

# Neurobiology of Trauma & Trauma Informed Advocacy

*Understanding how trauma impacts the brain and ensuring  
best practices in the field*

# What we will cover...

- Our response to stress and trauma
- The impact of trauma on the brain and body
- Trauma
- Empowering survivors
- Establishing our values and best practices
- Exploring trauma-informed responses

# “Trauma-Informed”



A dark, dense forest scene with several large, moss-covered tree trunks in the foreground. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and twigs. The lighting is dim, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere.

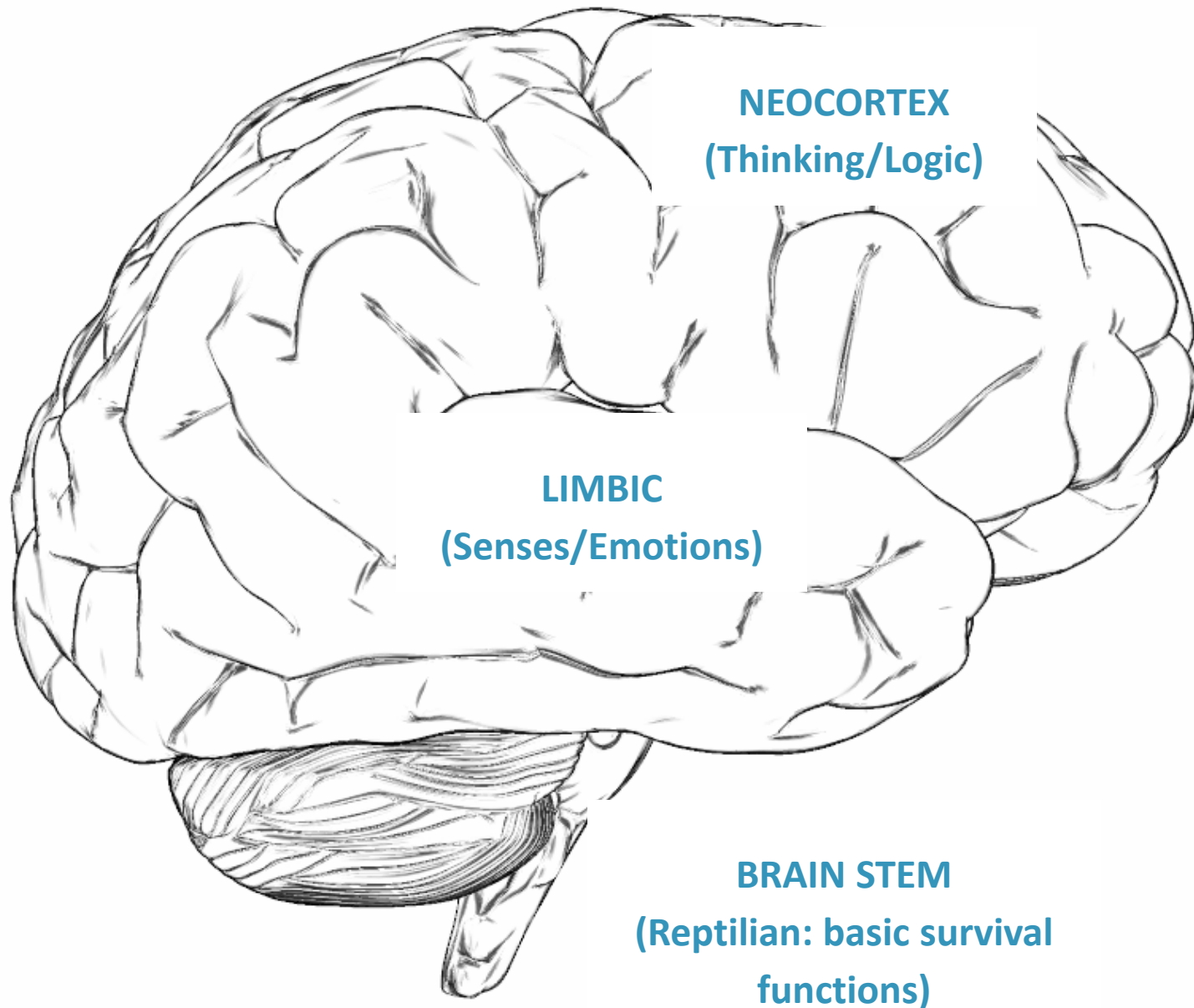
# The Thought Experiment

# The Brain

# Dan Siegal's Hand Model

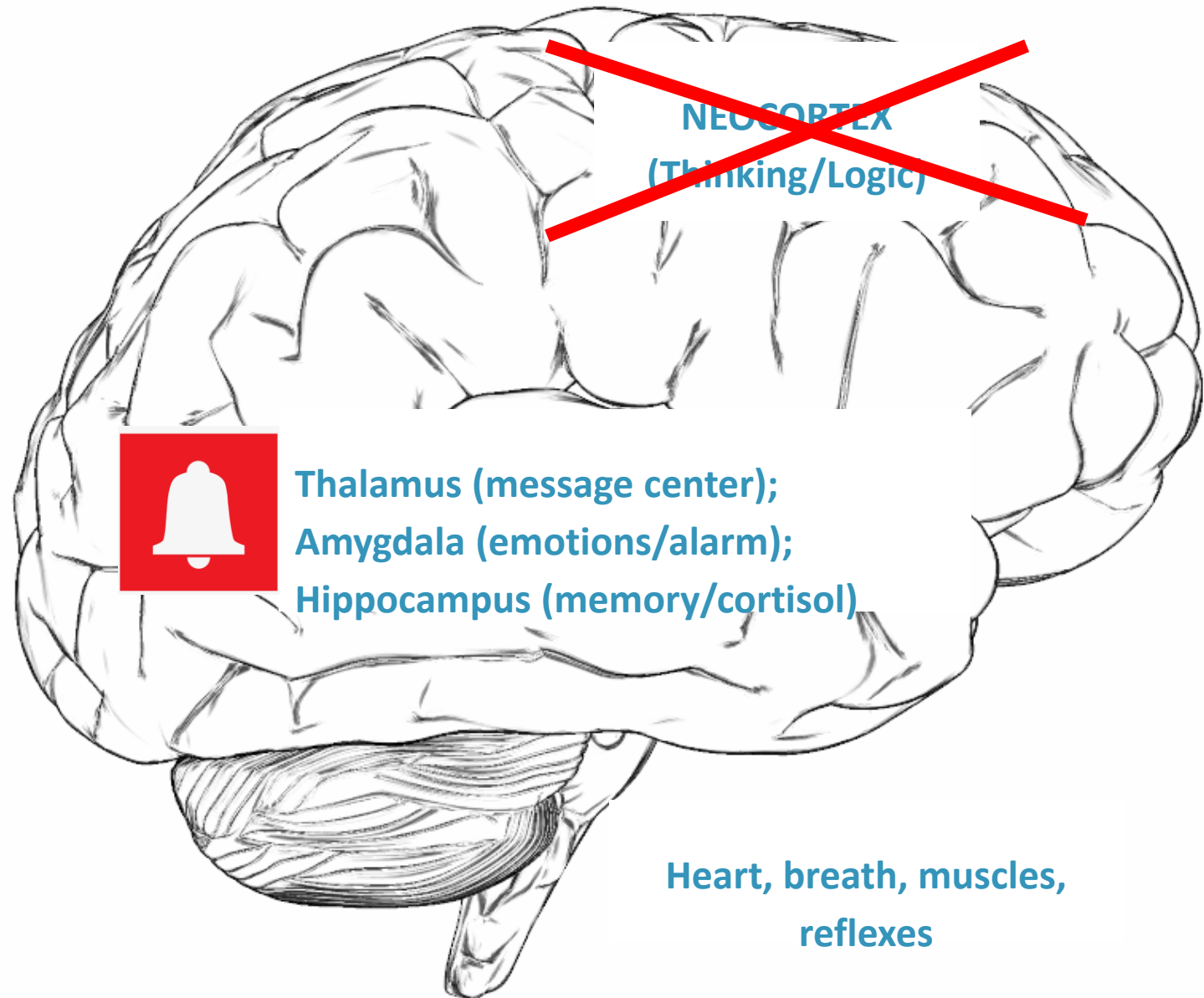


National Organization for Victim Assistance



# The Threatened Brain

1. Blood and oxygen are diverted to our muscles
2. Adrenaline floods the body
3. Heightened senses
4. All systems that aren't crucial are "switched off"
5. Hippocampus switches roles: Memories aren't filed, instead it pumps cortisol

