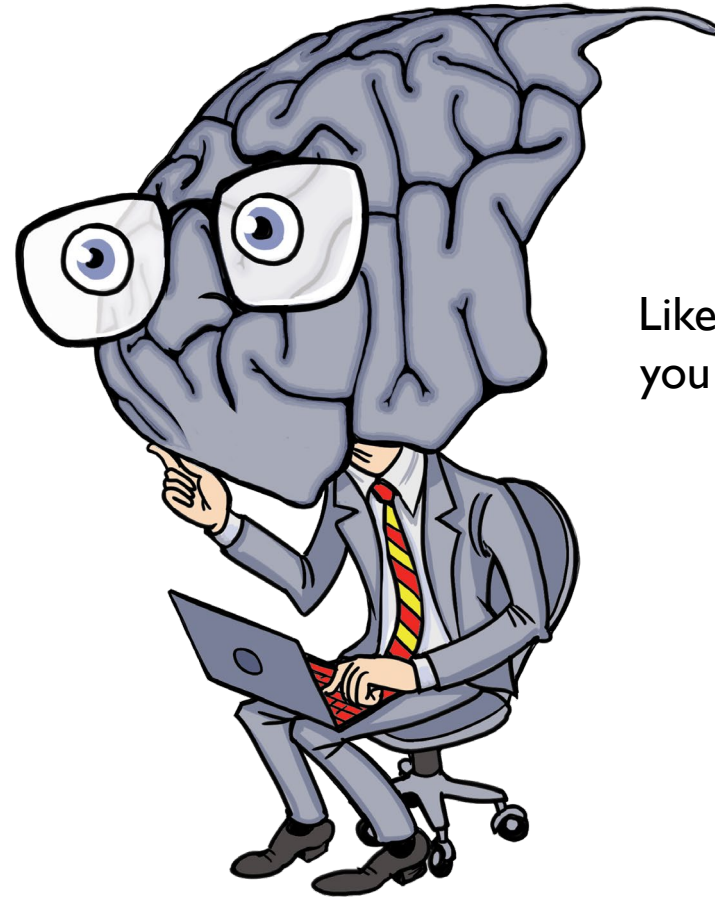
The Frontal Lobe

Frontal Lobe



The Frontal Lobe

Executive functioning involves planning and predicting the result of future actions.



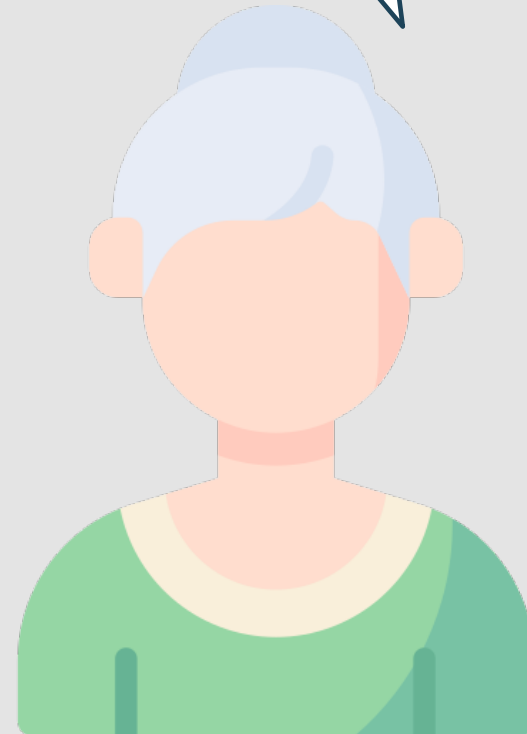
Like... if I told you that you had to plan a party for 20 people tomorrow...

While this is
incredibly functional
when getting
yourself out of an
emergency...

It can cause issues
later.



This is especially true if the individual is experiencing any sort of cognitive decline.



