

# **What we don't know CAN hurt us.**

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, PARTNER-  
INFLICTED BRAIN INJURY, AND A  
WAY FORWARD

Who am I?

RACHEL RAMIREZ

- Ohio Statewide DV coalition staff
- 18 years in DV work
- Trauma-informed capacity building
- Now a passionate advocate for survivors of domestic violence impacted by brain injury



# The Center on Partner-Inflicted Brain Injury

LEADING THE CHARGE TO RECOGNIZE BRAIN  
INJURY CAUSED BY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

<https://www.odvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Promising-Practices-Partner-Inflicted-Brain-Injury.pdf>

# What do you think?

The organization I work for is adequately prepared to address brain injury caused by violence.



Think it through!

**What does your organization need to be more prepared?**

## Fact #1

This is terrible violence to experience, and  
hard stuff to dig into.

## Fact #2

Seeking help is an amazing act of strength, courage, and resistance.



## Our time together...

- The Brain
- The Big Picture
- Partner-inflicted brain injury
- Signs and symptoms
- Misidentification and finally an answer
- Supporting survivors
- Ohio's CARE approach and tools

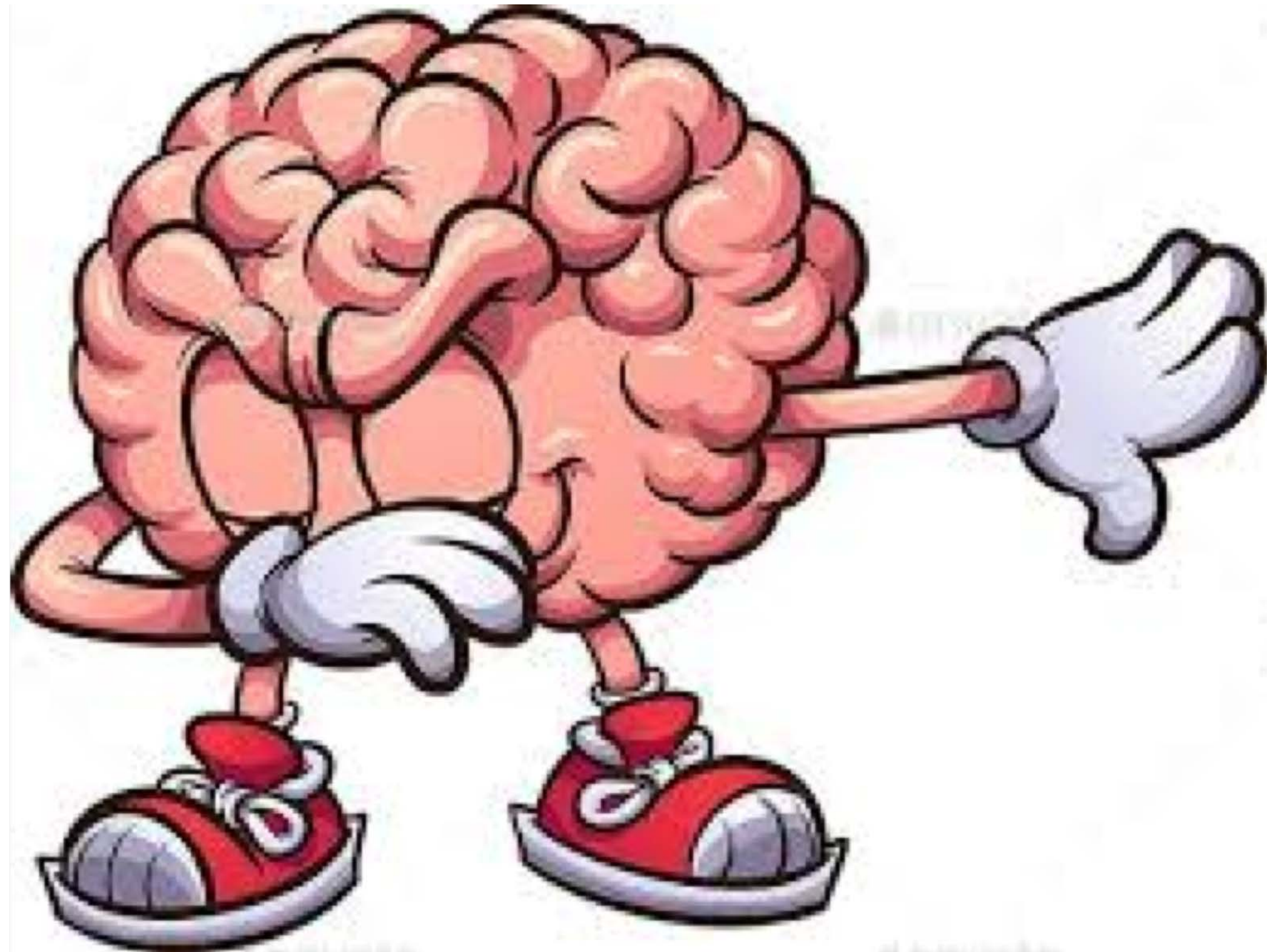




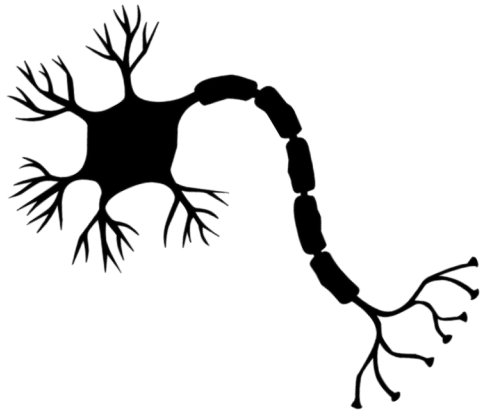
# Our life consists of things...