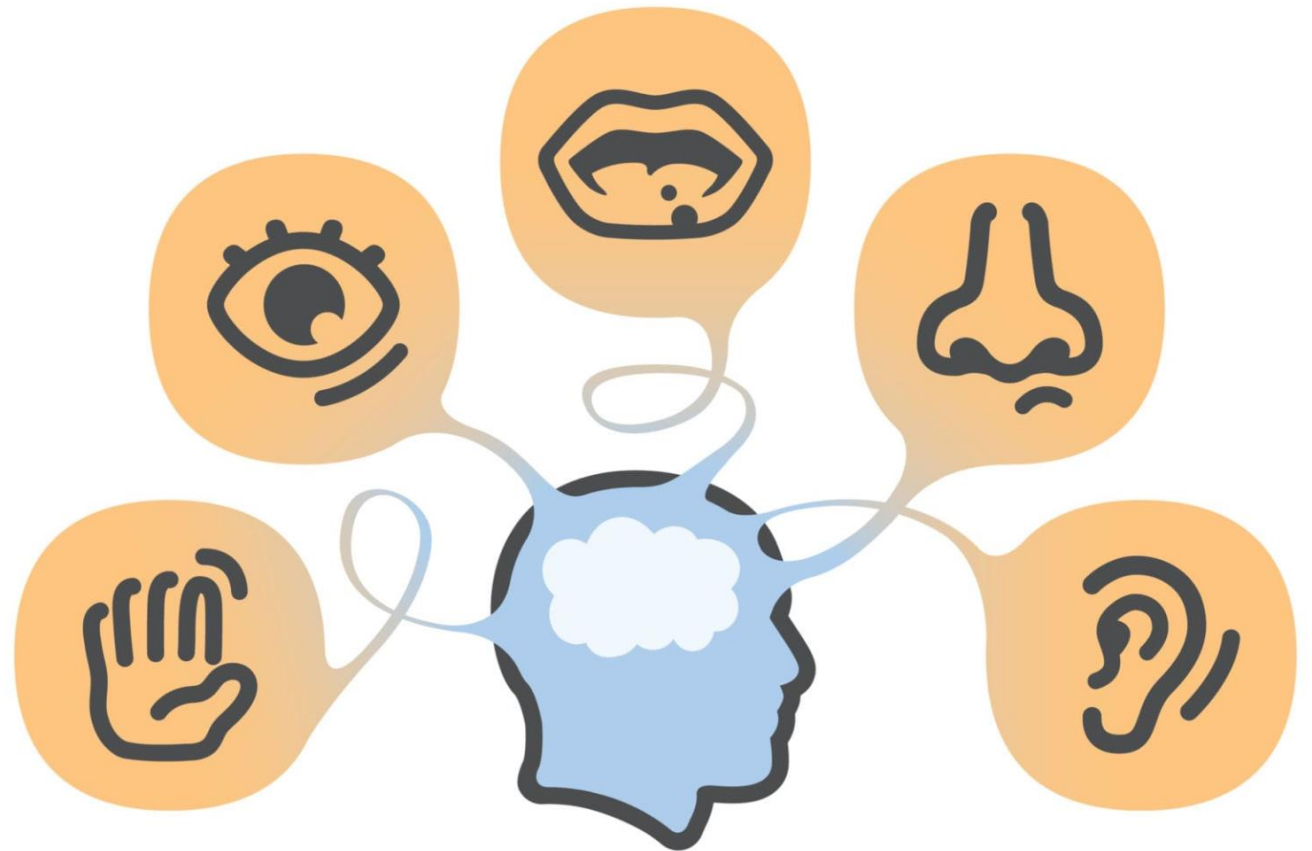




# Attention to Sensory Input

## Limbic System in Overdrive

- Touch
- Taste
- Smell
- Sound
- Sight



# The brain is always learning....

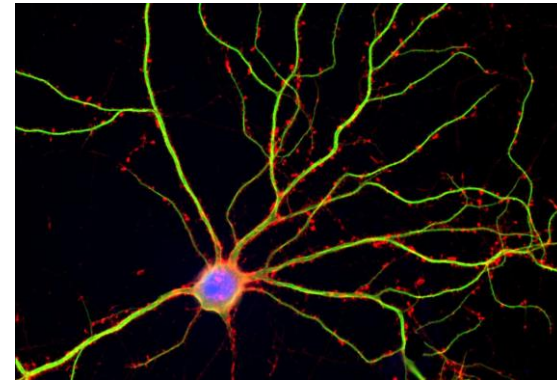
## Survival is our Priority



- If the reaction the brain initiated worked (survival), your brain becomes hardwired to respond to that stimulus the same way every time.
- We call these ***triggers*** (reminders, trauma responses...)

# Mirror Neurons

- Brain cells that react both when a particular action is *performed* and when it is *observed*.
- How we recognize emotions in others



# Trauma, Complex Trauma & Chronic Stress

# Trauma Definitions

“Individual trauma results from an **event, series of events, or set of circumstances** that is **experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening** and that has **lasting adverse effects** on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being”

↪ SAMHSA

# Trauma Definitions

## Acute

Single Incident

## Complex

Varied and multiple

## Chronic

Repeated and  
prolonged exposure

# Trauma Definitions

## Secondary

Indirect exposure to a traumatic experience.

