

Worksheet 4.1

Response Scenarios Case Studies With Answers

Scenario 1:

Kevin is 12 years old, and has been bullied and sexually assaulted by several boys from school. He and his mother, Karen, visit you. The police have arrested the assailants and Kevin wants to find out what will happen next.

Kevin is very quiet during your conversation. When his mother asks Kevin to describe what happened, you encourage Kevin to only say what he feels comfortable talking about.

Kevin responds, "I didn't feel anything. It was kind of like it was happening to someone else. Like I was in a movie or something. It was weird, it was like I didn't care."

Even though you make it clear it's not necessary, Kevin wants to tell you a little about the assault. But he does so in a very calm and detached way. When Kevin momentarily leaves the room, Karen confides to you that she is worried about Kevin, because although he seems okay, he won't leave her side. He is afraid to be alone and says he only feels safe with her. More than once, Karen says, Kevin has said "I don't feel right anymore." "I don't feel like myself."

1. What survival reflex did Kevin experience? Explain your reasoning.

Kevin experienced dissociation. He felt unreal, like he was in a movie, and disconnected from his body.

2. What effects did the assault have on Kevin? Which of the key brain circuitries discussed in this training were involved?

Kevin was able to clearly describe what happened to him, so his prefrontal cortex is functioning to the extent that he can retrieve thoughts and memories and put them into words in a clear and coherent way. However, he is still experiencing a lot of fear, including of being alone (fear circuitry). He also has a strong need and motivation to connect with someone close to him, his mother (seeking and satisfaction circuitries). When Kevin says that he "didn't feel anything" during the assault, and that he currently doesn't "feel like myself," he is indicating that he experienced dissociation during the assault and is still at least somewhat dissociated now. This is consistent with altered functioning of his embodiment circuitry. Feeling safe in his body again, by occupying his embodiment circuitry with calm, soothing, and even pleasurable sensations, is necessary for Kevin's healing. These experiences can come from feeling safe and connected with his mother and from engaging in physical exercise or any other activities in which Kevin can have body experiences that feel safe, comfortable and empowering.

Scenario 2:

Bella is a single mother with three children. She works cleaning homes and was on her way to deposit a large sum of cash into her account when she was robbed and sexually molested. The perpetrator threatened her with a gun, took all her money, and fondled her roughly under her clothing before leaving.

Bella visits you to find out how to obtain money for living expenses and rent. She says the police cannot help because she was so focused on the gun she could not give a good description of the perpetrator. She tells you that when the perpetrator approached her with a gun, “That was all I could focus on – that gun.”

Bella explains that she is from Columbia, and has seen much violence. She is very afraid of guns. “I was so scared I just stood there while he put his hands under my clothing and took my purse. I tried to scream but he had his hand over my mouth. I could feel my heart beating really fast. As soon as he was done I took off. I didn’t know I could move that fast.”

She is greatly troubled by the loss of money, more so than the sexual assault. Bella begins to cry. She blames herself for losing the money, and now she has no idea how she will provide for her 3 children.

1. Describe Bella’s emotional, physical, and attentional responses to the assault, based on the class discussion.

When confronted with the gun, Bella’s fear circuitry took over. She froze and stayed frozen throughout the robbery and assault, rather than fleeing or attempting to fight off the perpetrator. Throughout the robbery and assault attention was focused in a bottom-up way (i.e., capturing anything perceived as dangerous or threatening, or as needed for survival). Attention was focused almost exclusively on the gun, as well as inner sensations of her heartbeat. Because her heart was beating faster and harder, increased blood supply was sent to her muscles and she was able to flee quickly when the perpetrator left.

2. Describe how Bella’s memory may have been affected by the crime.

When Bella’s fear circuitry kicked into action, her prefrontal cortex was impaired and what she paid attention to was determined by the fear circuitry. This resulted in “bottom up” attention focused almost entirely on a specific stimulus – the gun. Because what gets attention largely determines what gets encoded into memory, Bella most vividly remembers the gun and the body sensations of her beating heart, as well as a few other details around the perpetrator taking her bag and touching her body.

Scenario 3:

When Gabrielle's rapist is brought to trial, she comes to you for information about the criminal justice process. As you are speaking with her, Gabrielle tells you she is afraid of testifying because of the way she responded during the crime. She says she was paralyzed with fear during the assault. "I just *knew* I was going to die," she says. "I tried to scream and wanted to defend myself, but I couldn't. I couldn't even *move*. I was just *stiff*."

She tells you that the police asked her repeatedly why she didn't fight back or resist. She feels ashamed that she wasn't able to fend off the attacker.

Because Gabrielle wants you to hear her story, you don't interrupt her. But as she continues, it's obvious that she's confused about some key facts and the sequence of events, and as she gets increasingly upset she has greater difficulty describing what happened. You realize that Gabrielle may be experiencing some of the same emotions that were present during the rape.

1. What survival reflex did Gabrielle experience? Explain your reasoning.

Tonic Immobility. Gabrielle described herself as essentially "paralyzed" and unable to fight back or even speak.

2. What effect did the rape have on Gabrielle's memory? What parts of the brain were involved?

Because Gabrielle was terrified during the rape, her amygdala was very active and, via its effects on the hippocampus, caused strong encoding into memory of some sensory and emotional fragments of the experience. But the altered functioning of the hippocampus also resulted in her poorly encoding the sequence of events and are now making it hard for her to recall or describe what happened in a clear and organized way. Finally, Gabrielle had difficulty speaking because the prefrontal cortex was impaired, just as it was during the actual crime, when she relived emotional reactions she had experienced during the assault.

INSTRUCTOR WORKSHEET
Sexual Assault Advocate/Counselor Training