- **We want or like to do.**
- **We need to do.**
- **We are expected to do.**

**And our amazing brain makes all of that possible.**



# Basic Brain Organization



Brain Cells =  
Neurons



Neurons  
connect



And form  
efficient  
pathways



A healthy  
brain is like  
a city with  
zero traffic  
jams

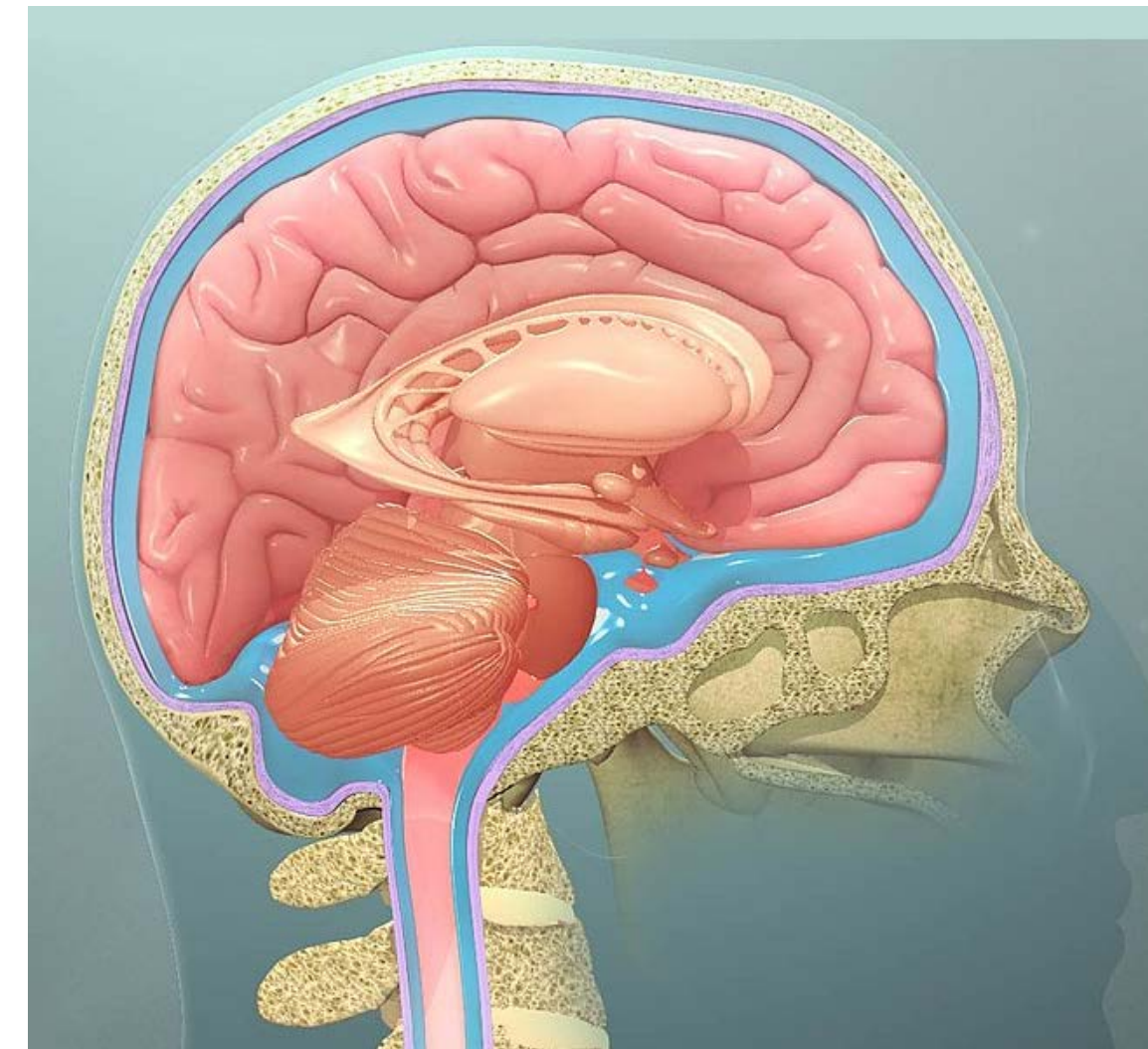




# The brain needs nutrients & protection



Blood vessels bring  
oxygen & nutrients



Protected by the skull,  
tissues, and fluid

# Brain Functions

## *Frontal*

Judgement  
Movement  
Memory  
Personality  
Executive  
function\*

## *Parietal*

Sensation