## Vicarious

Repeated exposure to indirect trauma

# What is Trauma?

- Involves threats to lives or bodies
- Feeling of terror or helplessness
- Loss of control



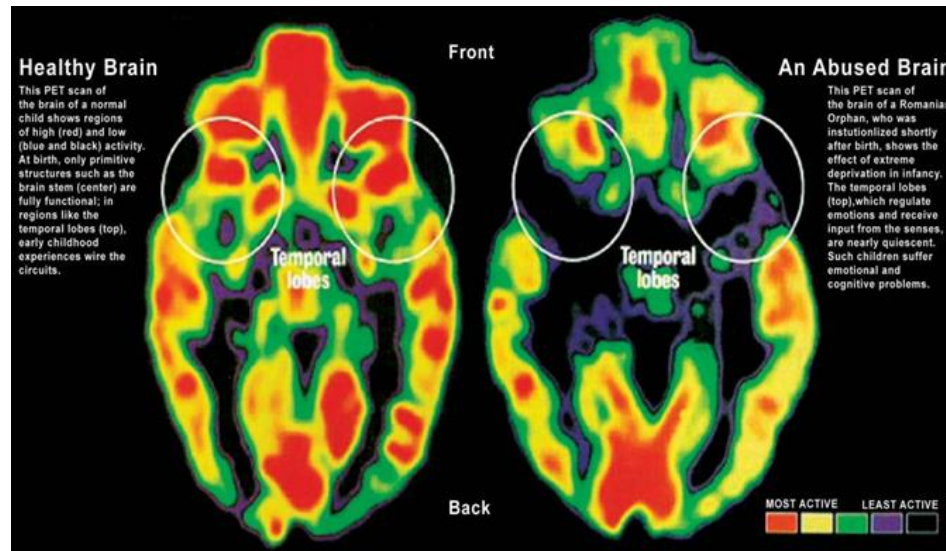
# The Impact

- ❖ Emotional
  - Social withdrawal, feelings of hopelessness/despair, reduced emotional satisfaction, anger/irritability, numbing
- ❖ Mental
  - Difficulty making decisions, poor boundaries and judgements, burnout and leaving the field
- ❖ Physical
  - Lack of energy, weight change, too much/too little sleep, drug/alcohol abuse
- ❖ Spiritual
  - Changes in worldview or beliefs

# Trauma Responses

- Damaged beliefs about oneself, other people, and the world.
- A person's life experience affects brain chemistry at least as much as brain chemistry affects a person's life experience. (Jaffe

Dumke, & Segal, 2005)



# Coping Strategies

## Healthy

- Exercising
- Journaling, self care
- Acceptance of feelings/emotions
- Reconnecting to people and places
- Living in the “now”
- Seeking support
- Developing self interest

## Unhealthy

- Substance abuse
- Neglecting personal appearance
- Continuation of the past
- Denial and blame
- Constant crisis mode
- Overeating , oversleeping
- Poor impulse control
- Lack of awareness

# Counterintuitive Behaviors

“Individuals learn how to behave through social interactions with family members and other individuals in society. When individual behavior does not match *culturally determined* ideas of how one is supposed to act, individuals are often not looked upon favorably and even shunned... Victims are often caught between societal expectations regarding the attack and personal feelings in an attempt to cope with the experience.”

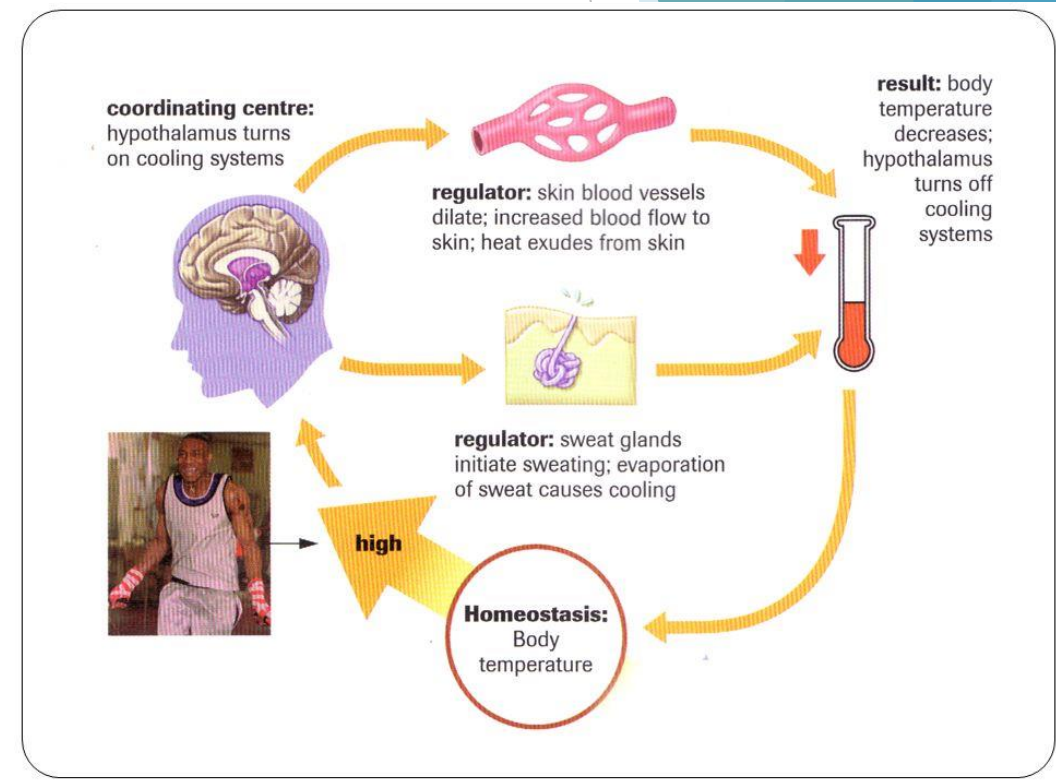
- ***Victim Responses to Sexual Assault: Counterintuitive or Adaptive?***  
***Patricia Fanflik, 2007***

