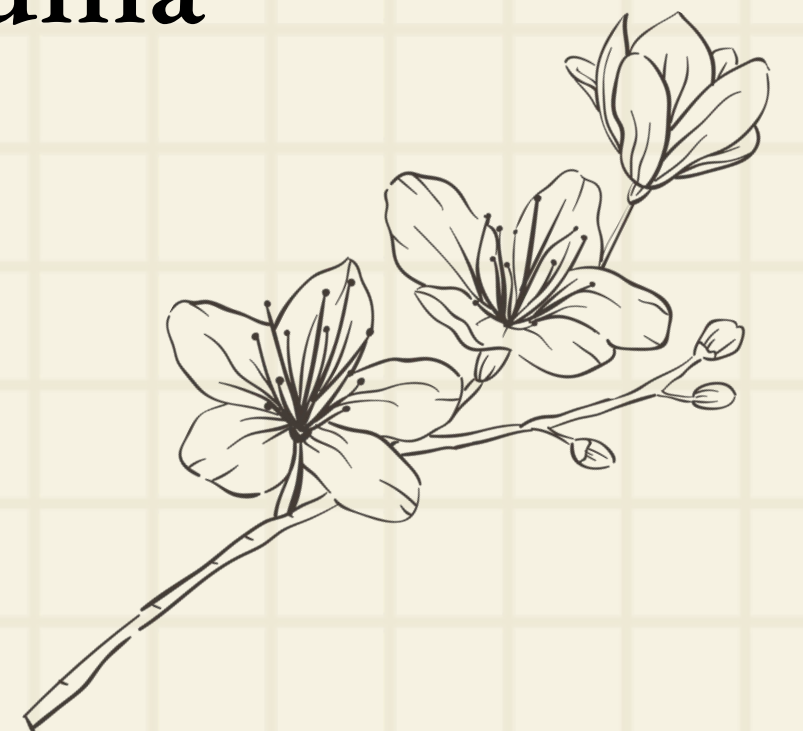




Incarcerated Victims:

**The Correlation Between Childhood Trauma
and Ending up Behind Bars**





Funding Disclaimer

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The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed throughout this presentation are those of the contributor and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.





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We are Trauma Therapists
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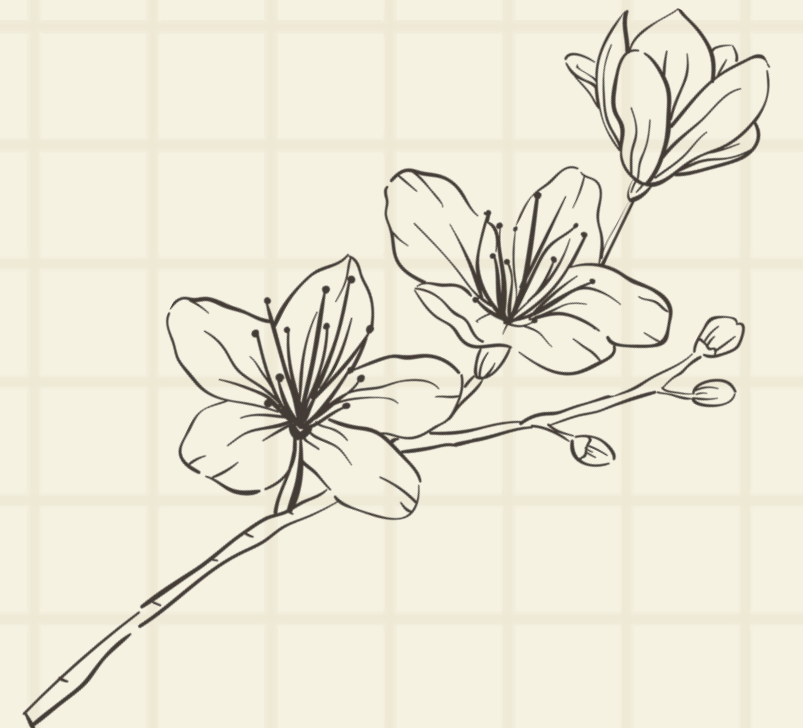
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Learning Objectives

1. Define trauma, developmental trauma, and ACEs
2. Describe changes in the brain caused by developmental trauma and articulate how this could lead to higher risk of incarceration
3. Identify meaningful alternatives to incarceration



STAND UP if you...



STAND UP if you...



What is Trauma?