## *Occipital*

Sight

## *Temporal*

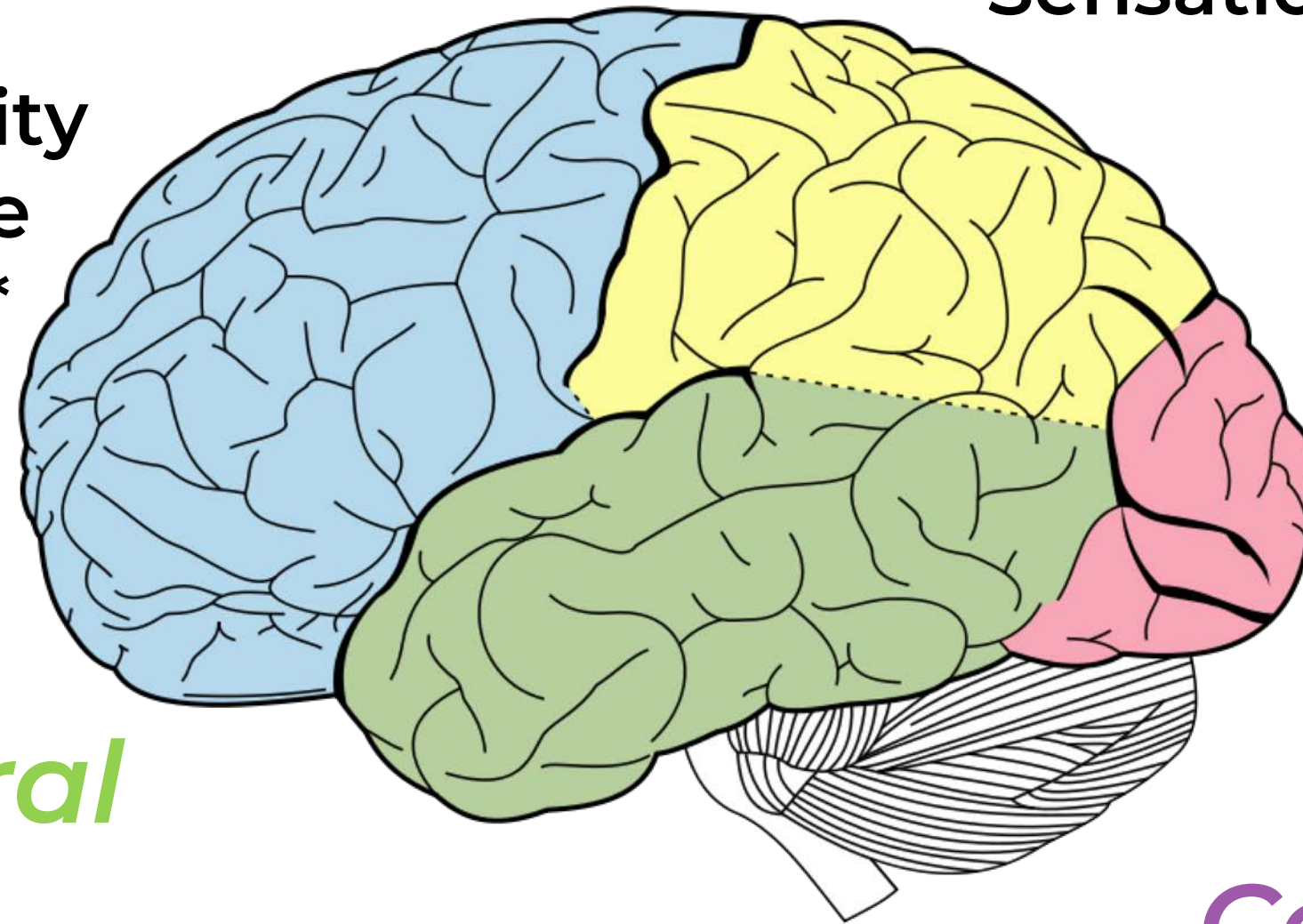
Language  
Hearing  
Processes and  
integrates memory  
Comprehension

## *Brain Stem*

Heart rate  
Swallowing  
Breathing

## *Cerebellum*

Coordination  
Balance





**Problem solving**  
**Time management**  
**Starting tasks**  
**Organizing**  
**Planning**  
**Managing emotions**  
**Controlling impulses**  
**Social and sexual behavior**  
**Self-awareness**  
**Prioritizing**

Executive Functioning:  
Mental skills that include working memory,  
flexible thinking,  
and self control  
Essential for everyday tasks