# Examples of Counterintuitive Behaviors

- Unable to create accurate timelines or sharing misinformation (what we perceive as “lying”)
- Counterintuitive emotional responses (happy tones/giggling/childish responses)
- Forgetting important details
- Remaining in contact or in a relationship with the person
- Continuing to use the platform
- Defending abuser’s behavior
- Thrill-seeking/ “risky” behavior
- Don’t report to law enforcement
- Dropping charges

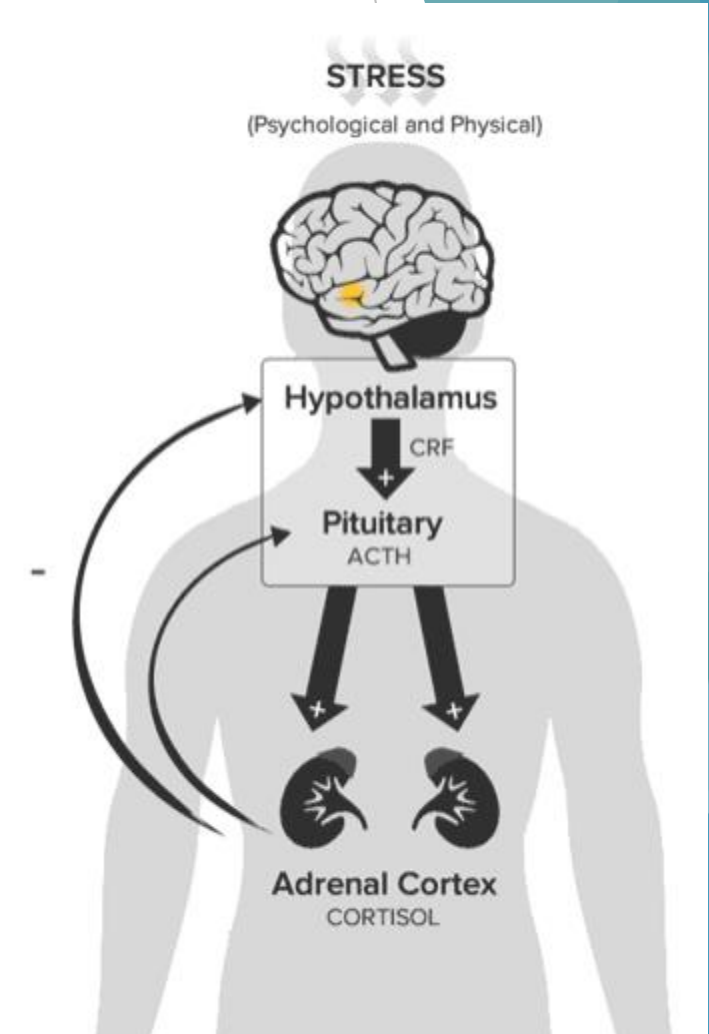
# Stress & Chronic Stress

- Wants to stay in “homeostasis”
- Autonomic Nervous System:
  - Sympathetic nervous system prepares the body for stressful or emergency situations
  - Parasympathetic nervous system controls the body processes during ordinary situations
- Chronic stress re-orientes the nervous system
- We often express emotions as physiology



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# Individual Trauma

Trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring condition, in which:

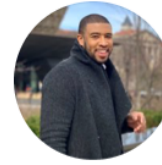
- ❖ The individual is exposed to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual (and/or psychological) violation (by directly experiencing, witnessing or learning about a traumatic event to a loved one) or has had first hand repeated exposure
- ❖ The individual's coping capacity and/or ability to integrate his or her emotional experience is overwhelmed and causing significant distress



# Collective Trauma

- Cultural, historical, insidious and political/economic trauma that impacts individuals and communities across generations; structural violence, triple trauma
- **Interpersonal Trauma:** Intimate and social betrayal; Cumulative burden; Ongoing risk