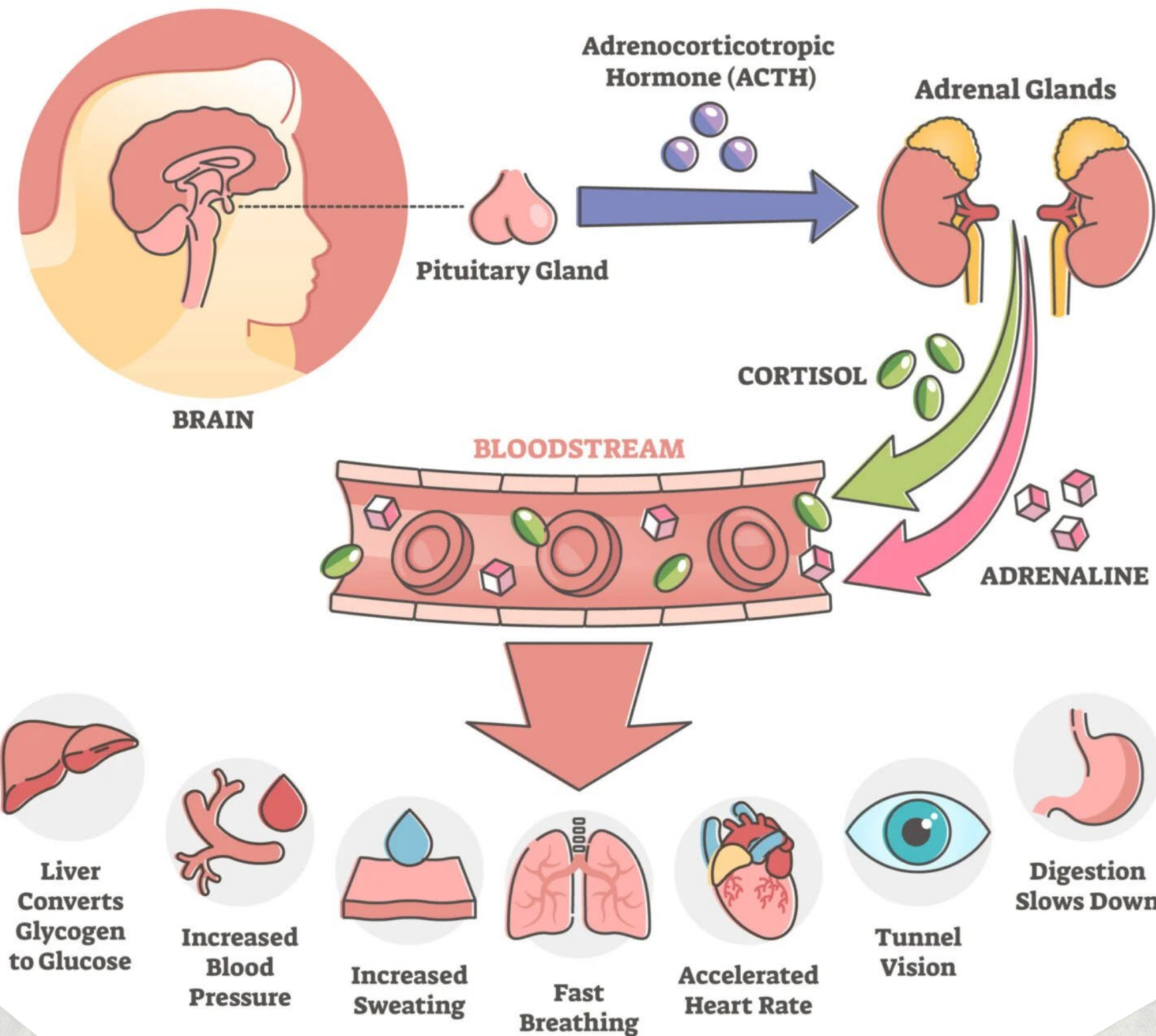
Definition

Psychological Trauma is the *lasting impact* of an extremely stressful, frightening or threatening event

American Psychological Association: It is “any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning”

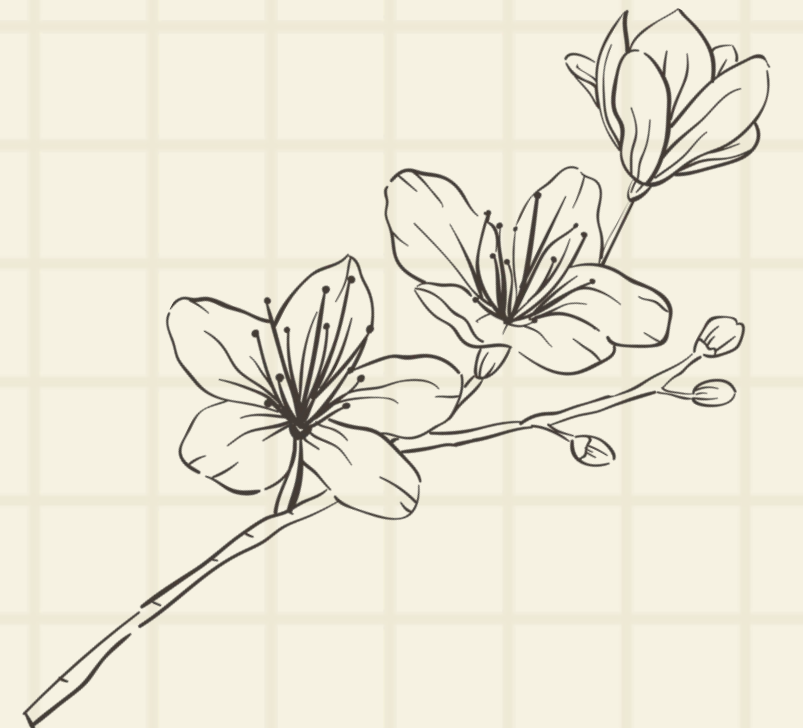


STRESS RESPONSE





What is Developmental Trauma?





Definition

Repeated, pervasive exposure to threat during sensitive periods of infant and child development. Involves prolonged activation of body's stress response system.

(Cruz, et al., 2022)



Impacts of Developmental Trauma

- Disrupts interpersonal attachments
- Alters capacity for cognitive, behavioral, and emotional control
- Shifts perception of one's vulnerability to danger in the world

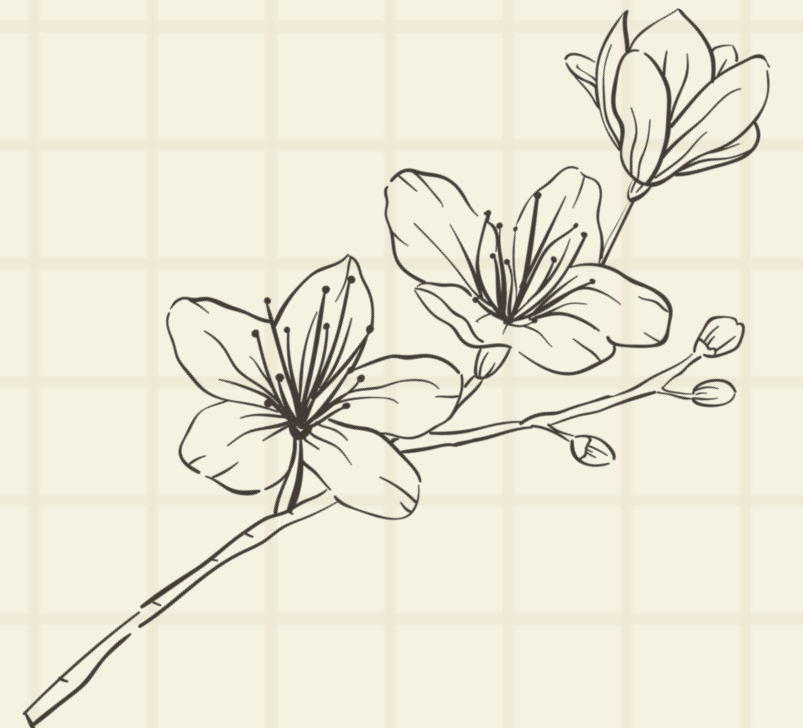


(Cruz, et al., 2022)





Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

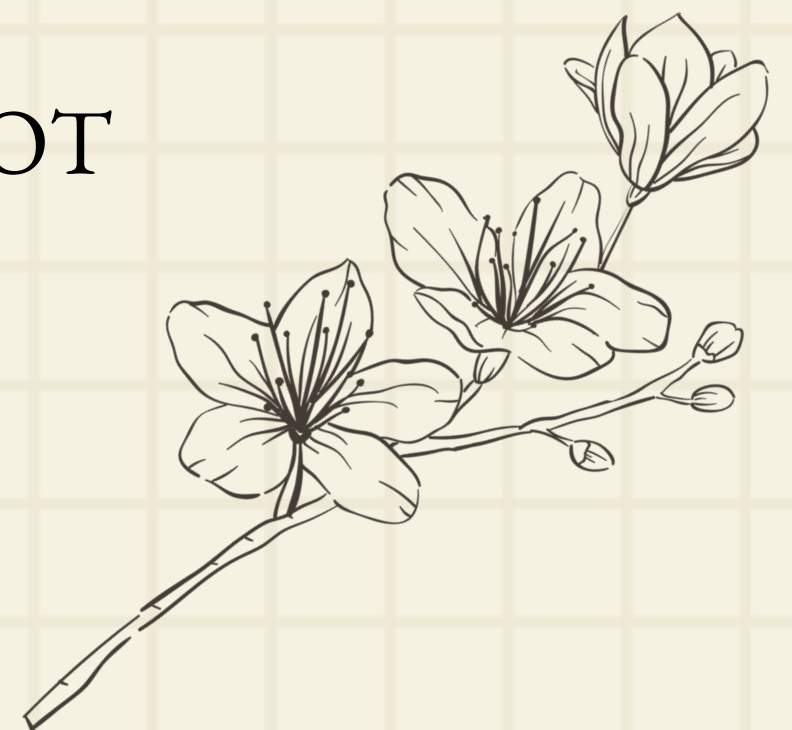




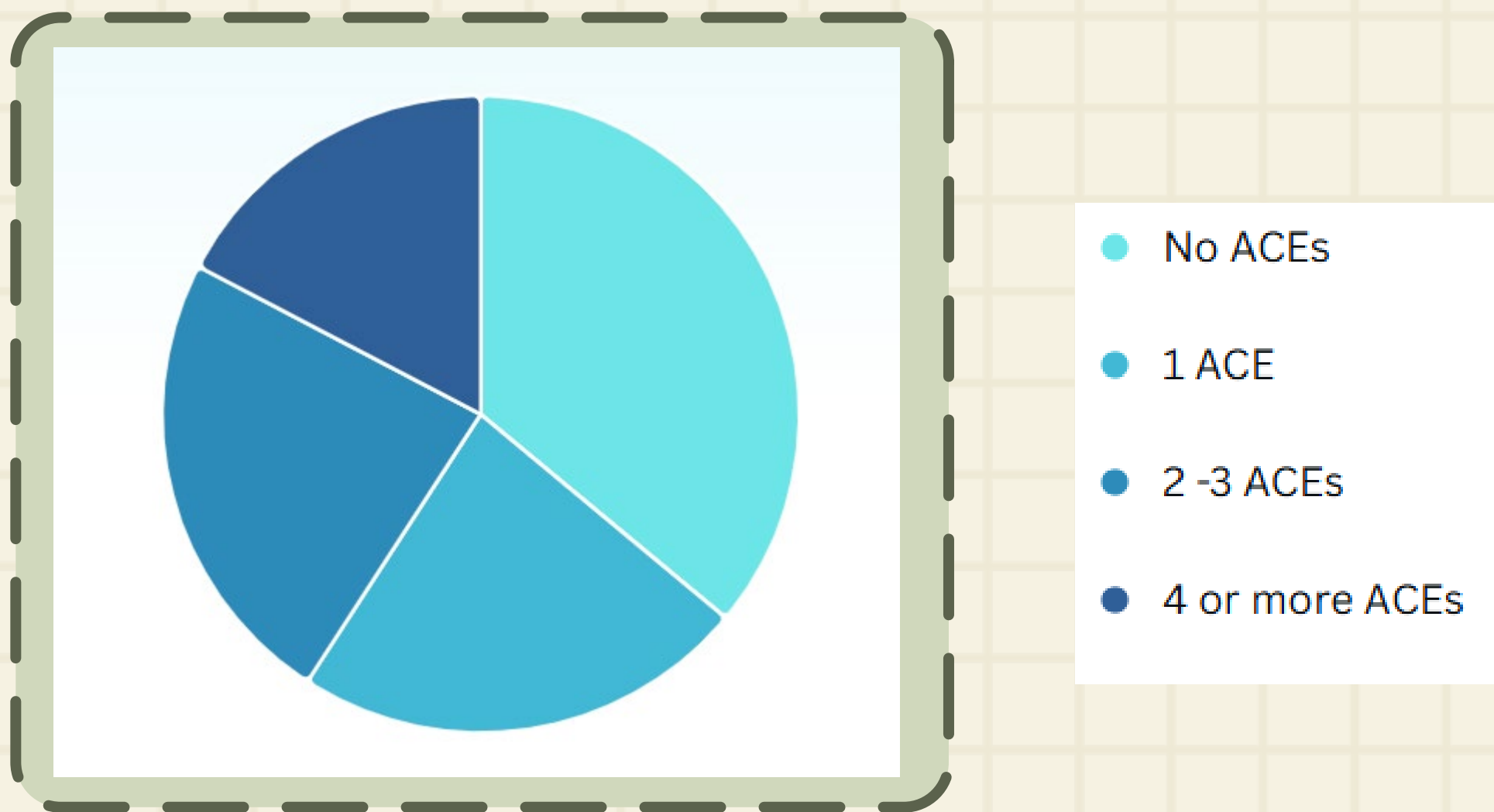
-Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events occurring before age 18

-ACEs include all types of abuse and neglect as well as household challenges such as: parent mental illness, substance use, parental separation, incarceration, and domestic violence

