The Neuropsychology of Trafficking Trauma

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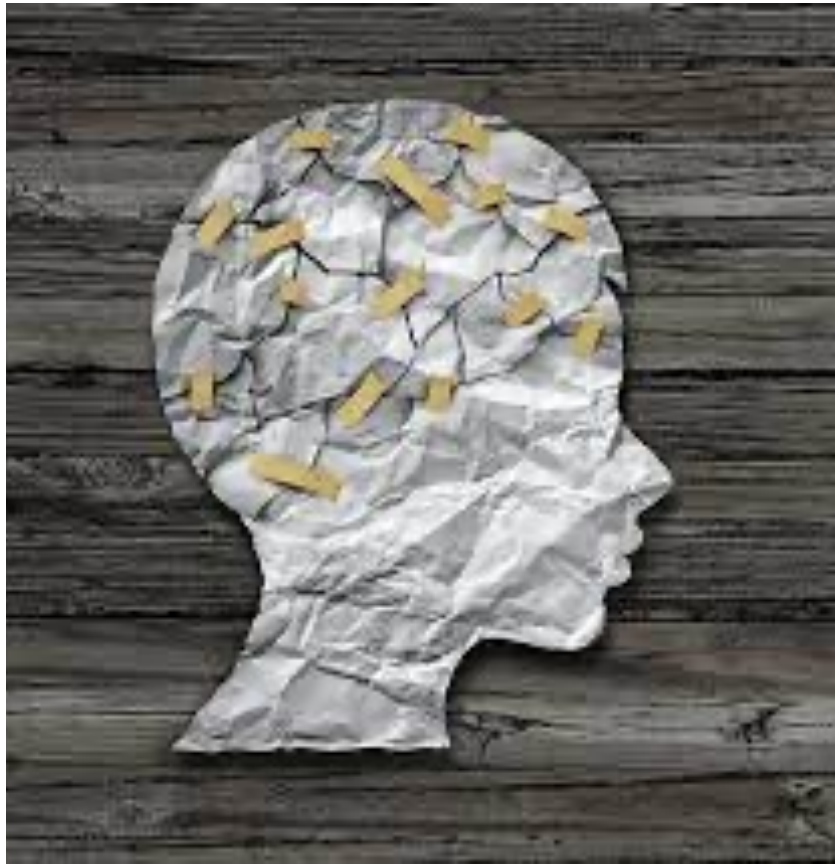
What is Neuropsychology?

- Neuropsychology is concerned with how a person's nervous system and brain influence their cognition and behavior.
- Neuropsychology often addresses how injuries or illnesses can affect the brain and behavior.