# The Trauma of Oppression

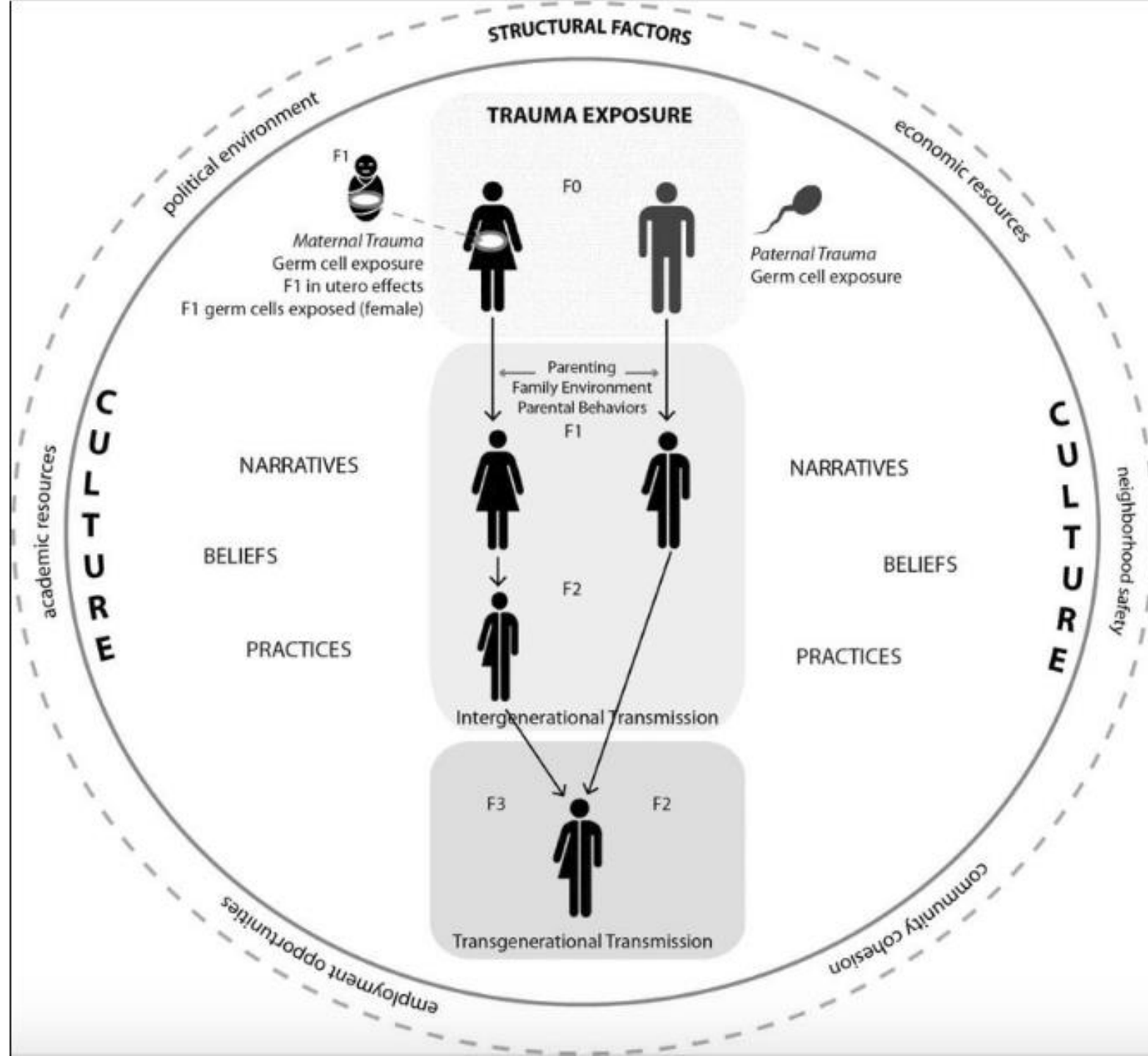


**Eugene Daniels** ✓  
@EugeneDaniels2

I still have police ask me what I'm doing in MY neighborhood. I am not insulated or protected. I am tired. I am scared. All the time. Growing up, I thought if I made people laugh and went to college and smiled, I would be safe. That's not even close to true.

# Historical & Intergenerational Trauma

- ↳ Trauma that is passed from one generation to another
- ↳ Largely the result of chronic stress and complex trauma:
  - ↳ Emotional & Behavioral
  - ↳ Biological & Cellular  
(*Epigenetic Change*)



# What is Trauma-Informed Care?

- A recognition that trauma is a pivotal force that shapes mental, emotional and physical well-being.
- A collaborative approach that envisions survivors and service providers in partnership rather than a top-down approach.
- Creating an environment where empowerment for victims/survivors can occur.