-Be mindful of what is **NOT** included in the ACEs



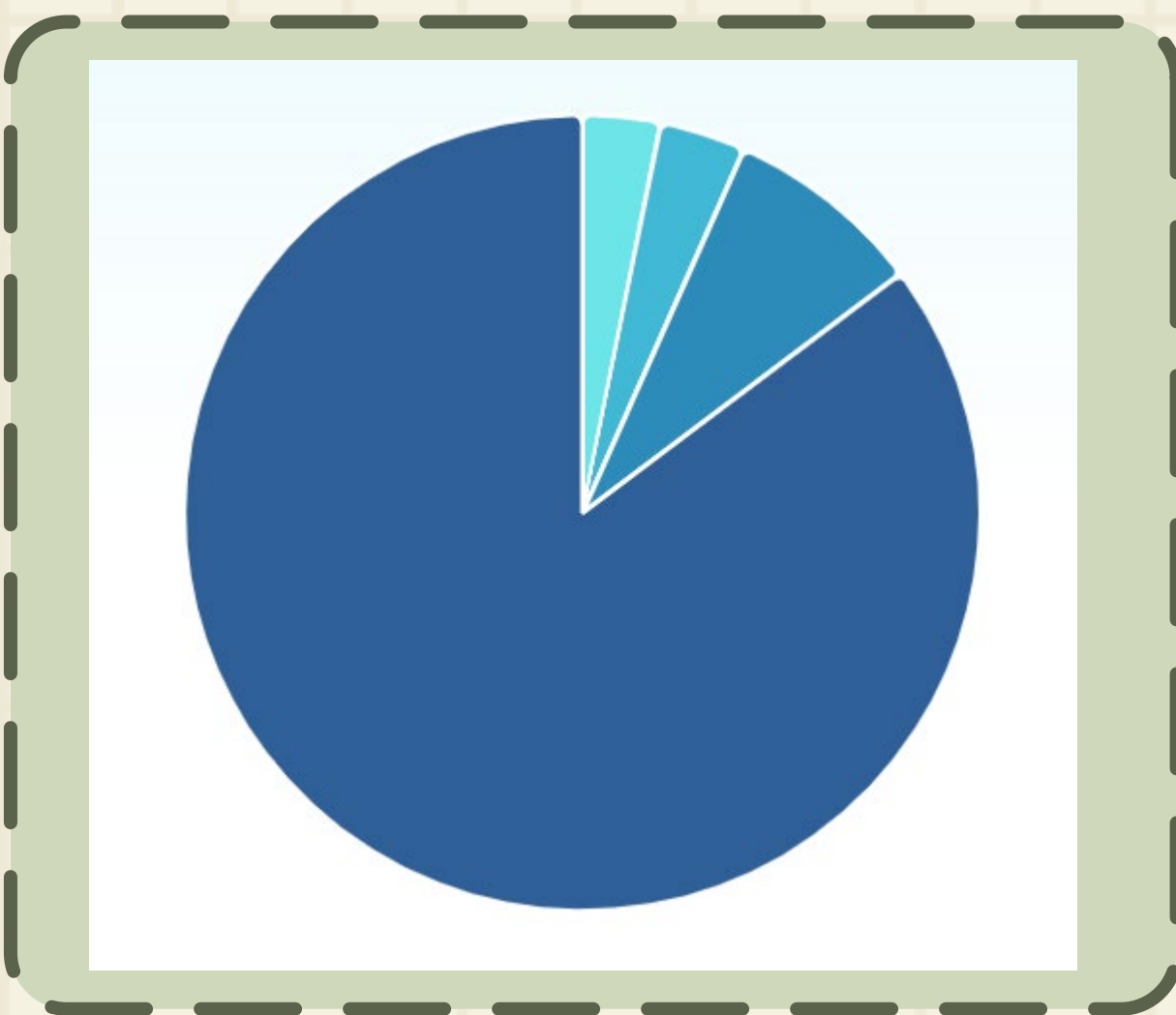
64% of US population has at least 1 ACE



No ACEs	36
1 ACE	23.1
2 - 3 ACEs	23.5
4 or more ACEs	17.3

cdc.gov

97% of prison population has at least 1 ACE



No ACEs	2.9
1 ACE	3.2
2 - 3 ACEs	7.4
4 or more ACEs	78.1

compassionprisonproject.org

Developmental Trauma and the Brain



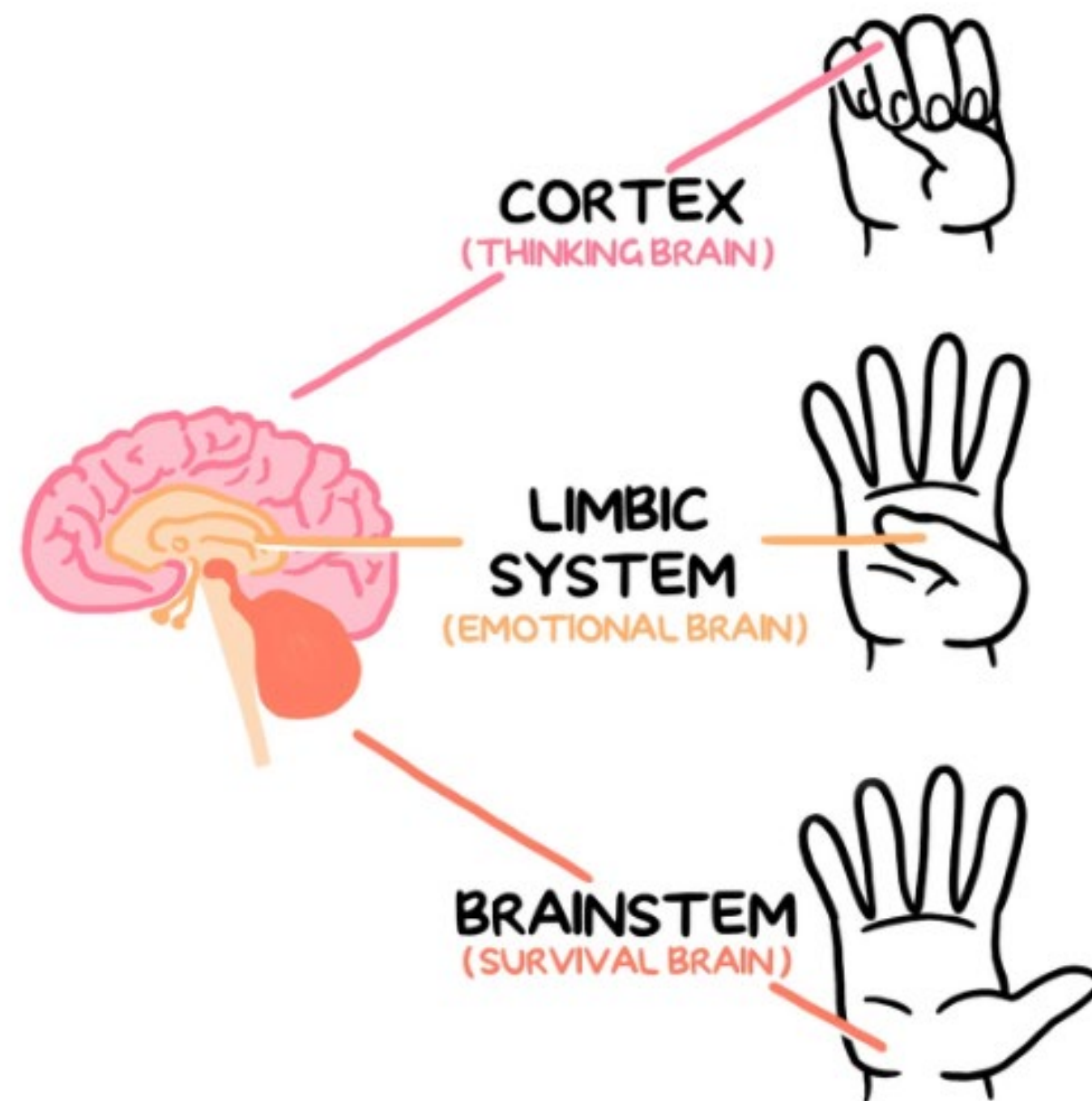


Development of
each “layer”
occurs at
different stages