Your Brain Does Many Things

Memory is one of a thousand things you brain does on a regular basis



Problem Solving

Memory

Reasoning

Visual Processing

Planning

Learning

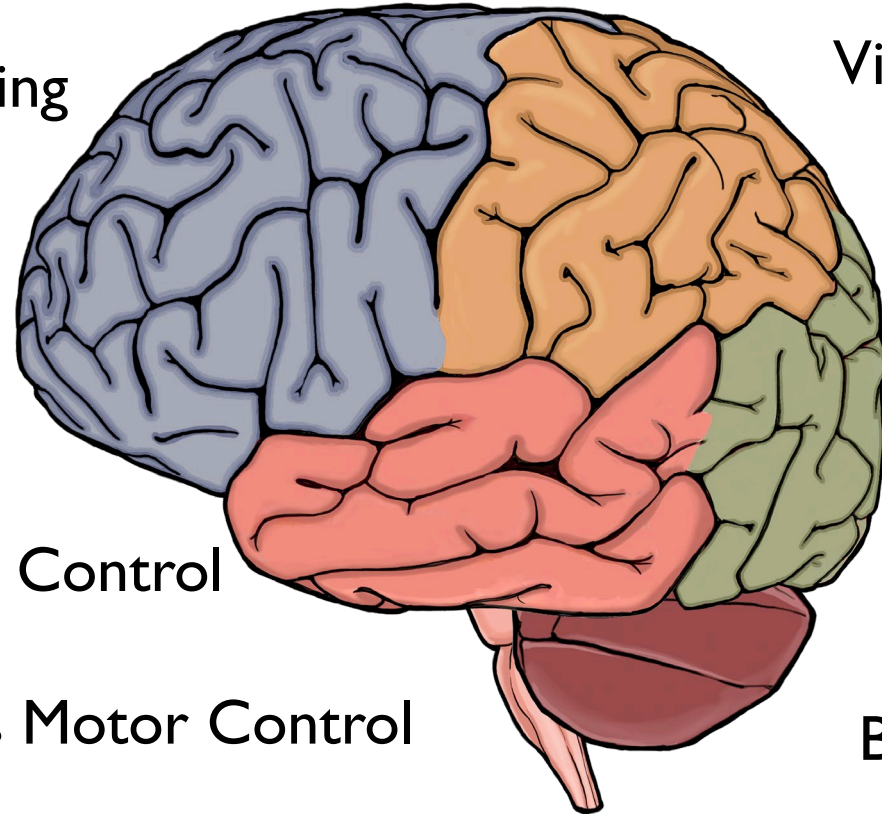
Emotional Regulation

Fine Motor Control

Auditory Processing

Gross Motor Control

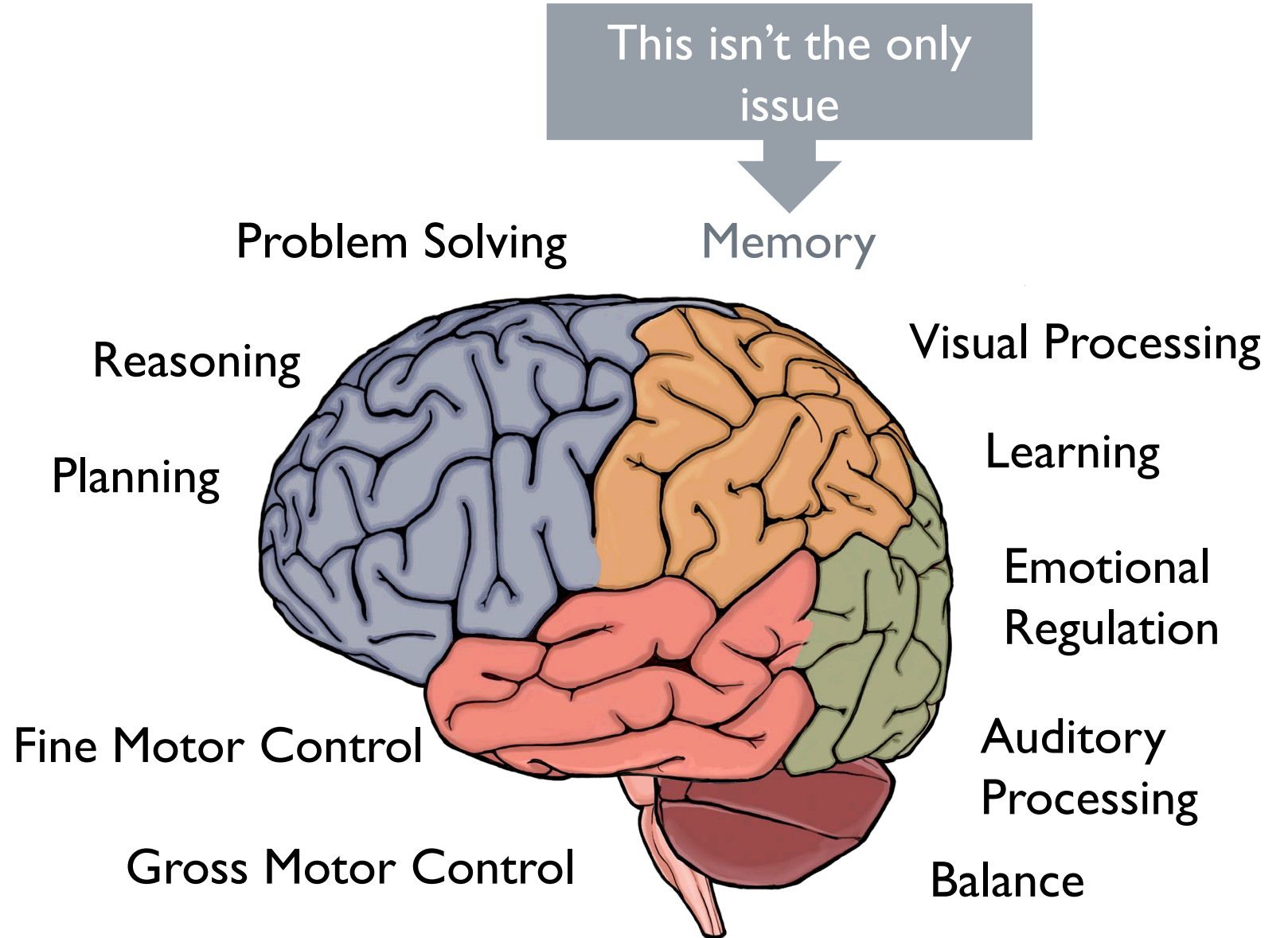
Balance



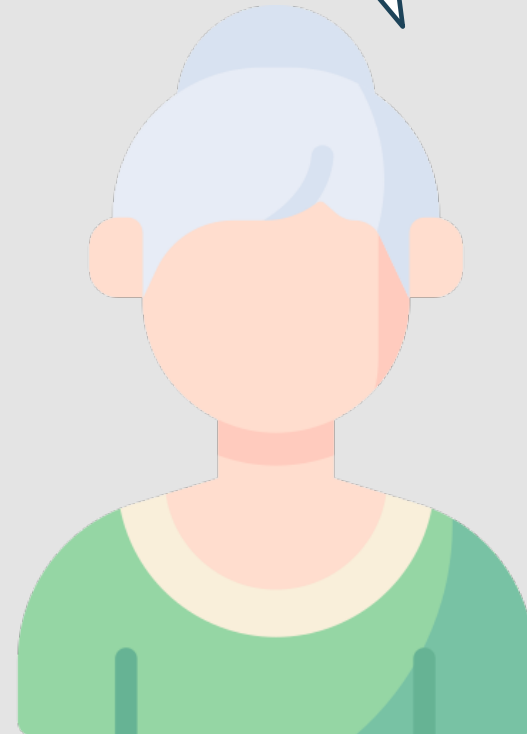


Think of
dementia (and
your brain) like a
vacuum cleaner...

Your Brain Does Many Things



This is especially true if the individual is experiencing any sort of cognitive decline.



Activation of the "HPA Axis" results in the release of...