# Trauma-Informed:

**Trauma-Informed Practice** is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of **trauma**, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment

# Trauma-Informed (Framework) Practice

Without a trauma framework, services can be traumatizing:

- Without an understanding of domestic violence, services may be unsafe
- Without attending to culture, services will not be relevant or accessible
- Without a social justice framework, abuse and violence are likely to continue
- Responding in welcoming, inclusive, trauma-informed ways can help counteract these effects

Excerpted from Carole Warshaw and Cathy Cave

# Trauma-Informed Response



# Access to Services

## Trauma can reduce access to service

- ❖ Avoidance of trauma reminders; reluctance to reach out when trust has been betrayed, re-traumatization in service settings; misperception of trauma responses and coping strategies
  
- ❖ **Coercive control, discrimination and lack of cultural attunement can reduce access to services**

Excerpted from Carole Warshaw and Cathy Cave



1. “What is WRONG with you?”

VS

2. “What HAPPENED to you?”

1. Is Deficit Based

1. Is Problem Focused

2. Is Strength Based

2. Is Addressing Past Trauma

# Surviving Trauma

- Trauma may be ongoing
  - Tech Abuse/Tech Related
- Does not end magically when victims/survivors reach out and connect with us or our agencies.
- Trauma can be individual and/or collective
  - IPV, Divorce, Natural Disaster, Disability, Violence

## Trauma Survivor:

- People start healing from abuse, once they are safe from the abuse.
- **“Surviving trauma & living with it are sadly two separate battles”**.- Dr. Tracy Werterman