of childhood

@adriana_draws_therapy

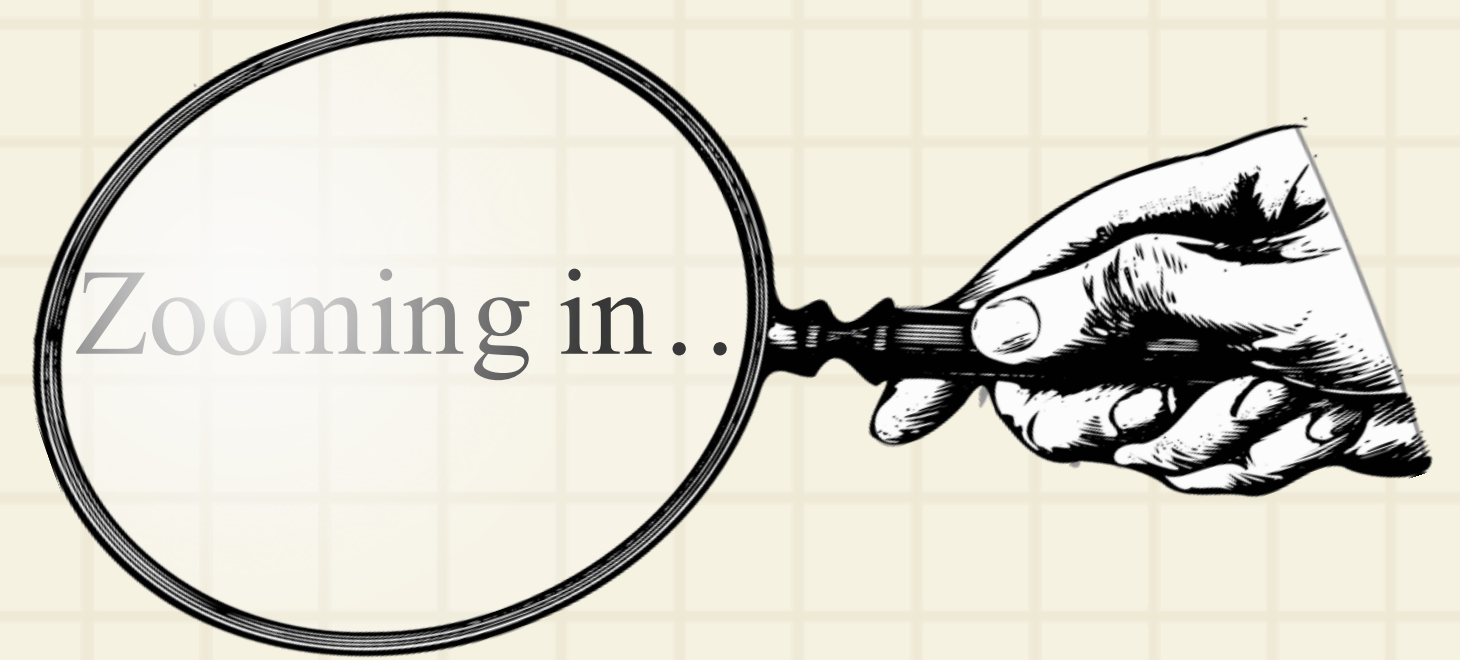
Hand model originally developed by Dr. Dan Siegel

THE HAND MODEL OF THE BRAIN





Amygdala



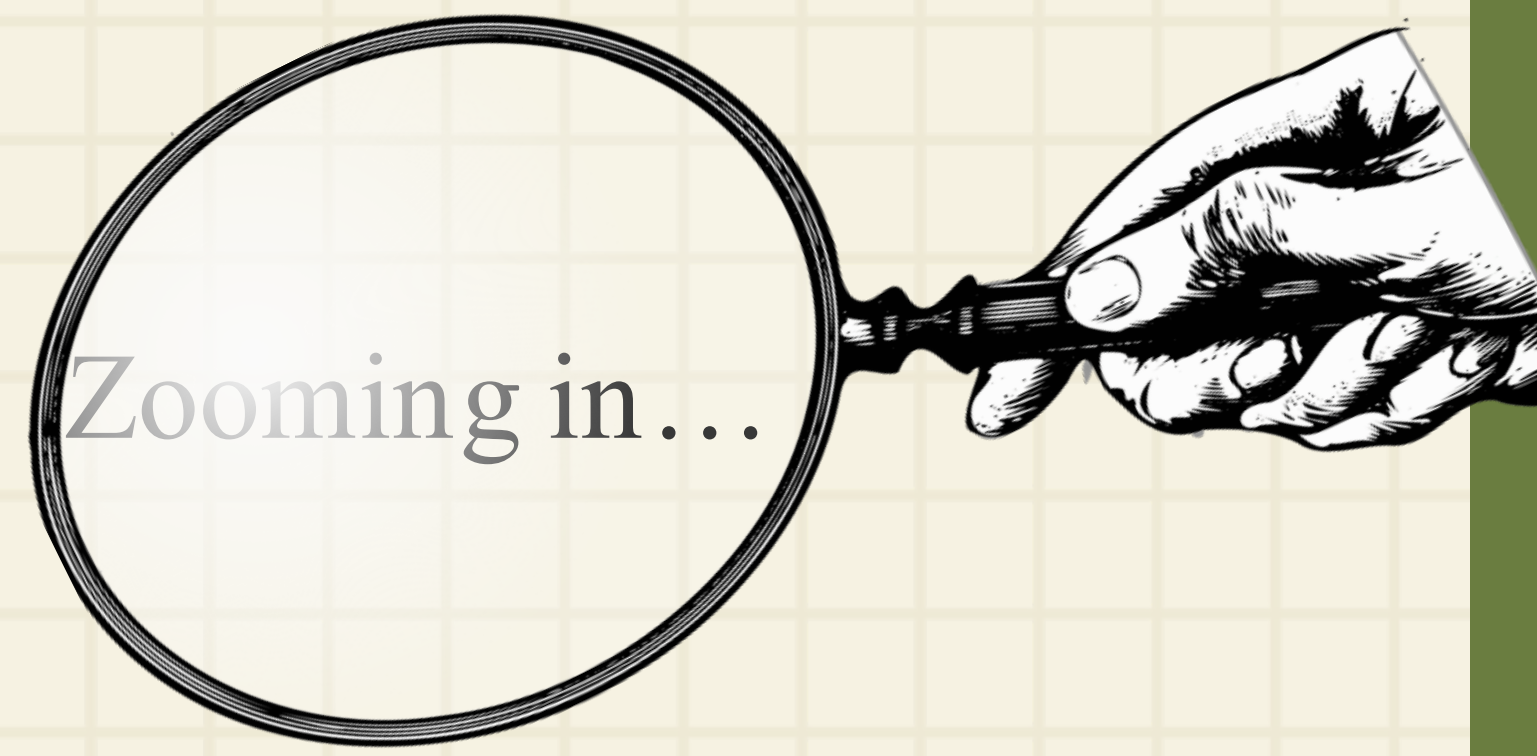
- Associated with strong emotions (part of the limbic system)
- Can over-develop with childhood trauma
- Can cause automatic behavioral responses to perceived threats

Result: Can lead to over-reactions to external stimuli





Nucleus Accumbens (NAc)



Zooming in...