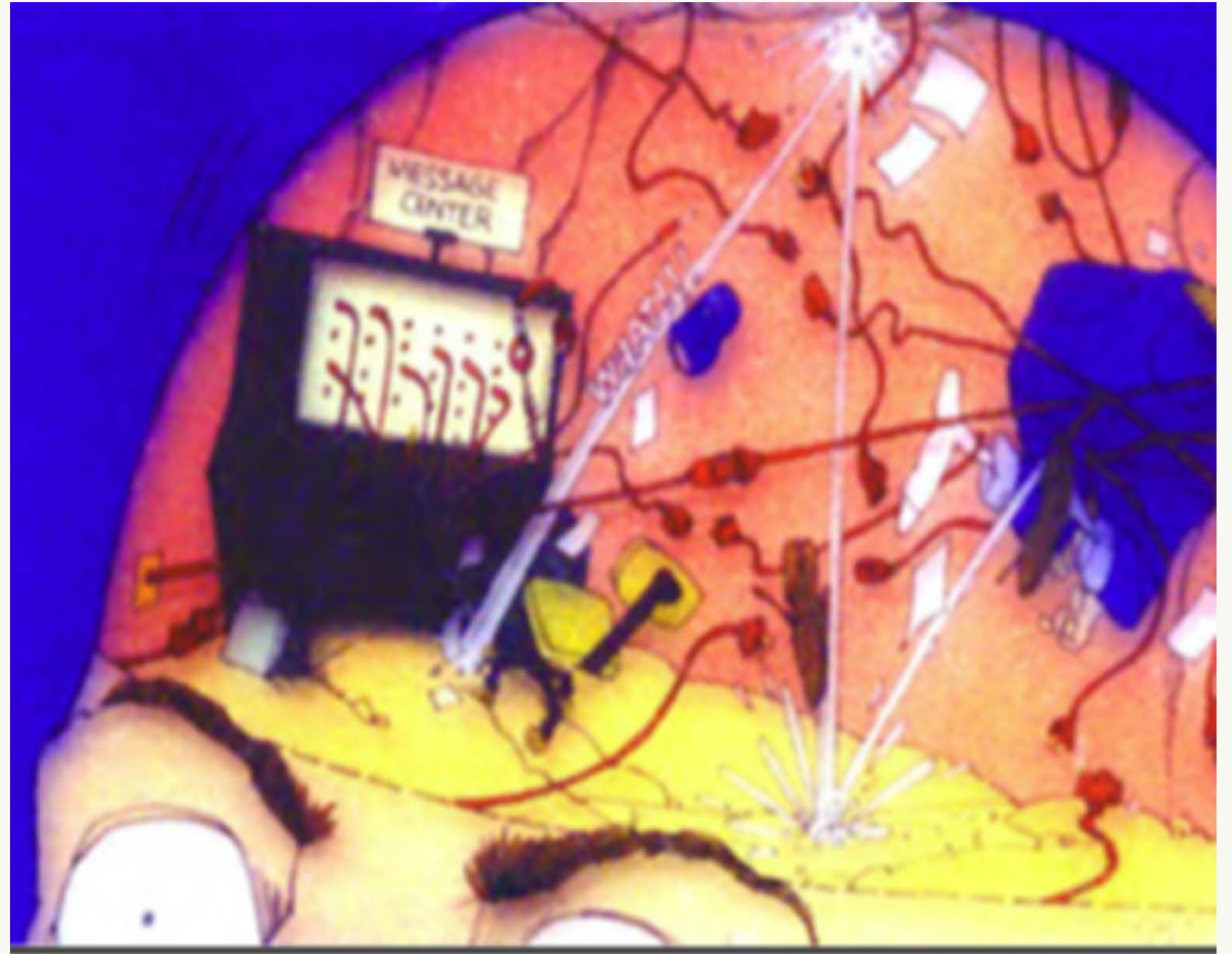


**When the  
brain is  
healthy...**





**When the  
brain gets  
hurt...**





## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The dynamics  
of abuse and  
the trauma it  
causes



# What is domestic violence?

**A pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors.**





# Coercive Control

- My body
- My movements
- My thoughts
- My feelings about myself and others
  - Mental health
  - Substance use
  - Physical health
- Reproductive coercion



# Gaslighting

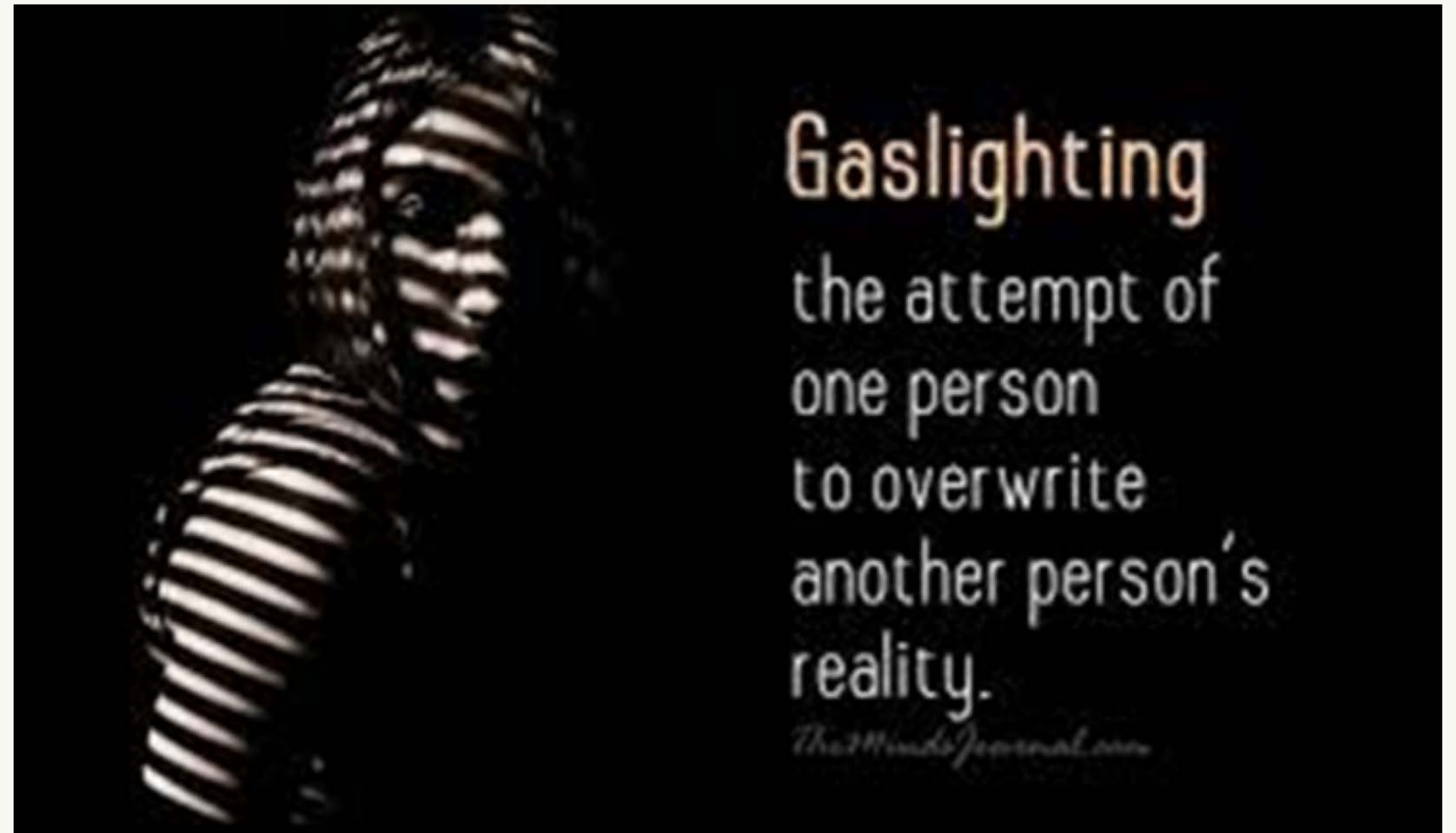
That didn't happen.  
And if it did, it wasn't that  
bad.