Adrenaline (Epinephrine)

Opioids

Cortisol

Increases physical performance

Decreases pain

Increases available glucose

Difficulty with executive functioning

Causes flat affect



Adrenaline

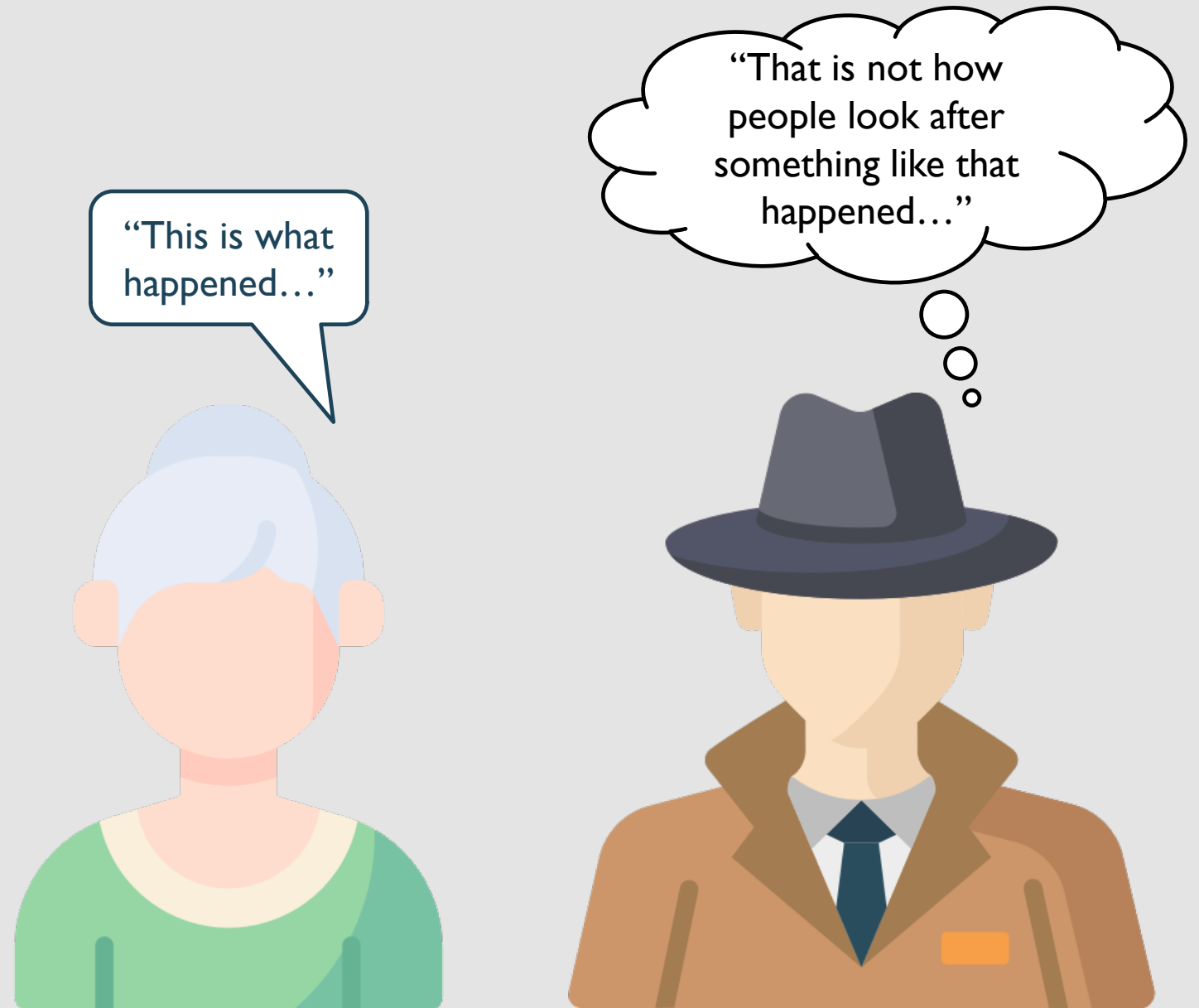
The military knows this... that is why they conduct drills.



Opioids

Normal emotional responses are muted.

Flat affect can be present in the moments immediately after a traumatic event or, especially in the case of older individuals, days or months after the event.



Activation of the "HPA Axis" results in the release of...

Adrenaline (Epinephrine)

Opioids

Cortisol

Increases physical performance

Decreases pain

Increases available glucose

Difficulty with executive functioning

Causes flat affect

Negatively impacts hippocampus functioning



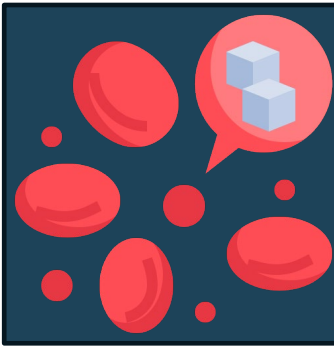
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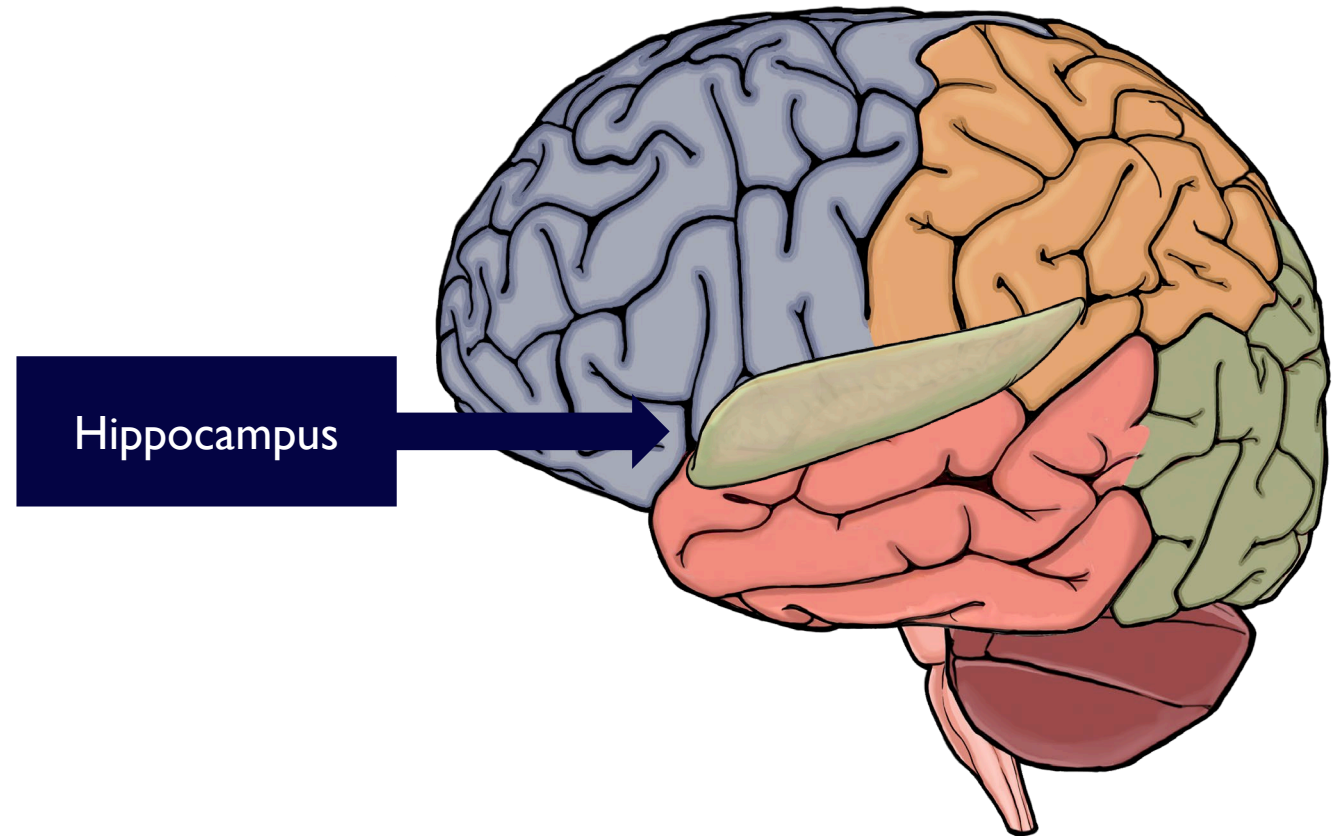


