

Truth and trauma

How understanding the neurobiology of trauma is helping Portland police officers work with domestic violence survivors



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

"I couldn't advocate for myself or answer any of their questions. He was sitting right there intimidating me, and right before the police got there he was chasing me around the house threatening to kill me."

— "AMANDA"
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVOR

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How understanding the neurobiology of trauma is helping Portland police officers work with domestic violence survivors

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

“Becky” was in a state of disbelief. One week ago she told her boyfriend she was pregnant. Now he was handing her a hat, insisting, Becky says, that she cover up the bleeding wound he had allegedly inflicted to the back of her head only moments earlier. She needed to get herself together. A neighbor had called 9-1-1 during the commotion, and now two Portland police officers were waiting for someone to answer the couple’s front door.

“It happened so fast. I was in complete shock,” says Becky, who asked that we not use her real name.

“I just did what he said. I didn’t realize how bad it was,” she says. In that state of shock she told the officers at the door that nothing had happened and that she was OK.

“They left without even taking my name,” she says. “I thought for sure he was going to get arrested, but he didn’t.”

Domestic violence cases are often a challenge. From victims who don’t want to testify to a lack of witnesses and physical evidence, they are uniquely difficult to prosecute.

In 2013, the Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office pressed charges in less than half the domestic violence cases it reviewed.

And over the past decade, resources to the Portland Police Bureau’s Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team (DVERT) and Domestic Violence Reduction Unit (DVRU) have been reduced. They now have about half the manpower they did 10 years ago – five officers assigned to the DVRU and two officers plus a Multnomah County Sheriff Office detective assigned to DVERT. With this staffing level, they have the resources to investigate only about 7 percent of domestic violence reports received by the department each year. In

2013, out of a total of 8,179 domestic violence reports, only the 586 most serious cases were assigned to the domestic violence unit.

About 3,000 of the calls were categorized as non-crime reports and required no further action. Sgt. Ronald Mason, head of DVERT and DVRU, says that the call from Becky’s neighbor was most likely categorized this way.

The cases the domestic violence team cannot take on fall to other PPB officers. However, Portland’s domestic violence team has an advantage that other officers, and in fact the majority of police across the country do not. They underwent a specialized training last summer on what some are calling a revolution in the way investigators interview violent crime victims – which can be key to ultimately closing a case.

Behind the shock and confusion Becky was feeling, as she talked to officers at her front door, is the neurobiology of trauma. In the event of a traumatic experience, chemicals released in the brain impair a victim’s cognitive functioning, making it difficult to think logically, says Dr. Christopher Wilson, a psychiatrist who has trained law enforcement across the country how to interact with people who are experiencing this phenomenon. He says traditionally, most officers are trained in the Reid technique of interviewing – the systematic who, what, when, where and why line of questioning – which can be very effective when trying to extract information from a perpetrator. But when officers take a similar, controlled and direct approach to interviewing someone who has just experienced a violent attack, it can cause anxiety and fear, causing the survivor to shut down and feel unsafe answering



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

questions truthfully.

The traditional practice of interviewing has been known to perpetuate self-blame in domestic violence survivors. (Why did you stay with him if you knew he was violent?) It can also result in police reports containing insufficient and contradictory information. To the un-trauma-informed investigator, many behaviors exhibited by someone who’s just experienced a traumatic event double as signs of lying. Behaviors such as an inability to remember the chronological order of events, nervousness, avoiding eye contact or of recalling sounds and smells with more ease than physical details about his or her attacker, are all the result of effects trauma has on the brain.

In the days that follow, the survivor can often remember details of the violent episode with more clarity. Discrepancies between the initial report taken at the scene of the crime and follow-up interviews can strengthen the abuser’s defense and lead police, attorneys and, in high-profile cases, the public, to blame the victim.

Experts agree it would be ideal to wait a couple days before interviewing the victim at all because it’s difficult for someone who has just experienced trauma to give a coherent account of events. The Portland Police Bureau is aware of this phenomenon,

citing it as the reason for delaying interviews with its own officers for 48 hours after they’ve been involved in a shooting.