And if it was, that's not a  
big deal.

And if it is, it's not my fault.

And if it was, I didn't  
mean it.

And if I did, you deserve it.





Trauma is...

An event, series of events, or set of circumstances that overwhelms your ability to cope.



Trauma Impacts us...

With physical, emotional, physiological, and cognitive impacts.

# How trauma can affect people

## **Decreases ability to:**

- Manage and regulate feelings
- Self-soothe
- Trust others
- Thoughtfully plan
- Have energy to get things done
- Tell stories

## **INCREASES CHANCES OF..**

- Tension, anxiety, panic, emotional volatility
- Avoidance, constriction, and disassociation
- Use of drugs, alcohol, or other addictions to manage symptoms



# Intersections



Historical and cultural trauma

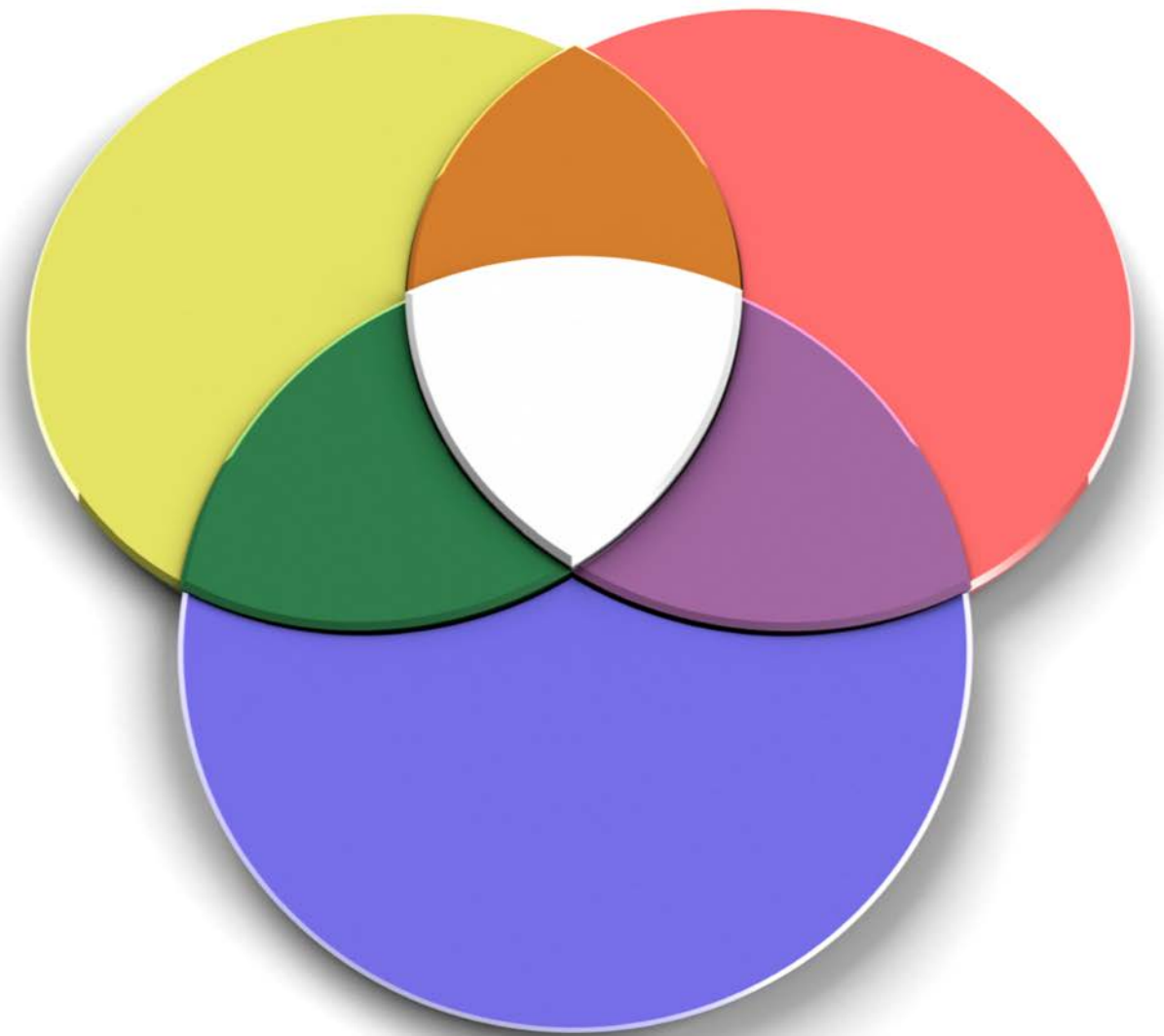
Cultural forces  
and pressures

Unequal access to resources

Social determinants of health

Stigma

Systemic prejudice, discrimination  
and oppression



# WHAT WE LEARNED IN OHIO

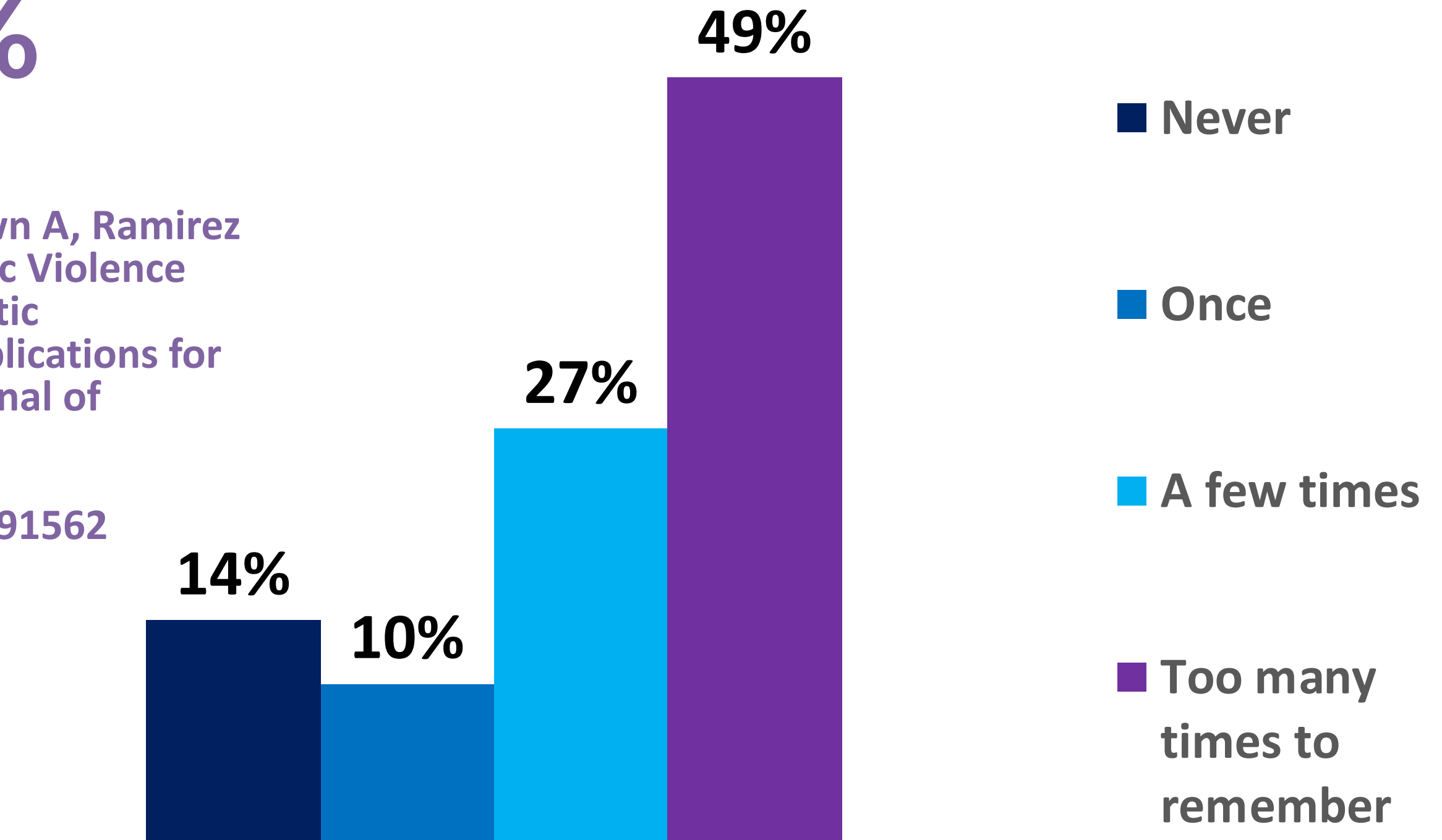
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0SJZjlogO0>



# Have You Ever Been Hit or Hurt in the Head?

**YES 86%**

Nemeth JM, Mengo C, Kulow E, Brown A, Ramirez R. Provider Perceptions and Domestic Violence (DV) Survivor Experiences of Traumatic and Anoxic-Hypoxic Brain Injury: Implications for DV Advocacy Service Provision. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. 2019;28(6):744-763. doi: 10.1080/10926771.2019.1591562



How many times?