# Coping Strategies

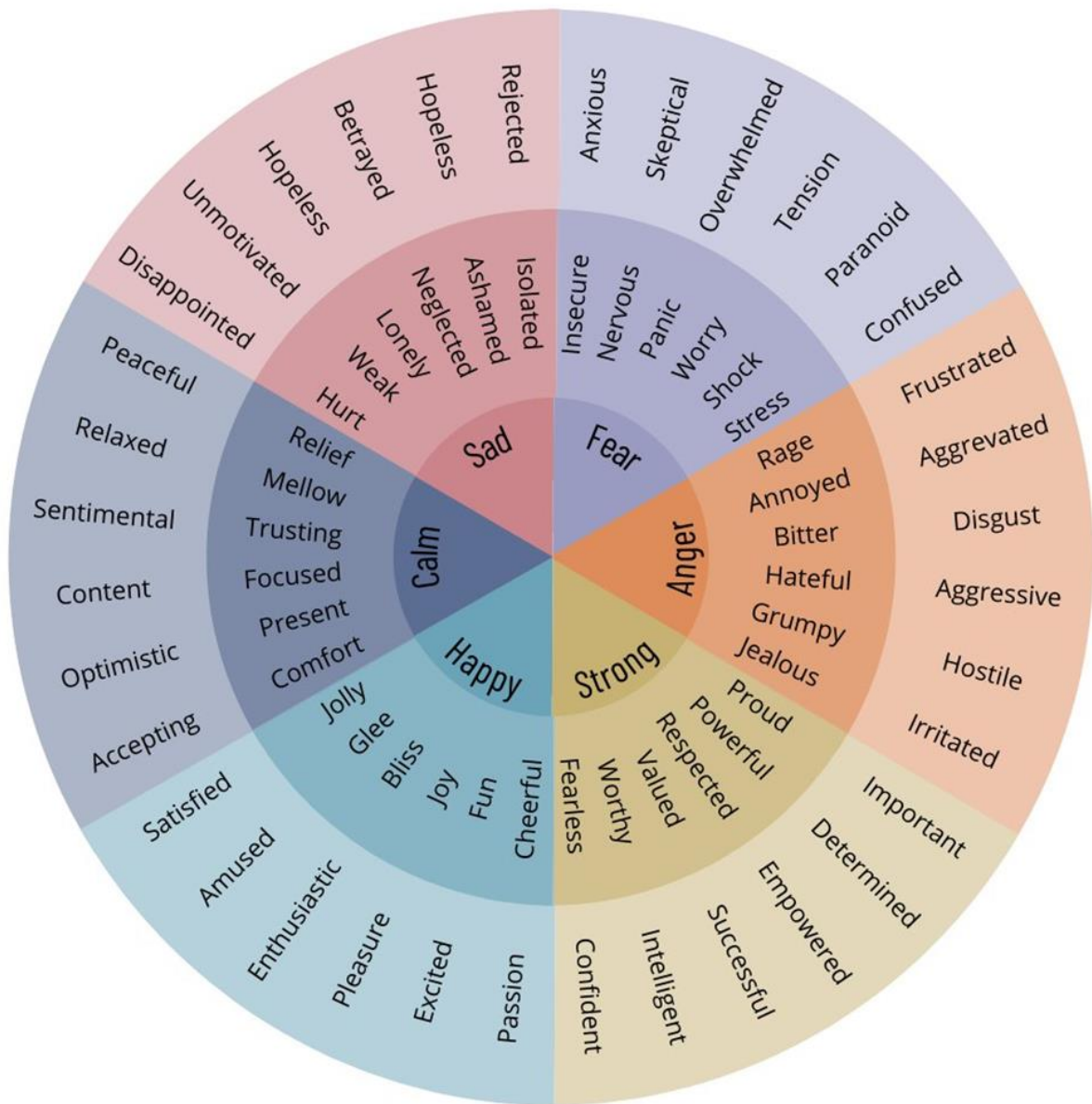
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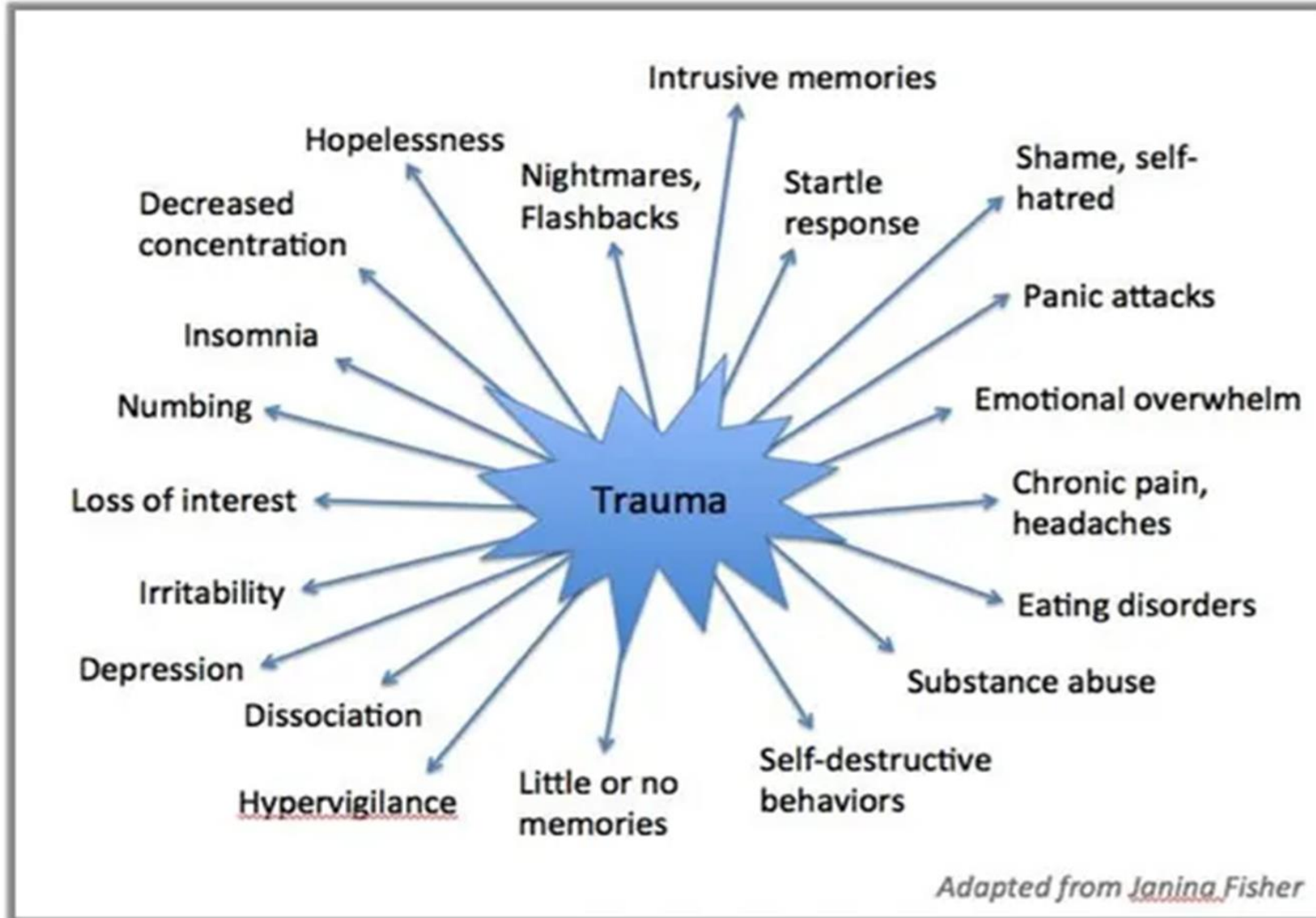
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# The Feel Wheel



# Remember that Trauma may look like:



## NOVA's Twitter Account



@NOVAvictims 

Are you following  
NOVA on social  
media?

# NOVA

## NOVA's Instagram Account



@NOVAvictims 

## NOVA's Facebook Account



## NOVA's LinkedIn Account



**QUESTIONS?**