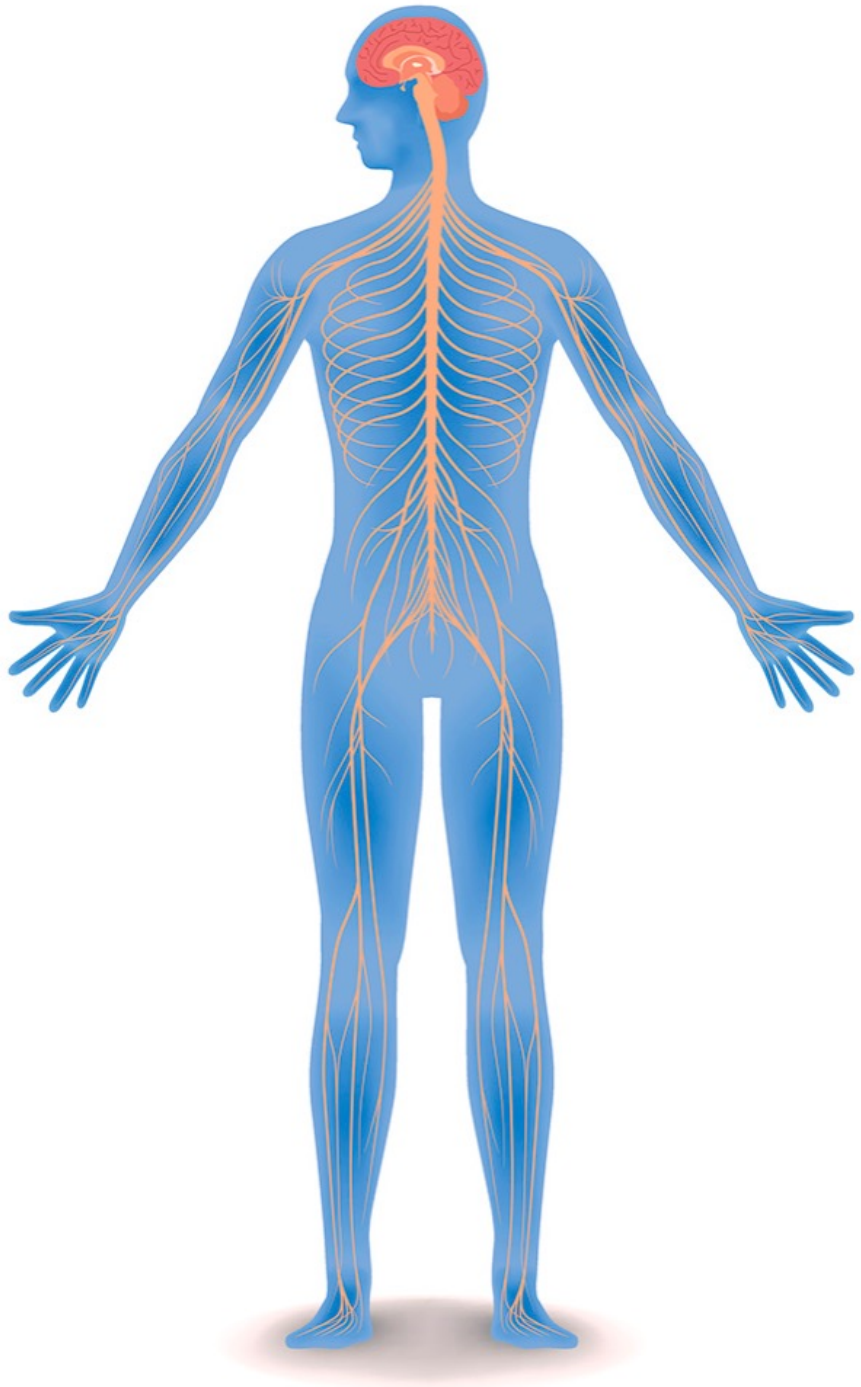
What is Trafficking Trauma?

- Survivors who escape trafficking live with physical and psychological scars.
- The emotional wounds last long after their bodies heal.
- Psychological challenges that are left for them to deal with are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), anxiety, depression, panic disorder, substance abuse, suicidal ideations, and Stockholm Syndrome.



Why Neuropsychology of Trafficking Trauma?

It’s important to learn about how the brain responds to trafficking trauma so that you have more empathy and understanding on how to treat the behavior in order to find appropriate solutions for healing instead of doing more harm.