- Associated with pleasure and reward (part of limbic system)
- Can under-develop with childhood trauma
- Natural reward system becomes compromised
- Deficits in reward processing

Result: Can lead to substance abuse / risk-taking behaviors



Prefrontal Cortex



- Associated with decision making and impulse control
- Can under-develop with childhood trauma
- Problem-solving functions are reduced, resulting in difficulty learning from experience and foreseeing consequences
- Fear memories override attention and concentration, resulting in difficulty learning new information

Result: Can lead to impulsive behaviors

Correlation to Incarceration



Effects of Developmental Trauma

- A brain that is:
 - biased to perceive threat
 - quick to react emotionally
 - challenged to learn from mistakes
 - has a lower response to natural rewards
- This can translate into reckless or disinhibited behaviors that lead to incarceration

Examples: Poor decision making, acting impulsively, taking risks without foreseeing consequences, aggression & fighting, stealing, abusing alcohol & drugs, etc.

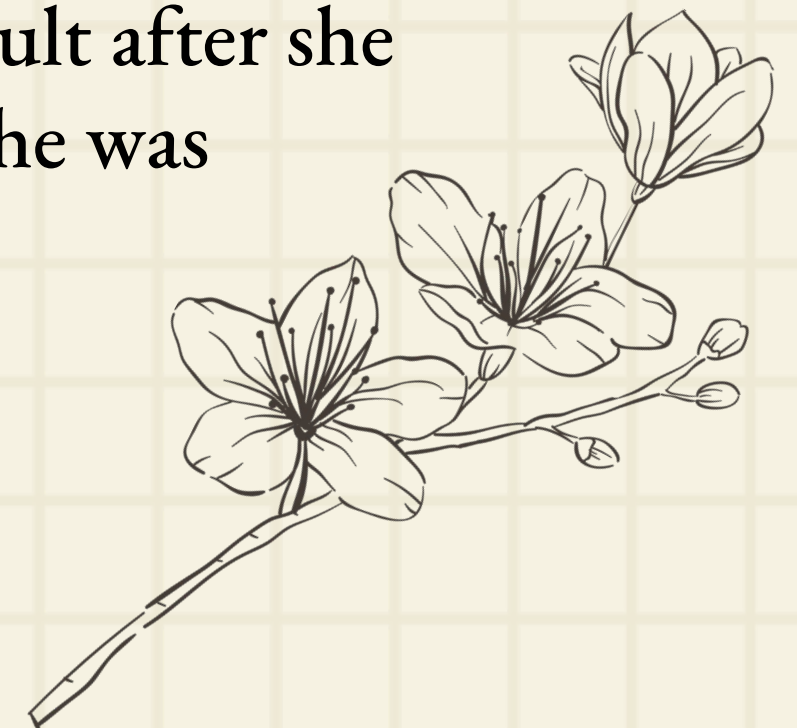
Criminal thinking or developmental trauma?





Case composite: Cora

Cora's mom struggled with alcohol abuse and never got help. When she was intoxicated, she would physically abuse Cora and her siblings. Cora's father left when she was 3 and she rarely saw him after that. At age 6, Cora witnessed the murder of an older sibling during a home invasion. Cora struggled to focus in school and often disrupted class. She was labeled a "problem" kid and was frequently expelled and disciplined. An older neighbor volunteered to help with Cora, and sexually abused her for 7 years. At 14, Cora ran away from home and lived on the streets. At age 19, Cora was charged with first degree assault after she misinterpreted a stranger's remarks and attacked them with a brick. She was sentenced to 12 years in prison.



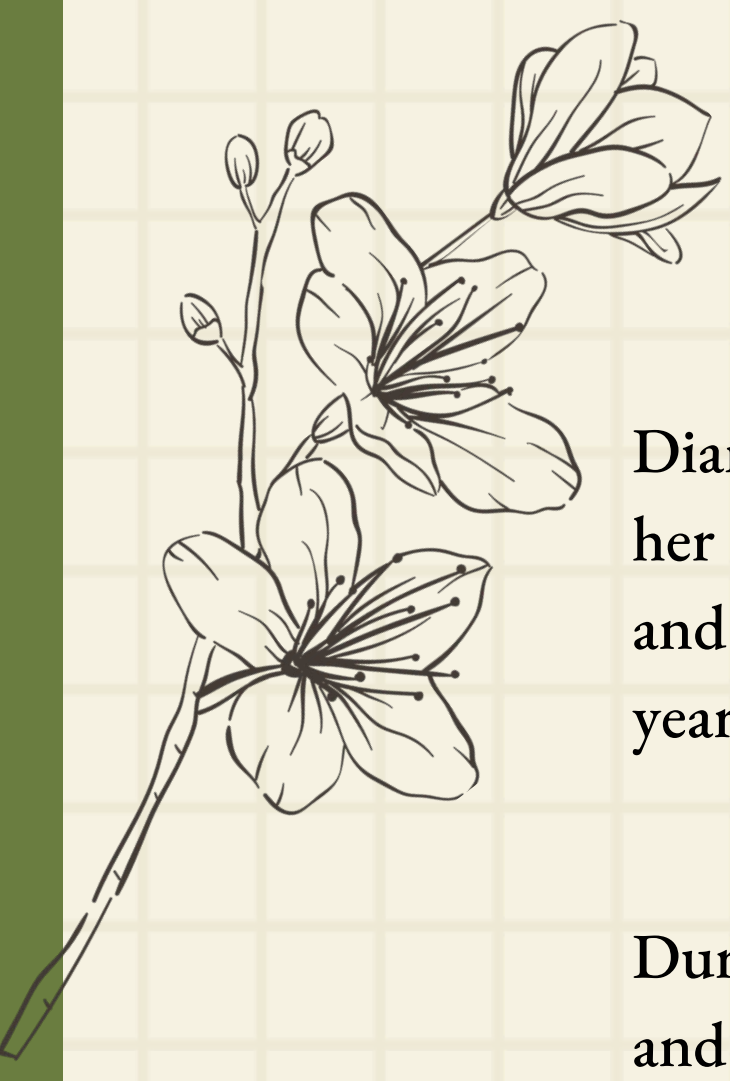
Trauma Survivors' Experience of Incarceration

