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### 3-4-5 Program Course

## Understanding Mental Hi-Jacking (“Emotional Flashbacks”)

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In the last few decades much has been discovered about how the human brain and central nervous system work. It is now common knowledge that our early life experiences imprint themselves on our minds. Those early memories and feelings effect us well into adulthood. They effect how our brains process information and feelings. They effect our beliefs about the world and ourselves.

There are now recognizable patterns to how child abuse survivors are afflicted in adulthood. One of the most common afflictions is our brain's negative reaction to most things. Years of chaos and violence (often combined with negative beliefs being taught to us) result in damage to the brain and central nervous system. The brain becomes “wired” to believe negative things and to be stuck in a pattern of fear and anxiety. It's what we were taught. This is now called Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) or “complex trauma” or “childhood trauma”. <https://www.healthline.com/health/cptsd#symptoms>

### **We remember the bad, forget the good.**

As adults, it is common for abuse survivors to constantly “misinterpret” what people are saying to us. The brain is strongly wired to believe the worst and to be on guard all the time. We are very easily triggered by casual comments. It is because the negative experiences we had in childhood are wired into the brain due to the **survival mechanism that causes bad things to be far more memorable than neutral or good things.**

## Trauma memories stay in the nervous system for life.

The brain is the core of the central nervous system. Anxiety is a central nervous system problem. Our systems have been wired to be negative and fearful due to violence (verbal, sexual, psychological or physical violence and neglect). **The trauma memories actually stay in the nervous system for life.** Those memories and the feelings they bring are chemically, physically stored in the nerves and brain. They stay there effecting all of our thoughts and reactions. Unless we consciously go in and “re-process” them and make them weaker, they will continue to haunt our psyches.

Researchers, therapists and survivors themselves have figured out how this works:

a survivor hears a comment that triggers them into a bad reaction. The person is not in control of their internal reaction, can't see that it is unnecessary and can't stop it. This is a process that has been discovered by many people and has several different terms to describe it.

An early term was “**Mental Hi-Jacking**” and it was developed early on to describe the PTSD that soldiers often suffer. Also called “Amygdala Hi-jacking”, this is the classic image of a person hearing a pop and then reacting as if they are back in the war. They panic and duck under the table expecting gun fire. A child abuse survivor has a similar reaction to things all day but instead of jumping under the table for fear of gun fire, we go into a kind of emotional chaos and can't respond well to those around us. The capacity to think very clearly is gone.

Pete Walker calls it “**Emotional Flashbacks**” - the brain is taking us back to the horrible feelings we had in childhood. Our emotions get scrambled as they revert to what they were when we were helpless hurt children. Confusion and fear over-come us.

Anna Runkle calls it “**Dysregulation**” in thinking. Our nervous system's trauma memories take over our ability to think completely clearly. The mental signals go out of sync as we struggle with the traumatic memories that are stored in the nervous system – dysregulating our thinking patterns.

These are all terms to describe the same thing: we get triggered, our minds go into panic and we get confused and feel horrible, as if we're that scared child again.

This is extremely painful for a person to have to live with. It interferes with normal life, with the ability to work well with others and to maintain positive healthy relationships.

The survivor is not to be blamed for this common physiological result of being abused.

Learning how to recognize then stop this process is one of the most important things a survivor can do. Eliminating this common reaction will bring enormous relief from the daily pain of struggling with hidden trauma memories in the nervous system.

**Solution:** do Muscle-Building Exercise #3: the Flood the Zone to specifically target this.