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Paralyzed by fear?



ORGANISME
APPUYÉ PAR

Granby

The effects of sexual assault

You probably already know, but maybe you have some questions...

The following quote shows just how serious the consequences of sexual assault can be.

‘Sexual assault is one of the most serious **TRAUMATIC** experiences, causing a number of long-term effects including PTSD, depression, addiction issues, suicidal tendencies, sexual polyvictimization, and other chronic health problems.’

* Kilpatrick and Acierno, 2003; Koss *et al*, 2003

That doesn't mean that it's impossible to heal! However, it's important to recognize that the experience is serious, and shouldn't be minimized.

Starting with the fact that it is serious trauma, let's take a closer look at what happens in our body/mind at the moment of the assault.

Why do we need to do this? Hopefully, it will help to understand certain questions, and ease feelings of shame and guilt.



WHY?

Why didn't I yell?

Why didn't I fight back?

Why didn't I run away?

Why did I feel like I was outside of my body,
with no control at all, like I was watching
the scene from the outside?

Do you recognize some of these thoughts, these questions?

Maybe you've heard other people asking questions like these...

You need to know: not yelling, not fighting, not running away (in other words, FEELING PARALYZED) are normal reactions, and ones that you have no control over.

The exact term for this state is **psychic sideration**.

What is it, exactly? It's a defense mechanism, triggered by trauma such as a sexual assault. To make a somewhat simplistic comparison, it's kind of like when the doctor gives your knee a tap with their little hammer, and your leg kicks out: it's a reflex. Well – psychic sideration is a little more complex, but you have no control over it either.

A short-circuit...

Why does this happen during a sexual assault? **Answer: to survive something that's unbearable.**

Your body works really well. It is designed to help you survive, even when faced with important trauma. That's why human brains develop survival mechanisms.

'We can think about our bodies as a sort of electrical circuit. The extreme stress experienced and felt during a sexual assault is like a circuit overload. This overvoltage (the stress) is an emotional reaction that is too strong. It's uncontrolled, and potentially dangerous: the overvoltage could cause a short-circuit.'

In other words: during the assault, it's the **meaninglessness** of the violence, its unthinkable nature that is the problem. The brain has nothing to compare it to. It doesn't comprehend, and it goes into a state of panic. The result is extreme stress that cannot be contained, controlled or changed by a mind that is temporarily 'out of order.'

The brain creates a voluntary short circuit to protect the body in the immediate situation (protecting it from a potentially fatal cardiovascular or neurological event caused by an overwhelming emotional reaction, such as a heart attack).