Cortisol

Increases available glucose

The Hippocampus

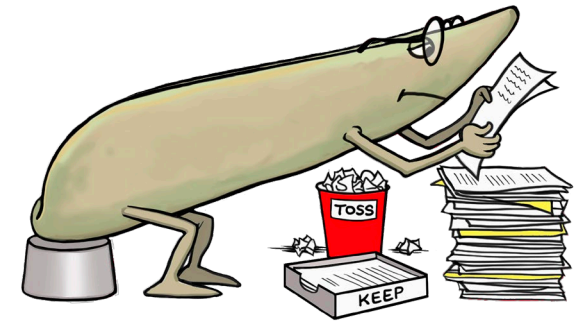
Responsible for
consolidating information
from the short-term
memory to long-term
memory.



The Hippocampus

Responsible for consolidating information from the short-term memory to long-term memory.

Think of your hippocampus as a “file clerk” that decides what goes into long-term memory and what gets discarded because it is deemed unnecessary.





A disruption in hippocampal activity can have serious consequences on memory.

Imagine I was going to give
you a difficult multiple-
choice test on this
presentation...

But I allowed you to take
notes.



However, all you get for
note-taking are mini post-
it notes

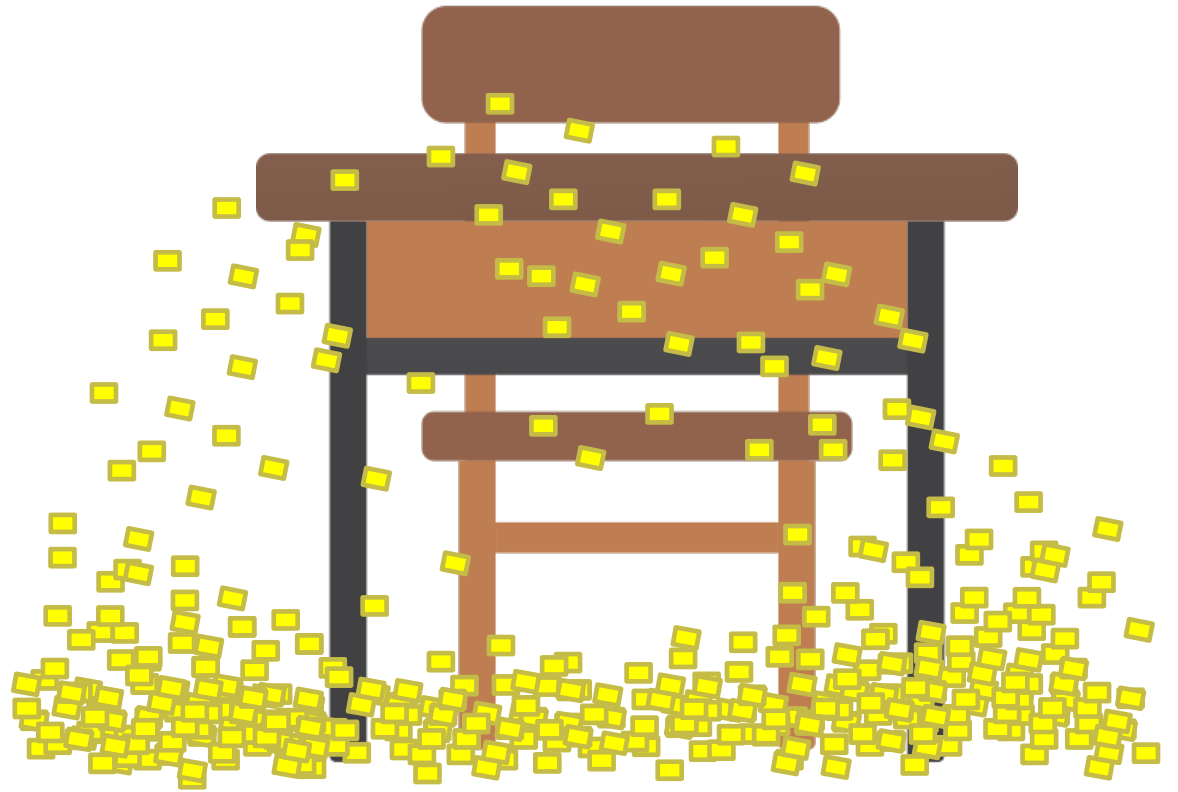


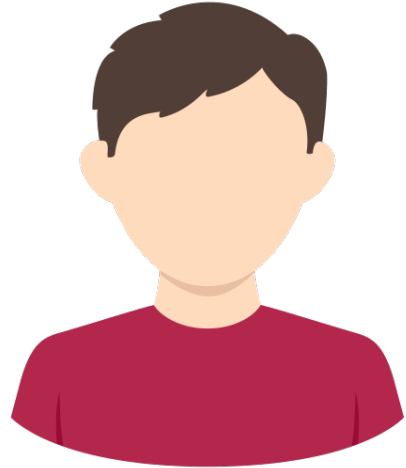


You were here.

