The Neurobiology of Sexual Assault

Dr. Rebecca Campbell

Professor of Psychology

Michigan State University

LEARNING GOAL:

Law enforcement personnel will learn about the neurobiology of trauma and its application to victims of sexual assault. Participants will learn how trauma affects victims’ emotions and behavioral presentations. Special attention will be given to examining how the brain processes and recalls traumatic events. Law enforcement personnel will learn how to apply these concepts to sexual assault investigations.

Performance objectives:

1. Participants will become familiar with national data regarding sexual assault reporting and sexual assault case attrition
2. Participants will understand common reasons why victims withdraw from the criminal justice system process and how this can be prevented
3. Participants will understand how sexual assault case attrition is related to the neurobiology of trauma
4. Participants will become familiar with neurobiological structures and physiological processes involved in traumatic events
5. Participants will learn which specific neurobiological structures and physiological processes are involved in sexual assault
6. Participants will learn how trauma affects victims’ emotions and behavioral presentations
7. Participants will learn how trauma affect memory encoding and recall
8. Participants will learn how common interviewing techniques, such as REID may be inadvisable with victims of trauma

Training Outline

I. Review of Training Goals & Objectives (3 minutes)

II. Research on Sexual Assault Case Attrition (20 minutes)
   a. Victims’ Perspectives
   b. Law Enforcement Perspectives
   c. Bringing Both Perspectives Together
III. Neurobiology of Trauma (20 minutes)
   a. Introduction to biological structures affecting emotion and behavior
   b. Introduction to biological structures affecting memory and recall

IV. Neurobiology of Sexual Assault (20 minutes)
   a. Sexual assault victims emotions and behavioral presentation
   b. CASE STUDY: Tonic Immobility
   c. Sexual assault victims’ memory recall
   d. CASE STUDY: Memory Fragmentation

V. Implications for Practice (30 minutes)
   a. REID Interviewing techniques & neurobiology of trauma
   b. False reports & neurobiology of trauma
   c. Complainant refused to prosecute & neurobiology of trauma
   d. Action steps for sexual assault investigations

VI. Questions and Discussion (20 minutes)