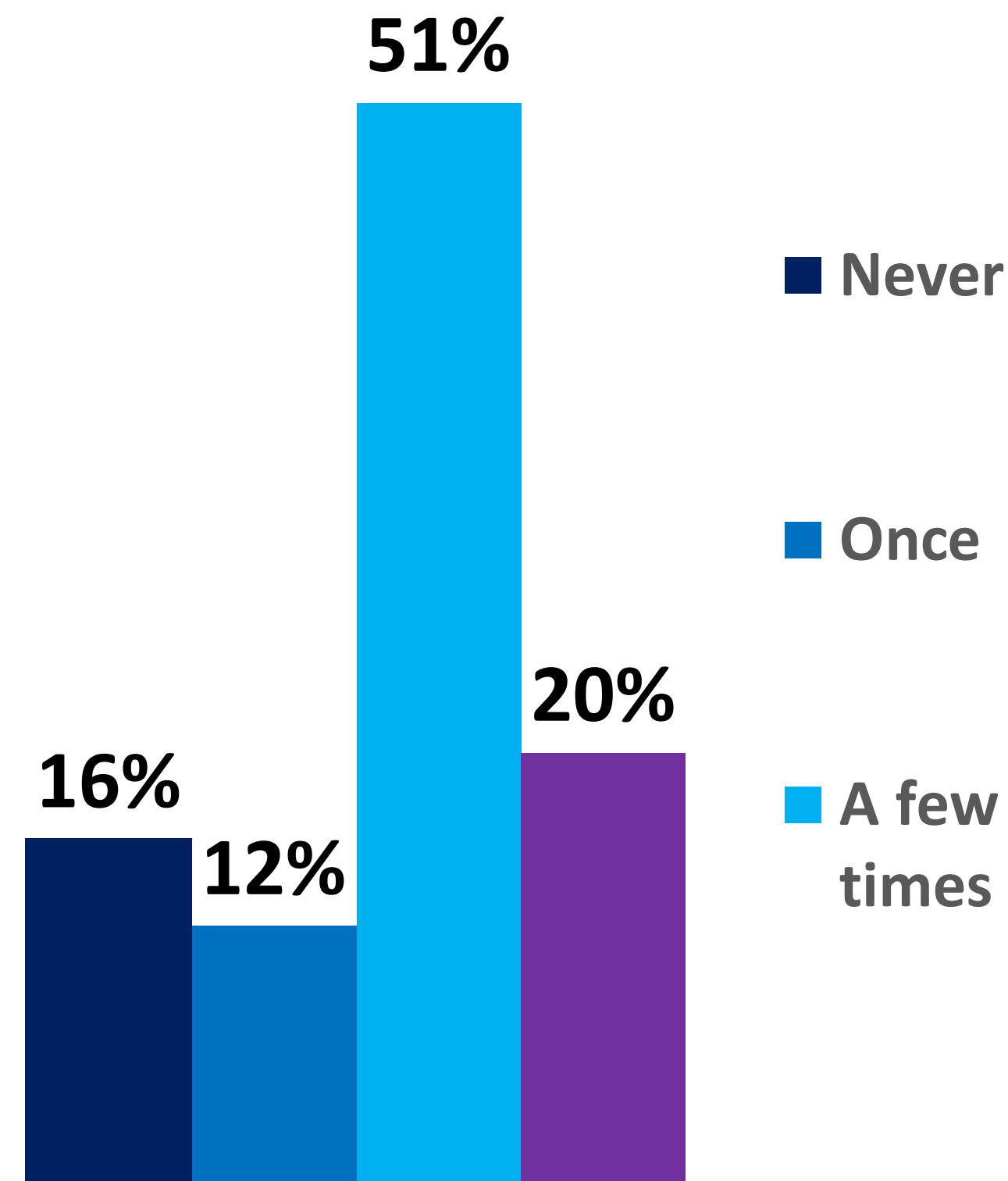
**Too Many to Count**  
**49%**

Nemeth JM, Mengo C, Kulow E, Brown A, Ramirez R. Provid Brain Injury: Implications for DV Advocacy Service Provision. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. 2019;28(6):744-763. doi: [10.1080/10926771.2019.1591562](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2019.1591562)er Perceptions and Domestic Violence (DV) Survivor Experiences of Traumatic and Anoxic-Hypoxic

Have You Ever Been Choked or  
Strangled?

**YES 83%**

Nemeth JM, Mengo C, Kulow E, Brown A, Ramirez R. Provider Perceptions and Domestic Violence (DV) Survivor Experiences of Traumatic and Anoxic-Hypoxic Brain Injury: Implications for DV Advocacy Service Provision. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. 2019;28(6):744-763. doi: 10.1080/10926771.2019.1591562





# What do you think??

- Brain injury was on the radar for most of the domestic violence service providers we talked to.



Staff was not  
recognizing brain  
injury.

One administrator shared:

"I mean, I've been here 28 years  
and we've truly only had a  
handful of true TBI clients."

Victims might be  
hiding symptoms.

One administrator shared:

"“Victims often try to  
compensate without telling  
people what’s happening  
with them, often, you know,  
try to keep it to themselves  
or hide it.”



# Seizures

Staff 1: We have a lot that come with seizures. That's pretty common for us.

Staff 2: That really is.

Facilitator: How common is that?

Staff 1: Oh my, gosh. It seems like a lot more than the general population would be.

Staff 2: I think there's been three since I've been here and I started in January, so that's a pretty common thing.

Staff 1: I've been here a little over two years, and I think at one point...we had three clients who reported seizures.

Interviewer: At the same time?

Staff 1: Yes.

Interviewer: How many beds is this facility?

Staff 1: Twelve, maybe fourteen.



# What causes concussions or TBIs?

For every  
1  
NHL player

5,500  
survivors of DV  
sustain a brain injury  
each year

## Brain Injury Caused by Domestic Violence

Multiple traumatic  
events within an  
ongoing traumatic  
environment







# Brain Injury Caused By Violence

When person's brain is hurt through intentional **strangulation** and/or **blows to the head** by another person. This can cause a **traumatic brain injury, concussion, or other type of brain injury.**

# Barriers?

**What type of response do people in your agency have when someone comes to services with these characteristics?**

**What additional barriers do these symptoms create to getting your agency's services?**

# When the brain is hurt?

- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Strangulation
- Changes in Normal Cognitive Function



# TBI

## **Traumatic Brain Injury is:**

## **Blow to the head and brain disruption**

- Blow, bump or jolt to the head
- Stretches, pulls, and damages tissue
- Inflammation causes widespread damage
- Neurons cannot regrow → slowly form new connections
- “When you’ve seen one brain injury, you’ve seen one brain injury.”

# Strangulation

## **Indicates significant safety and lethality risks**

- Pressure is applied to survivor's neck
- Restricts oxygen and nutrients to brain → results in hypoxic-anoxic brain injury
- Causes damage very fast with little pressure
- Altered consciousness + no access to medical care + lack of screening anywhere + lack of visible injuries = **minimization & brain injuries go undetected and unidentified**

# **Brain Injury Changes How Survivors** ***Think, Feel & Act***

**Thinking/  
Cognitive**

**Physical**

**Emotional**

# Cognitive Symptoms

## **Survivors may struggle with:**

- Poor memory
- Poor comprehension
- Getting started on tasks
- Maintaining attention
- Problem-solving
- Challenges with risk assessment
- Executive functioning

## **Which may look like:**

- “Not following through with plans
- Not interested or engaged
- They don’t care
- They are unmotivated or lazy
- Mentally fatigue easily
- Missing deadlines, appointments
- Not completing tasks or forms
- Losing train of thought or not following conversations



