Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviews – A Conversation with the Brainstem

Trauma victims undergo a process many professionals and victims do not commonly understand. Most of us inside and outside law enforcement have been trained to believe when an individual experiences an event, to include a trauma event, the cognitive brain usually records the vast majority of the event including the who, what where, why, when and how and peripheral information. Therefore, when the criminal justice system responds to the report of a crime most professionals are trained to obtain this type information.

Sadly, collecting information about the event in this manner actually inhibits memory and the accuracy of the details provided. Trauma victims do not experience trauma in the same way most of us experience a non-traumatic event. The body and brain react to and record trauma in an entirely different way then we have been led to believe. When trauma occurs, the cognitive brain will frequently shut down leaving the brainstem to experience and record the event. Brainstems do a great job recording experiential and sensory information but don’t do very well recording the information we have been trained to obtain. Most of our interview techniques have been developed to interview the cognitive brain and obtain cognitive information such as the color of shirt, description of the suspect, time frame, and other important information. Some victims are in fact capable of providing this information in a limited fashion. Most trauma victims however are not only unable to accurately provide this type of information, but when asked to do so often inadvertently provide inaccurate information and details which frequently causes the fact finder to become suspicious of the information provided. Since the vast majority of our training and experience has caused us to focus on the cognitive brain and research clearly shows the cognitive is not generally involved in experiencing or recording the experience we must develop and implement proven methods to properly interview the brainstem. This innovative and revolutionary manner is a way to interview the brainstem in a manner that not only reduces the inaccuracy of the information provided but will greatly enhance understanding of the experience, thereby increasing the likelihood of a better understanding of the event.

The Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview has already been proven to be a game changer in the investigation and prosecution of many forms of violence including child abuse and adult sexual abuse. Use of the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview process in domestic violence cases is also extremely promising for increasing successful interventions, investigations and prosecutions. This interview technique draws on the best practices of child forensic interviews, critical incident stress management, and motivational interview techniques combining them into a simple three pronged approach to unlock the trauma experience in a way we can better understand.

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