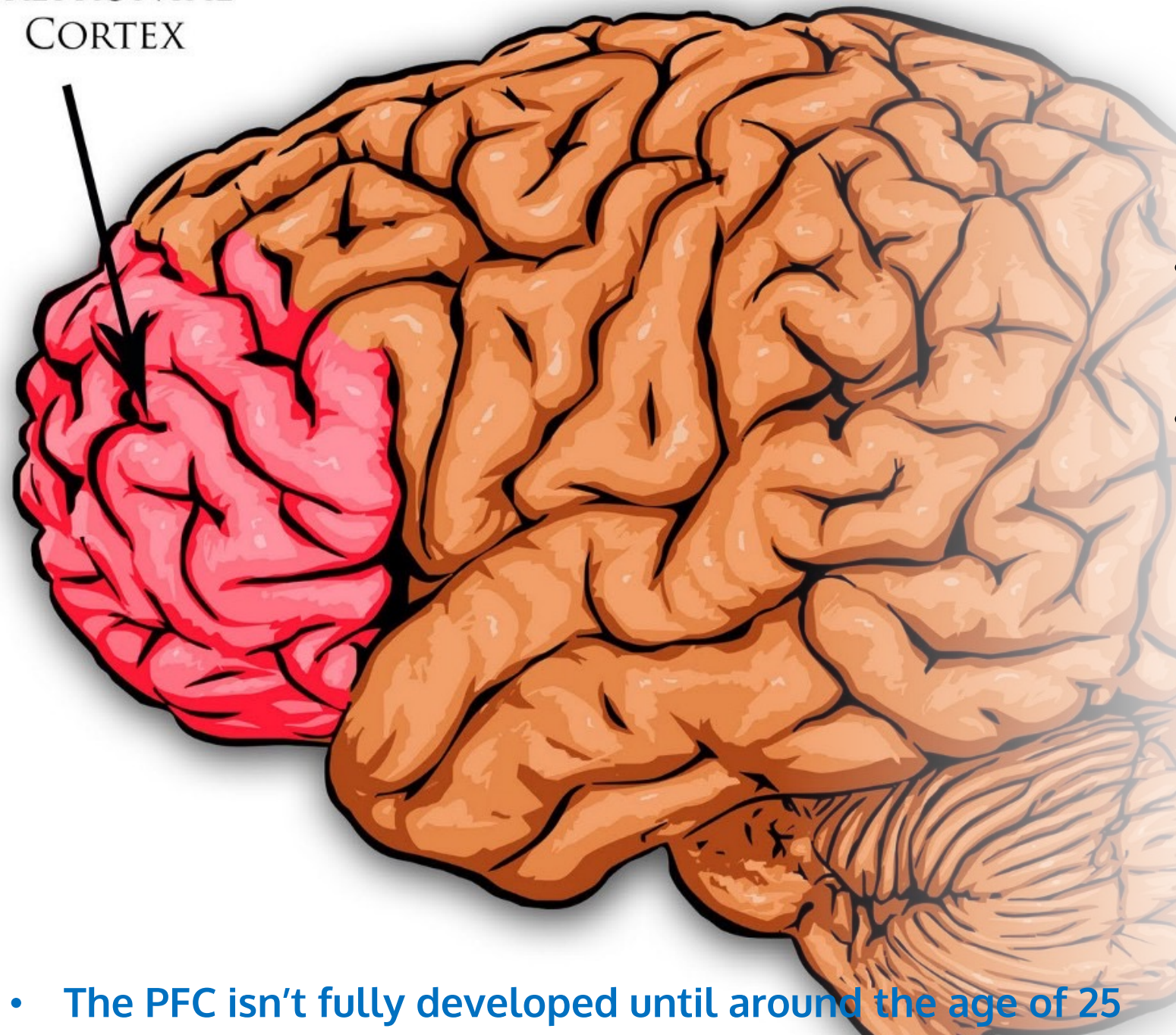


The Central Nervous System

- controls most functions of the body and mind
- Three functions:
  - sensory input
  - information processing
  - motor output

Sensory Input

- is the stimuli that is perceived by our senses like smell, sight, touch, taste, and hearing.
- Anything that you perceive using your senses can be called sensory input.



Pre-Frontal Cortex

- receives input from multiple regions of the brain to process information and adapts accordingly.
- It contributes to:
  - Focusing one's attention
  - Predicting the consequences of one's actions; anticipating events in the environment
  - Impulse control; managing emotional reactions
  - Planning for the future
  - Coordinating and adjusting complex behaviors ("I can't do A until B happens")

- **The PFC isn't fully developed until around the age of 25**

Example

16 y.o. female trafficked victim ran away from foster care and is meeting with a judge.

- The judge asked her why she was with a 23 y.o. man in his apartment.
- She becomes nervous. Her pre-frontal cortex isn't developed fully and has been traumatized through trafficking so she cannot predict, in the moment, that lying will not get her in more trouble.
- The part of the brain that provides self-control can't communicate well with the part of the brain that controls the flight or fight response because it hasn't grown all the connections needed.