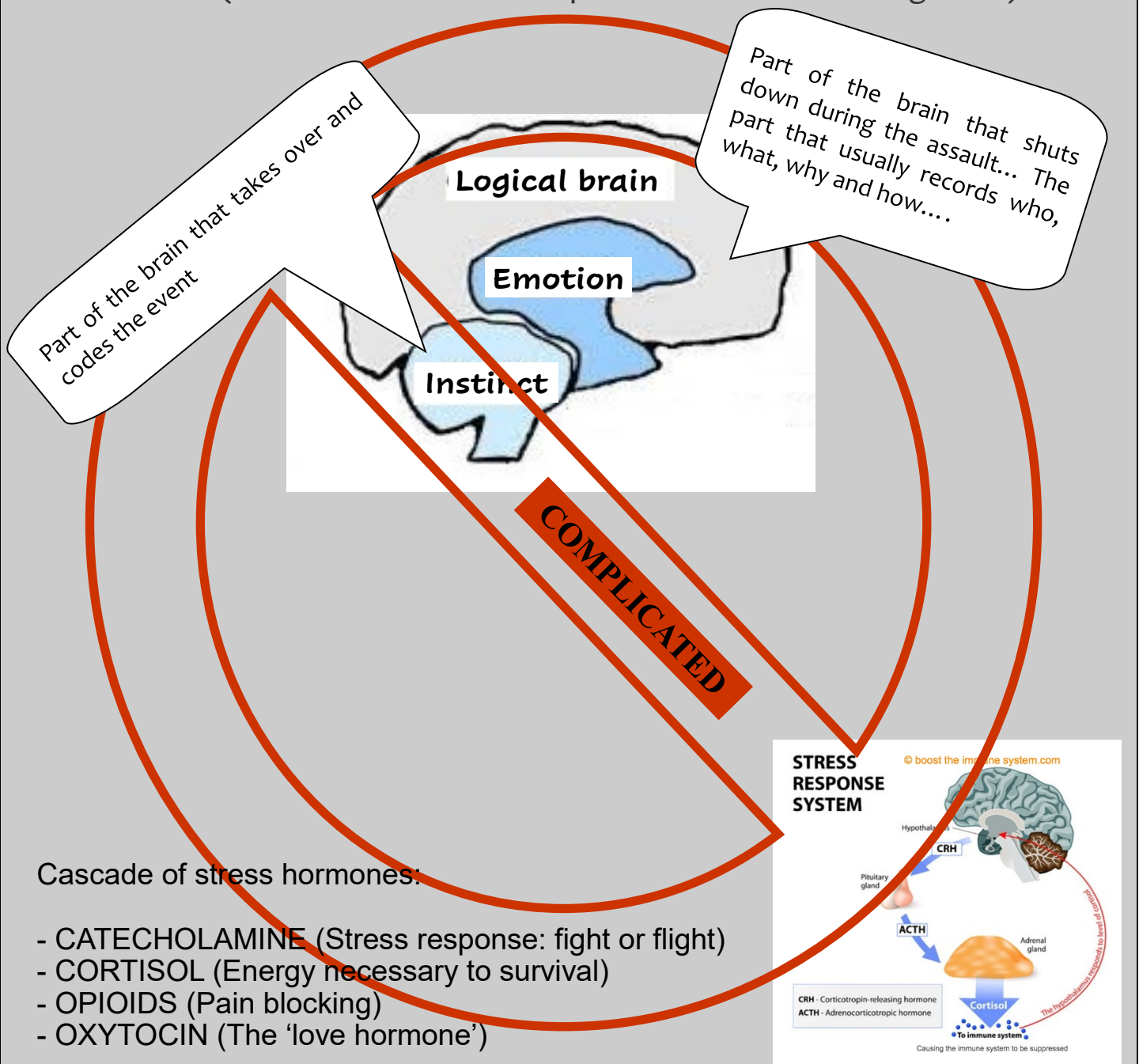
This disconnection is extremely short-term, and has an immediate effect. It acts as a sort of anaesthesia, a disassociation (an emotional disconnect). It is like a paralysis of the brain. It allows the victim to become a spectator, and detach herself from the violence.

That's why we don't yell, we don't fight back, we don't run away, and we feel like we're floating above our bodies.

... that leaves a lasting mark

We'll spare you the long names of the stress hormones that are the mechanisms for the short circuit, and the parts of the brain that are activated and shut down. We wanted to make the description as simple as possible so that you understand why we tend to just FREEZE...

Otherwise, we would have presented a series of illustrations and tables like this one. (We never said we were professional neurobiologists...)



Cascade of stress hormones:

- CATECHOLAMINE (Stress response: fight or flight)
- CORTISOL (Energy necessary to survival)
- OPIOIDS (Pain blocking)
- OXYTOCIN (The 'love hormone')

Consequences



If the 'short-circuit' strategy can be effective in the short term, this disconnect can create trauma that can have serious consequences when the victim goes back to reality. For example:

Traumatic memory: A ticking time bomb, with effects like intrusive memories (unwanted and uncontrolled) that make the victim relive the violence, suffering and distress on a loop.

Hyper vigilance: Controlling, avoidance, and other behaviours that are in themselves efficient strategies, but that are damaging and do not help the victim heal from traumatic memory.

These are normal consequences to an abnormal situation.

These are normal consequences, specifically linked to traumatic violence. They involve serious psychological suffering.

It's important to keep in mind that post-traumatic stress disorder comes out of a kind of 'brain paralysis,' and its effects can be felt for a very long time.