- They are placed in a threatening environment with an overactive amygdala already biased to perceive threat
 - This creates a mental state not conducive to healing or promoting positive changes in the brain
 - It reinforces the need for hyperarousal
- They are released back into society to return to unhealthy patterns
- They are frequently reincarcerated when their unhealthy patterns leads to re-arrest



Meaningful Alternatives to Incarceration



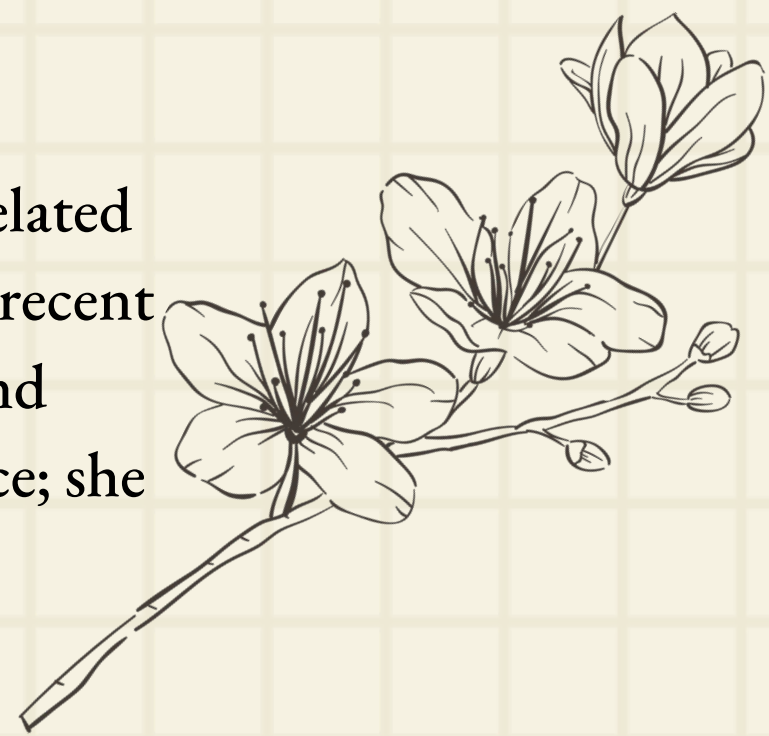


Case composite: Diane

Diane grew up with her grandmother and great-aunt because her mom was in active addiction and her father was involved in illegal activities. She began running away at the age of 7 due to the abuse and neglect she endured, and began experimenting with drugs and alcohol by the time she was 9 years old. She was bullied in school, frequently getting into fights, and skipped school a lot.

During her adolescence, she was sexually abused by a relative, became a victim sex of trafficking, and experimented with harder substances. Because Diane was involved in the streets, there were numerous times where her life was threatened. She had endured many losses as well, including her best friend being killed. In addition to violence, the street life brings incarceration.

Diane had been incarcerated about 10 times throughout her life, mainly for misdemeanors related to theft and solicitation. Her times behind bars would range from 1-6 months, but her most recent sentence was approximately 4 years. She was successfully released, engaged with probation and therapy, but was still engaging in high-risk behaviors. Her life sadly ended due to gun violence; she had just turned 23 years old.



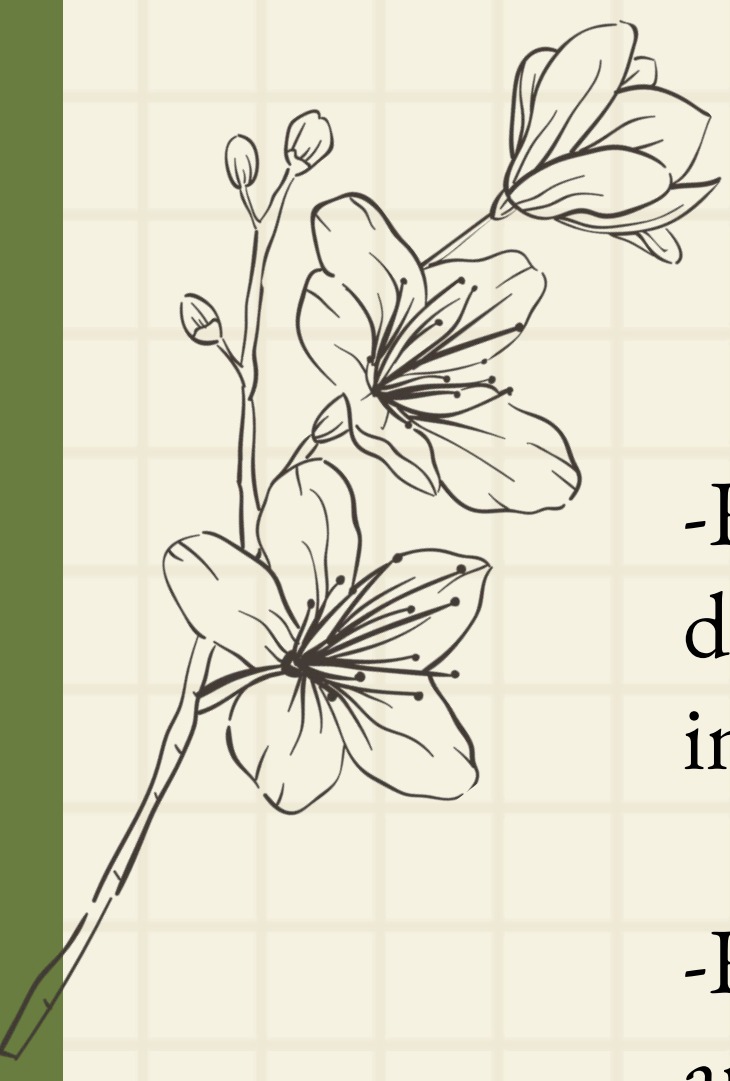
Trauma Informed Approach

*“Not what’s wrong with you,
but what happened to you?”*

Understanding that in order to help with one’s healing journey, you need to understand the complete picture of your client’s life. If applied, it can help with client engagement, commitment to treatment, and health outcomes.