Moral of the Story

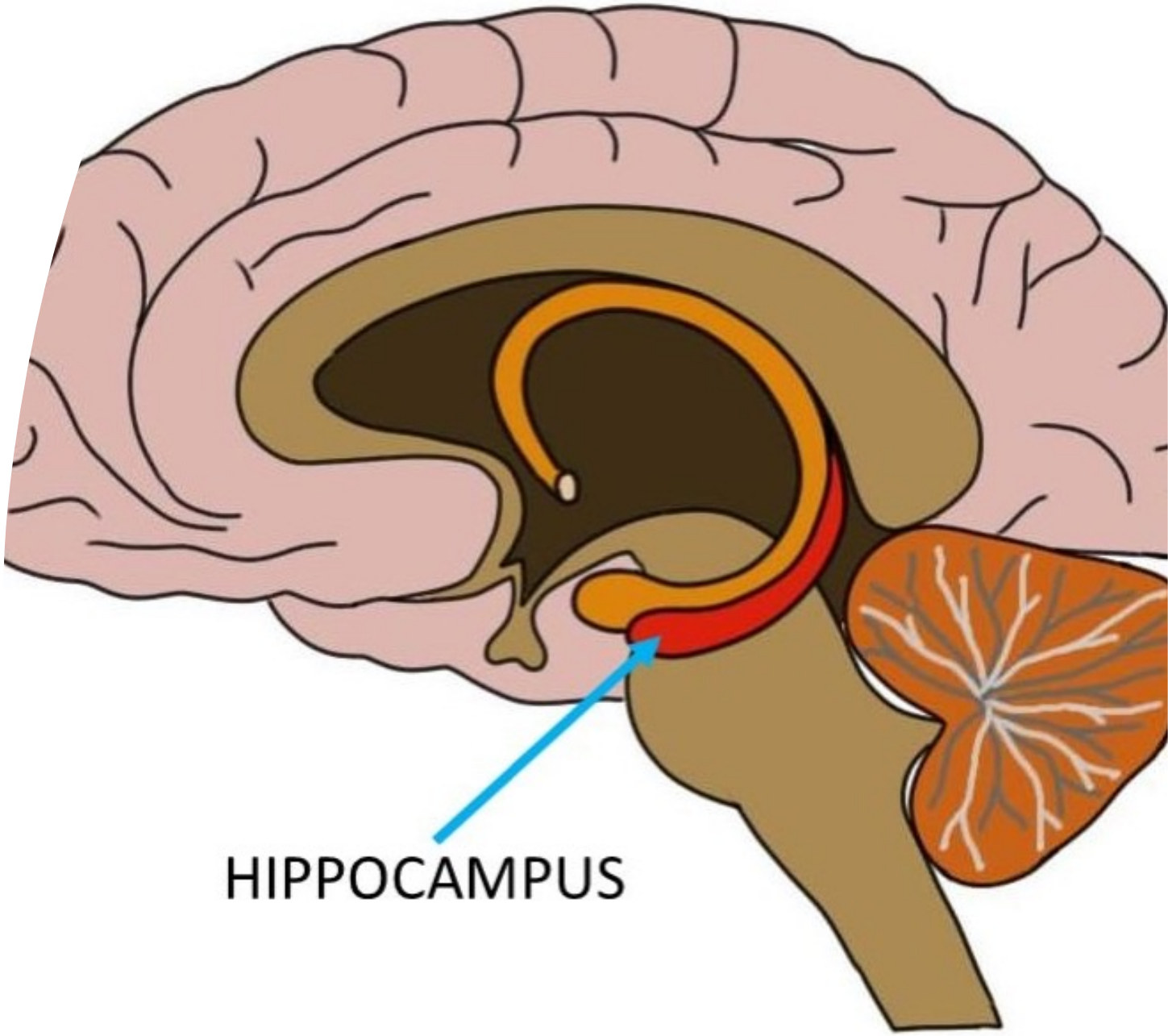
A youth may act rashly under stress, even if they technically "know better."

