

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) and Domestic / Sexual Abuse

- **Normal Response to Abnormal Event**
- **Symptoms include:** high stress and emotional arousal, flashbacks, re-experiencing, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, sleep disturbance, hyper-vigilance and avoidance of reminders
- Survivors need time to heal naturally immediately after a traumatic event [e.g. 3-4 weeks] and **therapy is not helpful initially**
- **Interpersonal events** are more likely to result in traumatisation
- & can lead to **Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**
- **Survival instincts** are stronger & quicker than ‘thinking’ responses
- **Flop/freeze responses** are common but people ‘think’ they would react differently – implications for justice system and self-appraisal
- **Fragmented memory** [inconsistent narrative] is problematic for criminal justice proceedings

3 Brains	Important Neurological Systems in Processing Trauma [a simplified interpretation]
Lower or Reptilian [Body]	Brainstem – physical regulation e.g. heartbeat, breathing, startle response
Middle or Limbic [Emotions]	Amygdala – processes emotion, early memory & attachment, holds emotional memory, attends to threat Hippocampus – stores memory (life events in correct space & time, facts and recognising people) – less accessible when under threat
Higher or Neocortex [Thinking]	Pre-Frontal Cortex – responsible for making meanings, self-awareness, language, working memory, cognitive flexibility, planning, problem-solving – this part of the brain deactivates under threat

The ‘F’s : survival instincts and responses

• Fight	Resistance or aggression (physical or verbal)
• Flight	Running or backing away
• Freeze	Immobilised, Muscles Tense (sympathetic nervous system)
• Flop	Shutting down, appeasing attacker, submitting (parasympathetic nervous system)
• Friend	Feeling under threat activates our attachment / relational security instincts (problematic in abuse)
• Fragment	Disrupted formation of memory, and Dissociation - zoning out, feeling numb, switching off
Food, Family Fornicate	Other instincts for survival and gene replication