While the police bureau isn’t delaying victim and witness interviews, Mason says that a couple days have usually passed between the time the initial report on a domestic violence case is taken and when his unit follows up. He says the initial report is like a snapshot, and by the time his investigators contact the victim, it’s easier to get a cleaner and more accurate picture of events.

Mason says that while his officers already had a basic understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence, his squad got a better understanding of the physiology of trauma and has incorporated things they learned from attending this unique brand of training, created by Russell Strand, in August. PPB’s Sex Crimes Unit will receive an abbreviated version of the same training later this month at a seminar put on by the Oregon attorney general’s office.

Strand is a former military police investigator and current chief of Behavioral Sciences Education and Training Division at the Military Police School at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. He has turned an approach

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psychiatrists have been using since the dawn of modern psychology into a program that teaches criminal investigators how to interview trauma victims. It's called the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview, or FETI. The technique can be broken down into three basic steps designed to enable the officer to collect as much forensic psychophysiological evidence as possible.

The first step is genuine empathy, as Strand explains that victims should never be treated as witnesses to their own crime. The second step is this question: Help me understand what you are able to remember about your experience.

And finally, shut up and listen.

As Mason explains it, a trauma victim's memory is "like a jigsaw puzzle that's been thrown into the air. The puzzle pieces land all over the place." He says it's up to the detective to collect the pieces from the victim as they are disseminated, sorting out the important pieces that help reveal the story.

"It's taking a disjointed story and translating it into a report that makes sense," he says.

Investigators in the U.S. Army have fully adopted the FETI approach, and it's quickly taking hold in other branches of the military as well. According to David Markel, one of the nation's foremost FETI experts, it's made a big difference in the military.

"What we're getting from our field agents in the military is that this manner of approach in interviewing victims of trauma is having a phenomenally good affect on how these cases are investigated," says Markel. "It's also having a great effect on how they're prosecuted and how they're perceived by other soldiers and other military personnel. We're actually getting fewer complaints from victims about how they are treated by investigators because this is a much more empathetic approach."

According to Sgt. Peter Mahuna, who leads PPB's Sex Crimes Unit and has already taken a course on FETI, exhibiting signs of the neurobiology of trauma can make a victim appear more believable. Markel says these signs can then aid the prosecution, serving as psychophysiological evidence that the victim actually experienced a violent attack.

Markel served as a lead investigator at the Lafayette Police Department in Colorado for 18 years and worked as a law-enforcement training consultant before he began working with Strand to train Army investigators on the FETI technique. Now that it's been implemented in the military, he's turning his attention toward training civilian law enforcement and has taught investigators in Ashland how to conduct this style of interview. He says officers who have received this type of training make up a very small percent of law enforcement across the county, putting officers in PPB's sex crimes and domestic violence units ahead of the curve.

But most of PPB's 950 police officers have not received this training, and they are the officers who ultimately handle the bulk of the department's domestic violence cases. Mason says it would cost about

\$800 to train each officer through Strand's program, but Mahuna says he is exploring ways of extending a shorter and less-expensive form of this training to the rest of the bureau, hoping it might eventually be worked into its annual weeklong in-service training.

PPB spokesman Pete Simpson says that,



Sgt. Ronald Mason

"only a few people have been through the FETI Training and there is still a long way to go before it would be proposed as a standard for the entire organization."

To date, only one Multnomah County sheriff detective, who is also a member of PPB's domestic violence team, has taken a class on FETI. But the sheriff's office is reportedly considering using the principles she learned during the course she took with DVERT for the future training of its first responders and other uniformed units.

Martha Strawn Morris, director of Multnomah County and city of Portland's Gateway Center for Domestic Violence, works closely with DVRU officers in her work. First responders to 9-1-1 calls give survivors information about her center, and many times women will



Martha Strawn Morris

follow up with her office the next day to connect with resources. Sometimes a police officer will meet a survivor at the center to either write up a report or to take down follow-up information.

Strawn Morris says she has

noticed a difference between the way officers in Portland's domestic violence unit interview a survivor and the way patrolmen from East Precinct, who are summoned when a DVRU officer isn't available, interview a survivor.