You took good notes.

...But now you can't
locate the information
even though it is here.





True



True



True

These aspects of trauma are true for everyone, regardless of the age at which the trauma occurred



However, there are aspects of trauma that are more specific to older adults

Current trauma symptoms in older adults may not be related to current trauma



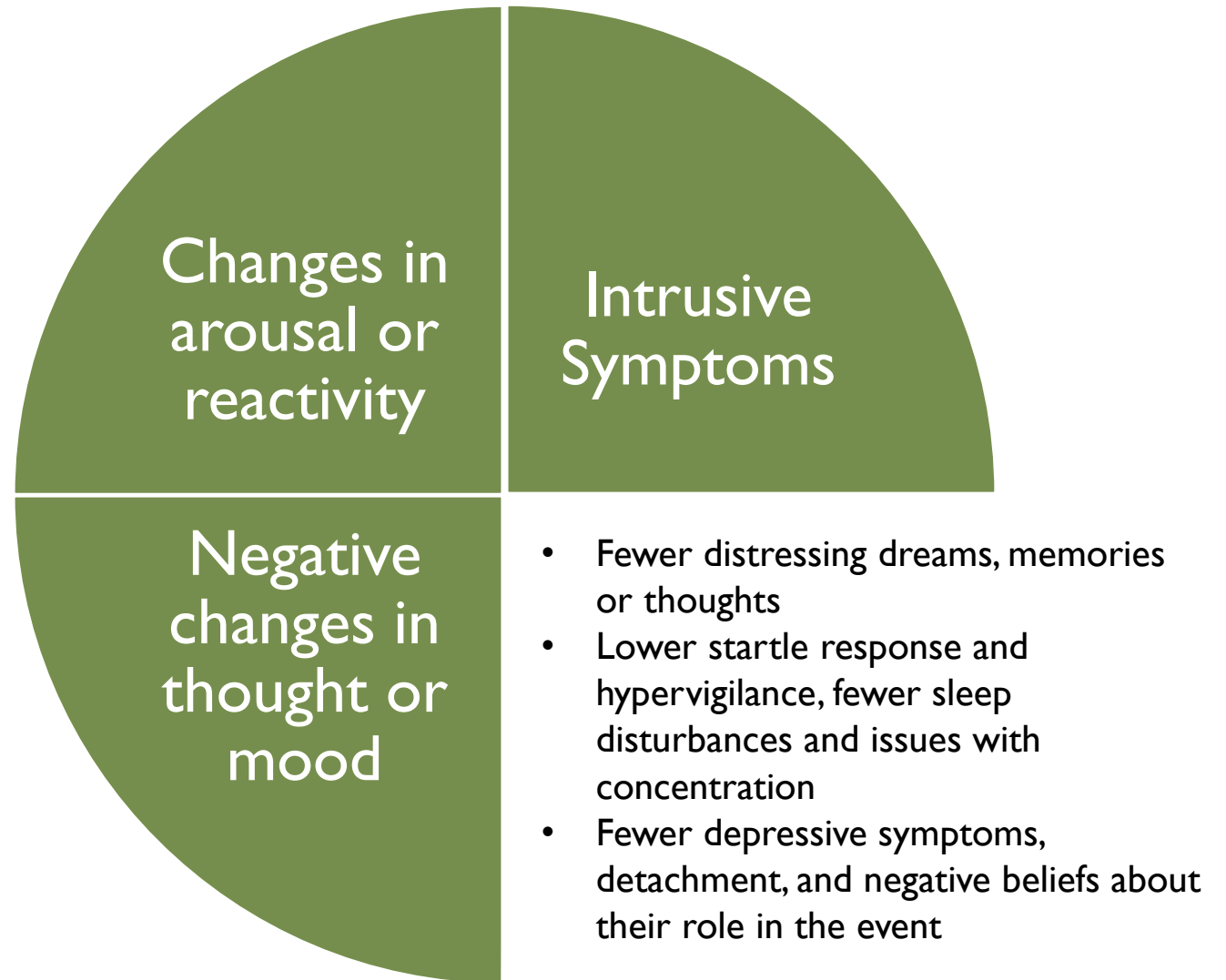
Symptoms of PTSD can, obviously, arise directly after the traumatic event.



In cases in which PTSD symptoms do not arise directly after the event, the average emergence of symptoms is 17 years after the event.