# Physical Symptoms

## **Survivors may struggle with:**

- Sensitivity to light & sound
- Vision problems
- Poor sleep quality
- Seizures
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Poor balance
- Fatigue
- Difficulty swallowing\*
- Neck pain\*

## **Which may look like:**

- Pain and discomfort
- Difficulties falling asleep, staying asleep & waking up
- Problems with eyesight or hearing
- Getting easily distracted
- Difficulties concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Bothered by noise or lighting
- Tripping/bumping into furniture
- Too tired to participate in normal activities

# Emotional Symptoms

## **Survivors may struggle with:**

- Becoming easily frustrated
- More aggressive
- Feeling anger and rage
- Mood fluctuations
- More impulsive
- Exacerbated mental health challenges
  - Anxiety
  - PTSD
  - Depression

## **Which may look like:**

- “Non-compliant”
- Say or do things without thinking
- Troubles getting along with staff or other residents
- Challenging others
- May not follow directions
- Talk about hopelessness
- Withdrawal or isolation
- Threats to harm others or self

# PTSD and Brain Injury

PTSD and Brain Injury share the following symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Sleep Problems
- Trouble with Memory and Attention
  - Feeling Depressed
  - Feeling Anxious
  - Irritability
- Cognitive Problems

# Acute and Chronic?

## ACUTE CONDITIONS

- Health conditions that happen, heal and go away. Most often it doesn't continue to impact your life.

## CHRONIC CONDITIONS

- Health conditions that happen (and sometimes develop over a period of time), heal some, but need to be managed.



# Lasting Effects

## Mild is still important

75% of BI = mild

Every BI looks & heals  
differently

Can impact so many  
different

## Multiple Brain Injuries

Survivors at greater risk for  
multiple BI

Compounds symptoms

Slows recovery

# Recovery after a head injury:

Affected by various factors

- Response after the injury
- Number of brain injuries
- Other bodily injuries
- Psychological factors
- General life stress
- Biological sex—women tend to have extended recovery time

# Body and Brain Responses

## Individualized

- Immediate symptoms

Right after the injury

- Brain injury symptoms
- Trauma-related symptoms
- Secondary symptoms

Once trying to get back to life

- Long term impact

Can last weeks, months, years, or forever

PERSISTENT  
SYMPTOMS

**NO KNOWN CAUSE**

**Post-Concussive  
Syndrome**

- **Thinking/Remembering**
- **Physical**
- **Emotional/Mood**
- **Sleep Disturbance**



# Addressing Head Injuries

# **Head Injury impacts survivors' daily activities**

And makes it difficult for survivors  
to take care of themselves &  
those they care about

## Words to Remember

**People will forget what you did, people will forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.**

# Accommodations

Provides support in a way that takes into account a person's unique needs.

Creates opportunities to address potential barriers to success.



# Website

CARE tools at  
[www.odvn.org](http://www.odvn.org)

# Promising Practices on Brain Injury

- Overview of partner-inflicted brain injury
- CARE Promising Practices for Addressing Brain Injury Caused By Violence
- CARE Organizational Promising Practices, Policies and Procedures

JUST BREATHE WORKBOOK

# Survivor Education:

## Better understanding & acknowledgement

## Normalize brain injury

- Key information about brain injury
- Can be used to start a conversation
- Or can be left out for survivors

### Addresses:

- TBI and strangulation
- Physical, cognitive & emotional symptoms
- Next steps
- Danger signs and when to see a doctor

# Survivor Tools: Promote wellness & mental health

## Help with organization and remembering

### *Just Breathe*

- Promote wellness & mental health
- Addresses:
  - Coping strategies
  - Self care plan
  - Tips for motion & relaxation

### *Invisible Injuries*

- Brain injury basics
- Problems & strategies
- Symptom logs
- Safety planning
- Goals and planners



# Advocate Tools: CHATS

## *CHATS*

- Identify possible head injuries by asking about:
- **C**hoking or strangulation
- **H**its to the head
- **A**fter your head was hurt (alterations in consciousness)
- **T**roubles a survivor is struggling with
- **S**everity of injury and impact and desire to seek additional care

Additional questions on:

Suicide

Substance use

Other health issues

# Advocate Tools: Head Injury

## *Head Injury Accommodations*

- Common Brain Injury Accommodations
- Connection challenges
- Physical Health Challenges
- Emotional Challenges
- Thinking/Cognitive Challenges

# CARE and Trauma Informed Practices

## **CARE WORKS AND IMPROVES TRAUMA- INFORMED PRACTICES**

**in the areas of**  
**Head trauma**  
**Strangulation**  
**Mental Health**  
**Substance Use**  
**Suicide**

**Because advocates directly  
address & accommodate brain  
injury!**



**Next Steps**

# OHIO'S **COSTS** AFTER VIOLENCE

The logo for "OHIO'S COSTS AFTER VIOLENCE" features a stylized figure in a circle. The figure is composed of two overlapping shapes: a light blue one on the left and a dark blue one on the right, both with a small circle at the top representing a head. The figure is set against a dark blue circular background. The text "OHIO'S" is in a smaller, black, sans-serif font above the word "COSTS". The word "COSTS" is in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. Below "COSTS" is the phrase "AFTER VIOLENCE" in a black, sans-serif font.

Collaboration On Strangulation and  
Traumatic Brain Injury Survivorship



# Resources

THE OHIO STATE  
UNIVERSITY

Dr. Julianna Nemeth  
Assistant Professor, College  
of Public Health  
[nemeth.37@osu.edu](mailto:nemeth.37@osu.edu)

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Especially to Christina Debroski  
for bringing OT strategies to  
domestic violence programs



# Contact Us

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