Information Processing

is how individuals perceive, analyze, manipulate, use, and remember information

Hippocampus

- is responsible for putting experience into chronological order and into perspective
- is responsible for integrating the raw sensory data into a coherent picture, putting a time tag on it, and transferring it into long-term memory, where it can be retrieved later
- is responsible for the ability to store and retrieve memories
- individuals may have difficulties storing and recalling information
- stress increases cortisol which damages the hippocampus

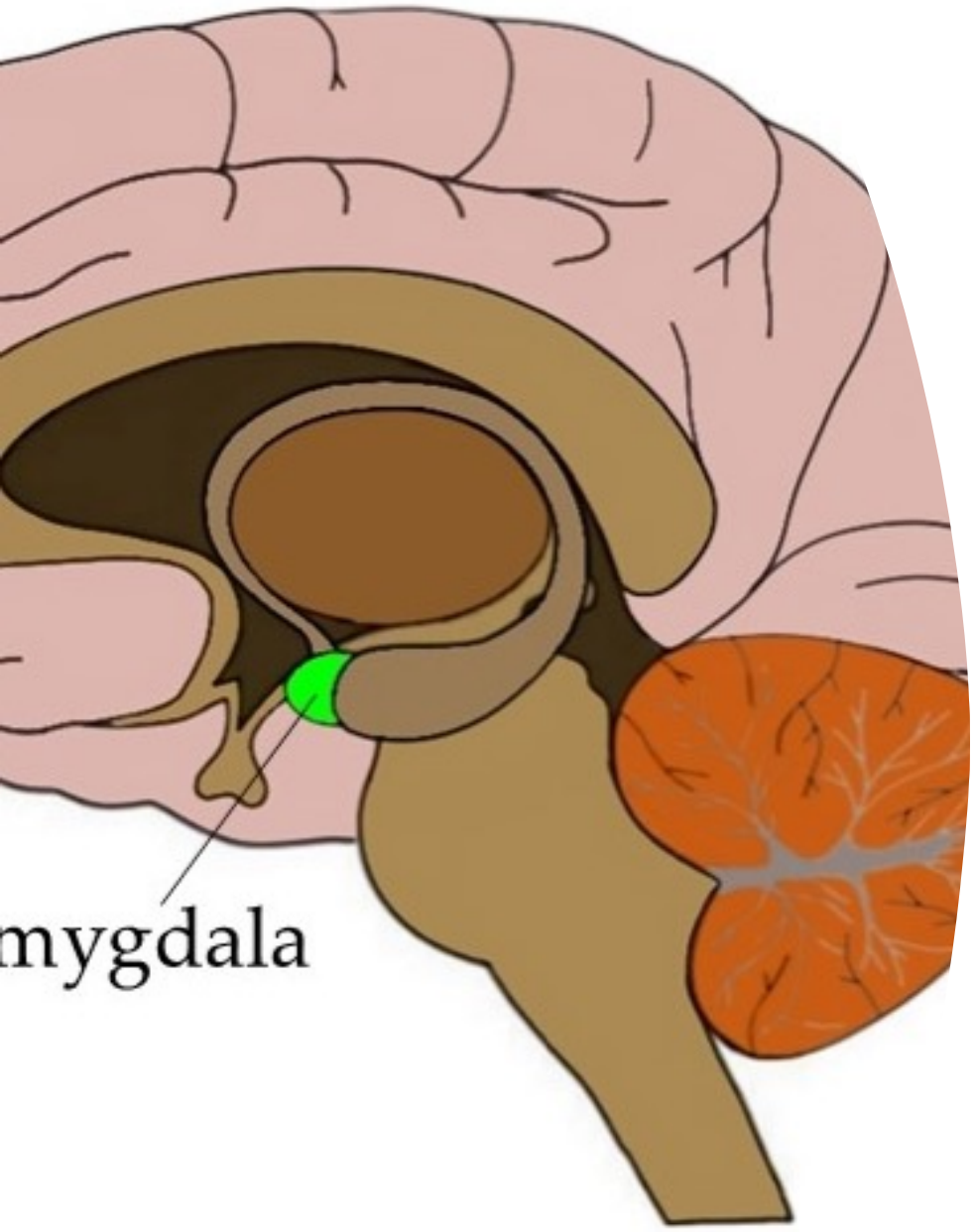


Hippocampus (continued)

After a trauma:

- Your hippocampus works to remember the event accurately and make sense of it.
- All the information doesn't get coded correctly when a person is overwhelmed.
- An individual will have trouble remembering important details of the event or might find themselves thinking a lot about what happened because their hippocampus is working so hard to try to make sense of things.
- Trauma impairs the hippocampus from imagining future experiences because we recall past experiences to evaluate future options.