Current trauma symptoms in older adults may not be related to current trauma

On average, older adults display less severe symptoms compared to younger adults



Current trauma symptoms in older adults may not be related to current trauma

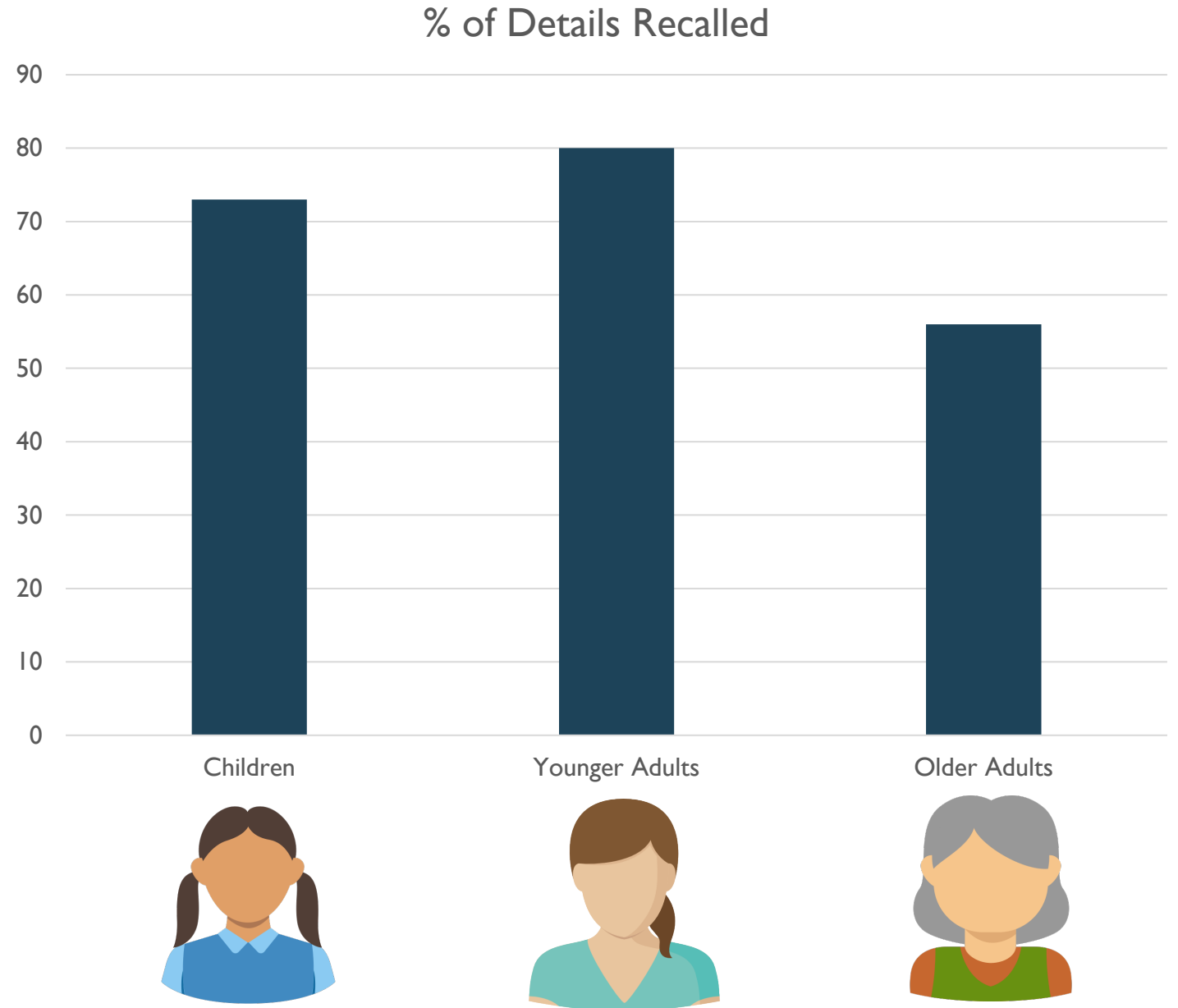
On average, older adults display less severe symptoms compared to younger adults

Older adults exhibit higher levels of avoidance symptoms

They will often avoid distressing memories and/or external reminders associated with the event more frequently than younger individuals.

Avoidance of Stimuli

And... Getting information out of older adults can be difficult



Older adults recall
fewer details of
traumatic events
compared to
younger adults

10-Year-Olds



College Students



Adults Over 65



Older adults recall fewer details of traumatic events compared to younger adults

10-Year-Olds



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Each individual views the same event as it occurs...



Older adults recall fewer details of traumatic events compared to younger adults

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Completeness

Accuracy

College Students



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Completeness



Accuracy



Older adults recall fewer details of traumatic events compared to younger adults

Older adults were 20% less accurate in free recall tests



“Tell me what happened...”

Older adults were 13% less accurate in cued recall tests



“Tell me more about...”

Adults Over 65



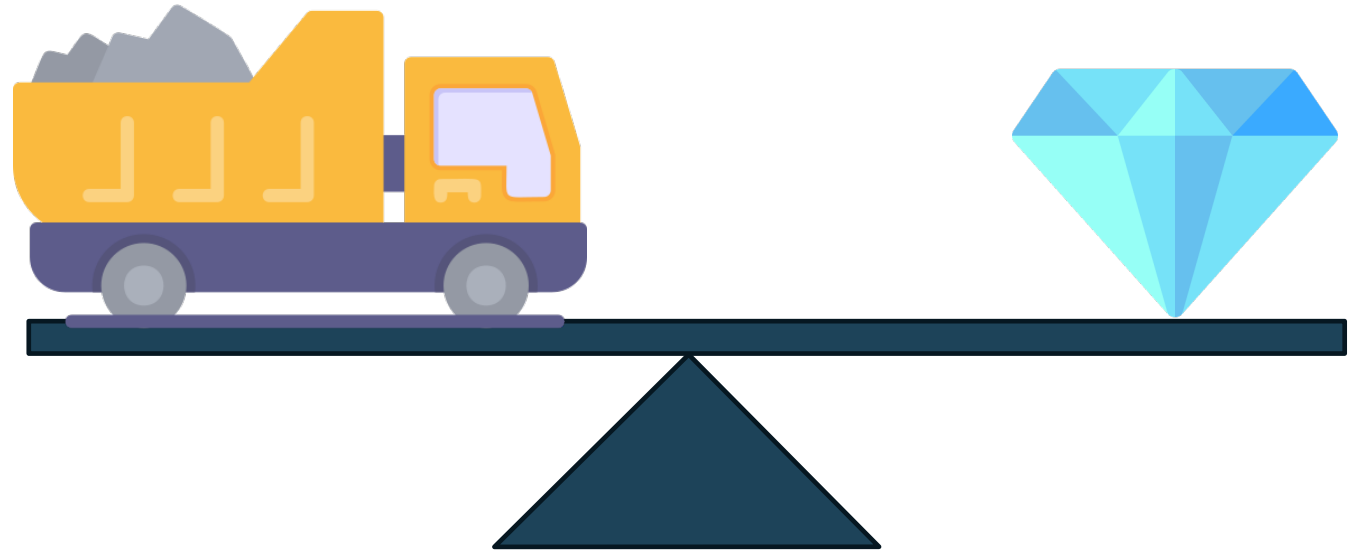
Completeness



Accuracy



There is a balance between getting a “ton” of information and getting “quality” information



Interview Techniques

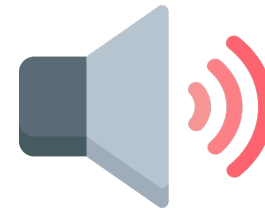
Reinstate the context of the event



Time of day



Weather



Sounds



Location



Important to do this without retraumatizing the individual.