To read more about the subject, here are some references:

- <https://assopolyvalence.org/informations-sante/infos-ptsd/apathie-et-sideration/>
- <http://www.madmoizelle.com/sideration-agression-sexuelle-615413>

'What did your aggressor's penis look like?'

A LAWYER DEFENDING HER CLIENT, ACCUSED OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT OF A SIX-YEAR-OLD MINOR, ASKED THE VICTIM THIS VERY QUESTION. SHE WAS UNABLE TO RESPOND.

Stories like this are shocking. When we say that the victims of sexual assault are mistreated by the justice system, this is what we mean. The CALACS would like to make certain things clear regarding sexual assault.

Right from the start, if a six year-old is assaulted, the aggressor's penis probably seems gigantic. But is that really what's important? With an experience like this at age six, you've been completely traumatized, and you don't know what has happened. Your brain short-circuited.

With the brief details that follow, we hope that you will understand why this victim's memory is hazy and why she has forgotten certain details. First of all, sexual assault is among the most violent of trauma, and triggers responses like post-traumatic shock.

We don't pretend to be qualified to give an introductory course in neurobiology, but we would like to explain this, in the simplest terms: when someone is a victim of a traumatic experience, such as a sexual assault, there is a wave of stress hormones that are unleashed. This is a protective reflex that takes the victim out of her body, cut off from reality, and 'frozen.' This mechanism helps the victim survive an unbearable situation. (The same goes for those people who ask why the victim didn't cry out or fight back.) For the same reason, the victim has a hard time pinpointing how much time went by, distances, specific details of events happening around her.

This is the reason that when questions like 'Who? What? Why?' and '... by the way, what was his penis like?' are asked after the assault, victims can have a hard time remembering, or the details could be vague. They have to tell the story over and over again, or see their aggressor sitting there, and this could bring the events of the assault back. This is called re-victimization.

If everyone who needed to question victims of sexual assault could be educated about psychical consideration, about post-traumatic stress, for example, perhaps they would go about it differently: at least, the CALACS hopes so.

'The plaintiff's version of events was often contradictory and her evidence should not be admissible, according to the defence counsel.' We can only imagine that it will be the same story in another case against the same man, accused this time of assaulting two boys.

One aggressor, three victims. How is this even possible? What will it take for him to be convicted? A confession? A videotape? This isn't a movie, it's real life. The legal system is failing victims of sexual assault.

Sophie Labrie for the Granby CALACS

Membership Application For the CALACS

Identification

Name:
 Birthday:
 Address:
 Postal code:
 Telephone:
 Cell phone:
 Email address:
 It's OK to identify mail coming from the CALACS yes : no :

NOTE: All information will remain confidential, and for internal use only.

MEMBERSHIP STATUS

SELECT ONE

Regular member

Collaborator

Regular member

You are a woman aged 14 and up;

You adhere to the goals and objectives of the CALACS and work to further them;

You apply or renew your membership by filling out the form and send it to the Board of directors 1 month before the annual general assembly;

You respect each member's confidentiality, meaning no disclosure of any kind of internal activities, of those receiving or having received services from the CALACS, or who are associated with the CALACS as members or activists;

You satisfy all other conditions that could be decreed by the Board of directors, by resolution.

Collaborator

Any group or man aged 14 and over who wants to be associated with the objectives of the CALACS, and who submits their membership to the Board of directors.

As a member, do you identify with any of the following status?

- Immigrant/refugee
- Living with an intellectual or physical handicap
- Racialized (susceptible to experiencing racism in Quebec)
- LGBTQ+
- Indigenous

As a member, I would like to become active in the CALACS by (indicate your choices)

- Being on a committee
- Becoming a militant for various actions (gatherings – marches – petitions ...)
- Doing various office tasks

I would like to make a donation to the CALACS in the following amount:

- \$5
- \$10
- \$20
- Other: _____

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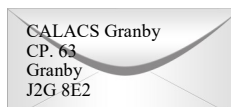
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