The role of memory is to form future actions based on our ability to remember our past.



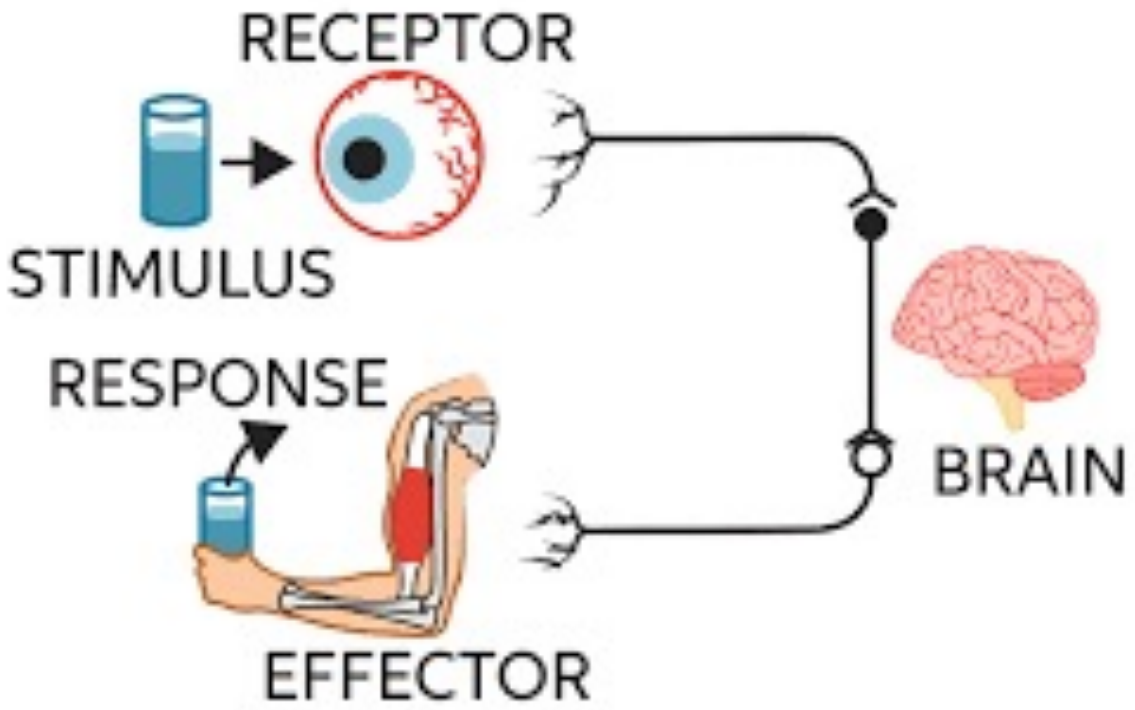
AMYGDALA

- catalogues past sensory experiences (threats, anger) as implicit memories, memories that are unconscious but can affect thoughts and behaviors

- these memories are readily primed in order to quickly associate them with future situations that are stressful or threatening

- this enables an instant response to danger

Motor Output



- Based on the sensory input and integration, the nervous system responds by sending signals to muscles, causing them to contract, or to glands, causing them to respond.

Real Life Scenarios from Those Who Have Experienced Trafficking and How the Nervous System Affected Their Response

Assault on an officer:16 y.o. trafficked female

- **Runway**
- **15 y.o.**
- **met trafficker while waiting for friends**

- Young lady in safe home demands a staff member tell her she loves her.
- Throws things at staff member when they refuse.

Other Factors That Affect Youth

- Family
- Home life
- Emotions/hormones

“The way to help our youth do better is to understand why their struggling.”

Summary

- Why do trafficked youth struggle?
  - Pre-frontal cortex not fully developed AND has decreased in function and activation due to trafficking trauma.
  - Hippocampus is shrunk.
  - Amygdala is mostly on.
  - Family trauma, possible unstable homelife, normal teenage hormones

How Can You Help?

Find safe ways to connect to youth.

Increase dopamine and oxytocin through:

- Safe touch
- Appropriate eye contact
- Appropriate voice (tone, volume, cadence)
- Behavior Matching
- Offering Choices within Boundaries

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