This is a game-time decision, but err on the side of caution.

Interview Techniques

Reinstate the context of the event

Report everything they can recall



Sharing things with people we know and love is hard... doing so with strangers is even more difficult.



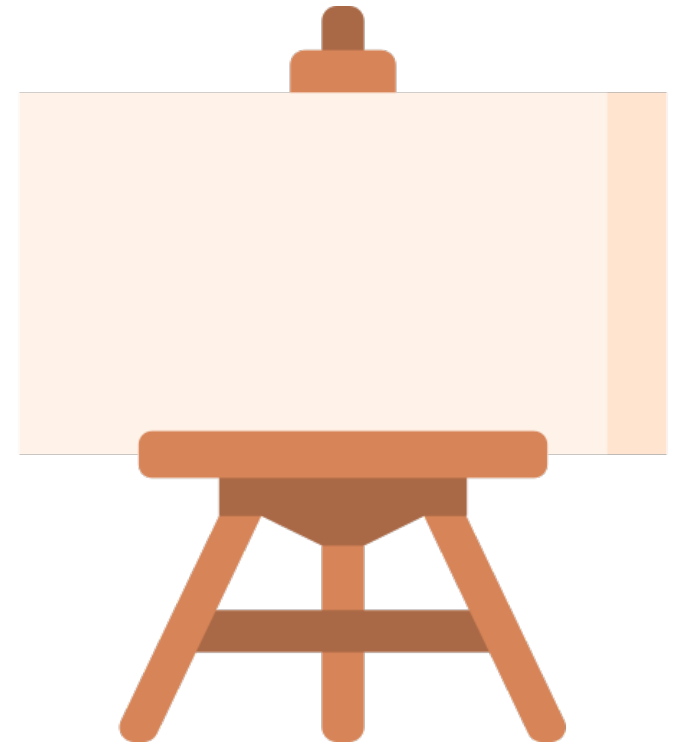
But there is an inherent problem with this process...

They don't know what is important to tell you... and you don't (fully) know what is important.

So... You start
broad.

General Invitations

- First line of questioning
- “Tell me about...”



“I don’t
know...”



Cued Invitations

- Second line of questioning
- “Tell me more about”

“Hands” Questions...



- What were you doing with your hands?
- What was the offender doing with their hands?

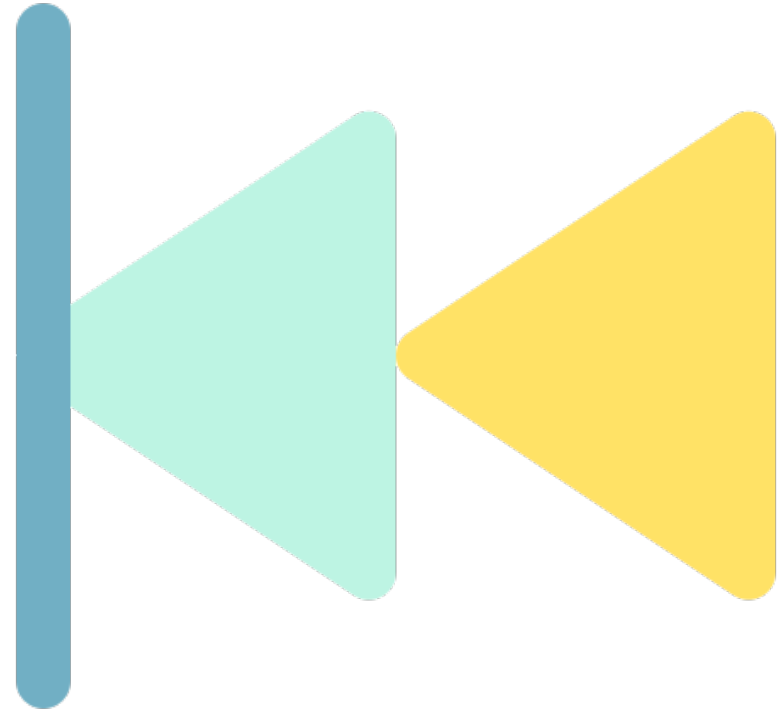
In one study, 76% of children undergoing a forensic interview provided answer to these questions and approximately 60% of the details provided were novel.

Interview Techniques

Reinstate the context of the event

Report everything they can recall

Reverse the order of recall



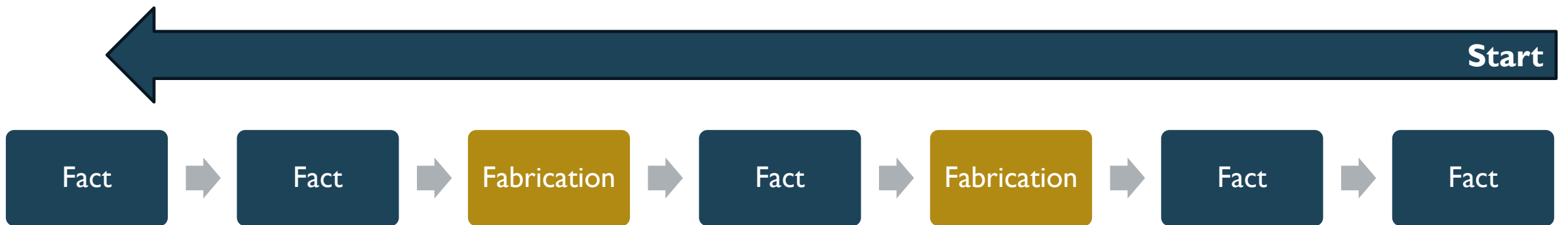
When recounting events in a logical timeline, the brain has a tendency to try and “fill in” any blank spaces.