"The DVRU is less likely to victim-blame and is more sensitive to the dynamics of domestic violence. They're just better trained on this particular topic. I've come to believe, working with domestic violence survivors over the last four years, day in and day out, that victim blaming is the default position for all of us. It's not just police officers," Strawn Morris says. "I've heard patrol officers really emphasize the fact of (the survivor's) intimate relationship — 'Well, he was your boyfriend

right?'" She says the implication is that the survivor chose him, knew what he was like, and therefore invited this.

"And unfortunately, many survivors hold those same beliefs," Strawn Morris says.

"And then the cop comes along and enforces that same belief."

"Amanda," who also asked that we not use her real name, didn't feel as if she was being heard after multiple attempts to involve law enforcement in the aftermath of an abusive relationship she had ended. At one point she says her ex-boyfriend forced his way into her home,

and fearing for her life, she called 9-1-1. She says the two officers who responded to her call seemed to be indifferent about her situation. At the time, she says, her whole body was shaking and her mind had completely shut down.

"I couldn't advocate for myself or answer any of their questions," she recalls. She says her ex-boyfriend "was sitting right there intimidating me, and right before the police got there he was chasing me around the house threatening to kill me."

According to court documents, that scenario ended in the police asking her ex-boyfriend to leave, which he did.

After filing pre-restraining and pre-stalking orders, Amanda eventually sought the help of the Gateway Center. It was there that she was connected with DVRU and FETI-trained Officer Dan Romanowski. She says he appeared to genuinely care about her situation. "I felt like he really believed me," she says. "He seemed to go out of his way to help me."

Once she adjusted from the shock of her alleged attack, Becky also decided to press charges. She went to the Gateway Center, where advocates connected her with an officer to start processing her case.

Markel says that since FETI's adoption in the U.S. Army, victim complaints about how investigators handle their cases have drastically decreased. It took about four years for FETI to become standard practice in the military, and FETI programs are currently being developed to teach officers how to interview perpetrators too, because they often identify themselves as victims.

But law enforcement can be slower to adopt new ways of doing things, says Markel. He says it can be difficult for most police officers to wrap their heads around a concept that puts the interview in the hands of the victim.

"It's so ingrained in us, as law enforcement officials, that we have to be in control of all our interviews," Markel says. "But once they truly understand it and start to see it work, it becomes easier and easier."

emily@streetroots.org

'Options' program a new approach to sexual assault

The police department in Ashland has implemented an innovative new approach to handling sexual assault cases. The You Have Options program puts decisions about how to move forward with an investigation into the hands of the victim. The program's creator, Detective Carrie Hull, says that since its adoption in 2013, the number of sexual assaults reported each year has more than doubled. The department has also seen a drastic increase in positive interactions with law enforcement, Hull says.

"The techniques that we use are not complicated and they are not new to law enforcement. We just have formalized them so survivors understand that these actually are options at the police departments that offer them," Hull says.

She says the real difference between this program's approach and the traditional way of conducting an investigation is time. When a person's home is burglarized, the residents may be traumatized, but they want the burglar caught and want police to move forward with an investigation right away, she says. They may feel bad about leaving their front door unlocked, but the police are not likely to chastise them for that mistake. But with a sexual assault case, says Hull, the victim is more likely to internalize mistakes he or she made, and is going to need a lot more time to process that decision. For that reason, she says the Ashland Police Department is ready to listen when the victim is ready to talk.

The program also gives victims the option to stay anonymous, have someone else file the report for them, decide whether or not investigators will contact the person who assaulted them and include them in other decisions about the investigation.

"There are evidentiary problems that can come from that," Hull says, "but the alternative is, if they never come in, we're never going to get to a place where we are potentially turning a case over to a DA where those evidentiary considerations will come in."

In 2014, Sgt. Peter Mahuna, head of PPB's Sex Crimes Unit, attended a weeklong training on the You Have Options program. A main component of the program is the Forensic Experiential Interview (FETI). Mahuna says he likes the program and may implement aspects of it. He says it would be difficult for a department the size of Portland's to sign on officially considering that to be a recognized member, all 1,100 people who work in the bureau, including nonsworn staff, would have to undergo the training.

— Emily Green