However, a straight recounting of event is a good place to start.



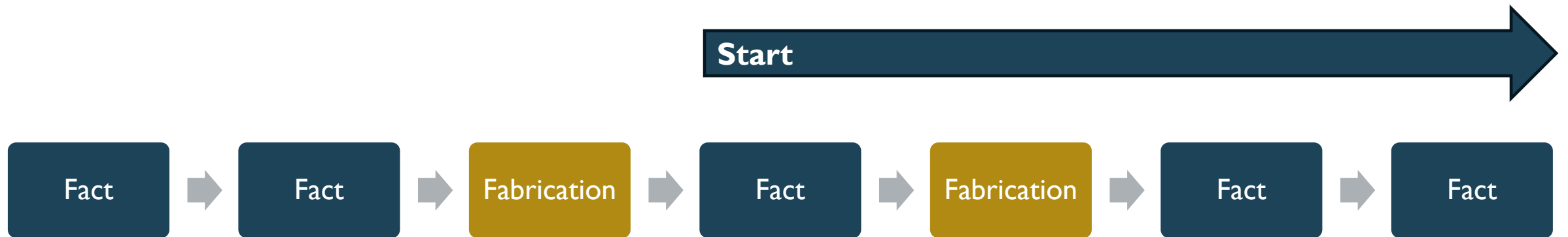
Don't let the brain fill in the blank spaces...

People tend to recall more details, and more correct details, when the timeline is manipulated.



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Don't let the brain fill in the blank spaces...

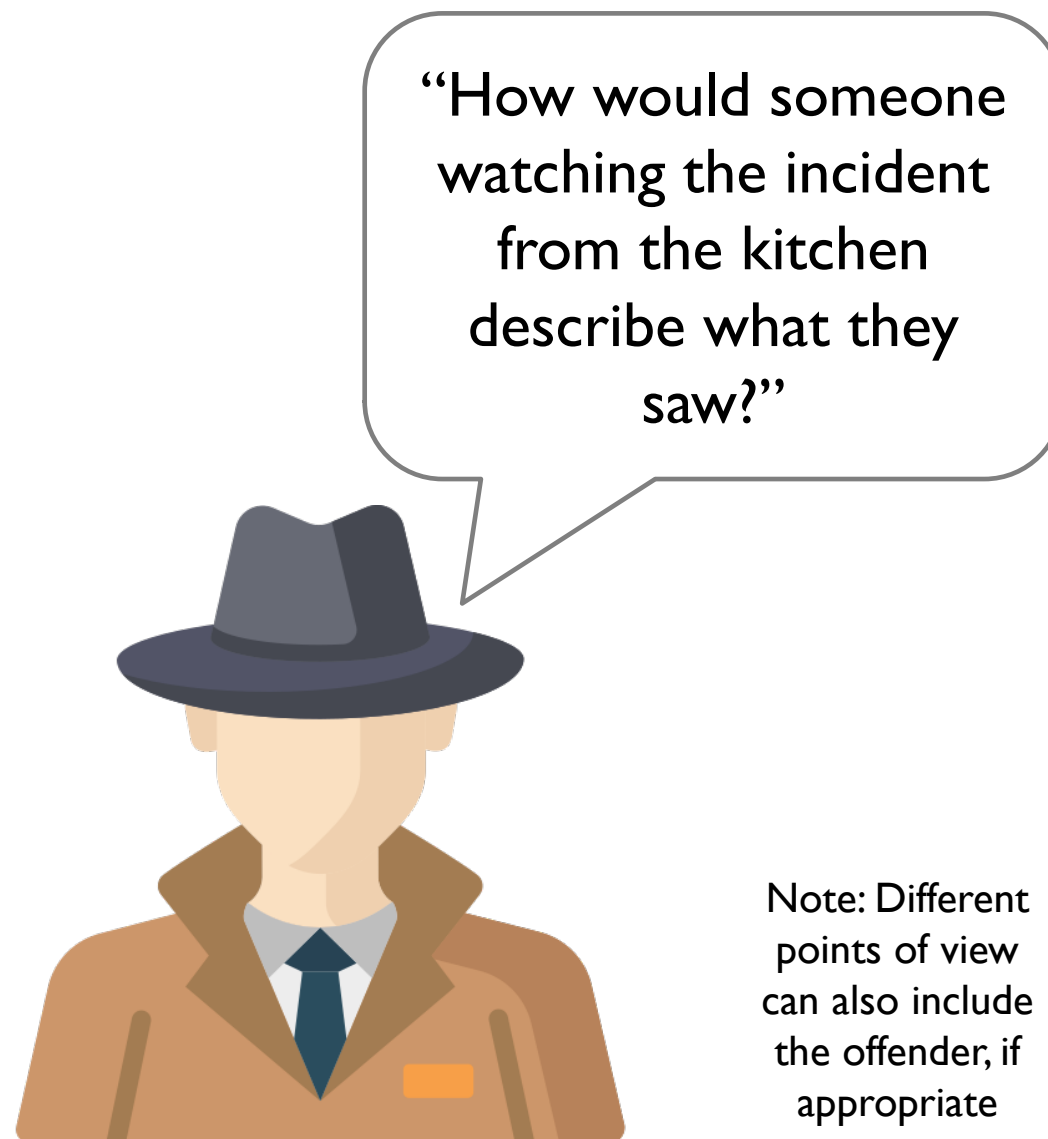
Interview Techniques

Reinstate the context of the event

Report everything they can recall

Reverse the order of recall

Report other points of view



Depending on when the event occurred (compared to your conversation)... You may also need to consider the coping mechanisms used by the individual.



Acknowledge reality



Avoid reality



Acknowledge Reality

- Actively cope in a healthy manner
- Forgiveness
- Perceive being alone as an advantage
- Social comparison

Avoid Reality

- Positive thinking
- Deliberate disengagement
 - A cousin of positive thinking, but the trauma is just ignored, not dressed up in positive thoughts

Coping Mechanisms



Questions?

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