This approach focuses on:

- Intentionally avoid re-traumatizing
- Recognize trauma symptoms
- Include knowledge of trauma into development of services and policies
- Be aware of the impact of trauma and what recovery could look like



Harm Reduction

- Reducing the harm associated with drug use through public health interventions
- Recognizing all people deserve safety and dignity; meeting people where they are at
- Apply this mindset to folks with a criminal background, not just addiction history

(Coulson, et. al., 2022)



Alternatives to Incarceration



Crisis Response Teams (CRTs)

- Mental health specialists and/or peer support specialists accompany law enforcement to 911 calls

- Utilize a client centered, trauma informed approach to de-escalate the situation and prevent arrest

Diversion Programs

- Instead of arrests, connect individuals to applicable programs (ex. substance abuse treatment or mental health services)

(Pacho, 2025)



Local Examples



Crisis Intervention Response Team (CIRT)

-Clinicians accompany officers on 911 calls and connect to services

Police Assisted Diversion (PAD)

-Connect folks to applicable resources

<https://www.phillypolice.com/community-services/behavioral-health-unit/>



Hero Help is a collaboration of various agencies/departments in DE to provide drug and/or alcohol addiction treatment to qualifying adults who come into contact with law enforcement

<https://www.newcastlede.gov/1266/HERO-HELP-Program>

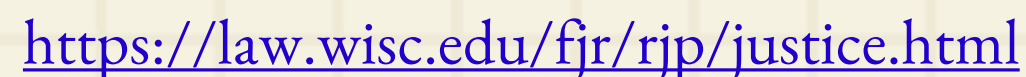


Three Goals:

1. Repair the harm that has been done
2. Prioritize human relationships
3. Address the root cause of the crime

-Instead of viewing the crime as a violation of the law, reframe it as a violation of the person

- The goal isn't punishment, but the measurement of how much repair has been done





Three Elements to Restorative Justice

ENCOUNTER

Facilitated meeting that is not mandatory

Those most impacted by the crime are invited to determine steps to repair/achieve justice

REPAIR

Survivors heal through the encounter

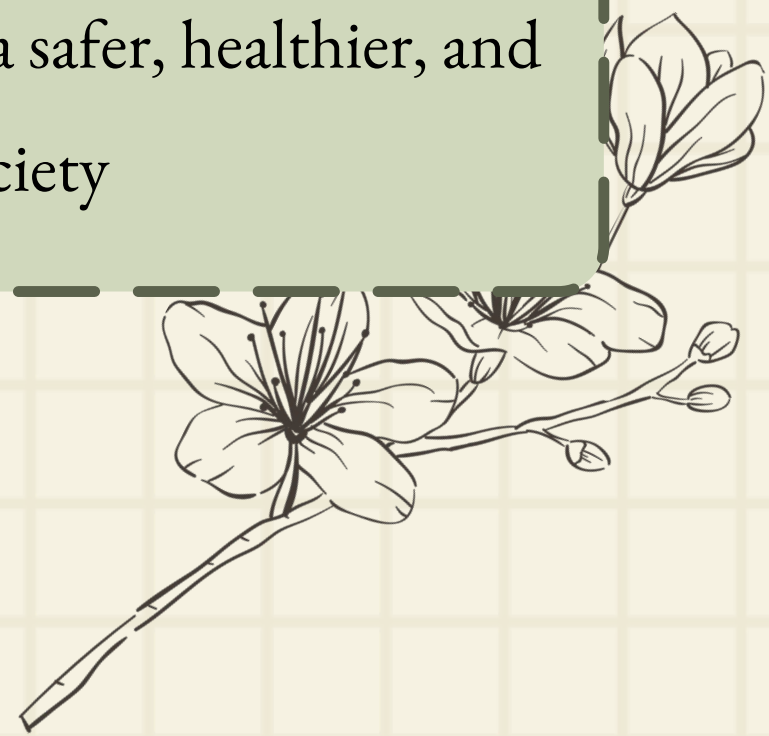
Offender makes amends to survivors and community

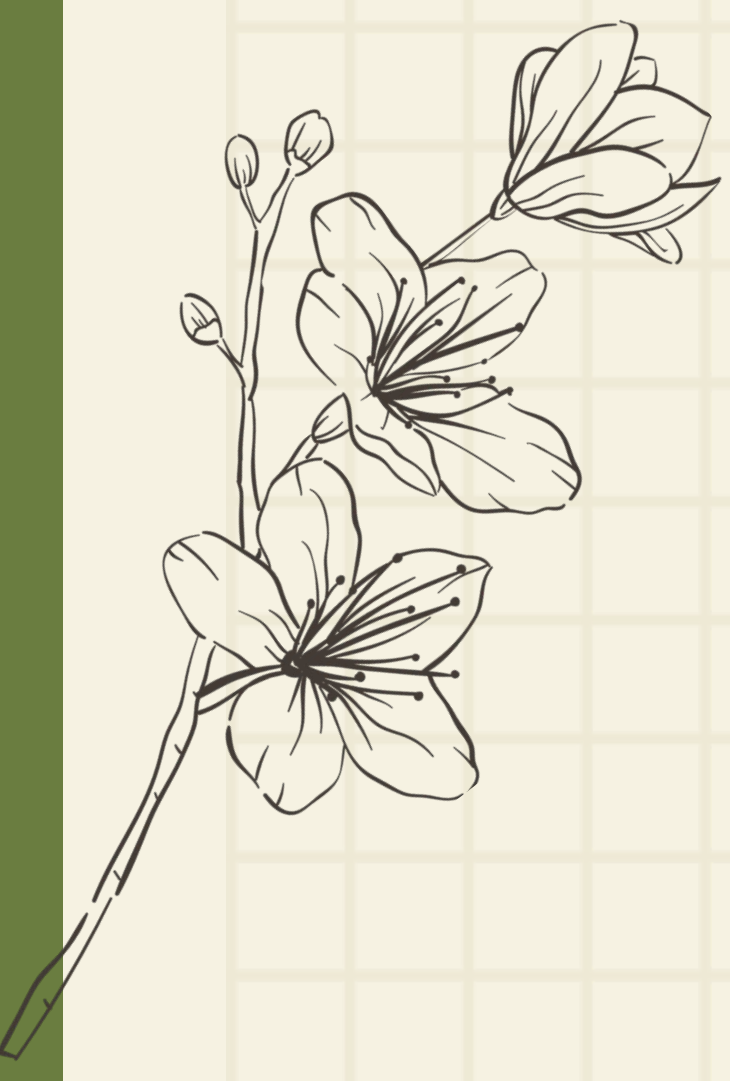
Community benefits from relational health and safety

TRANSFORM

Individuals: Survivors, Offenders, Communities

Systems: Systemic issues can be addressed and we can create a safer, healthier, and just society





Court of Common Pleas/Victim Restoration & Community Conferencing Program

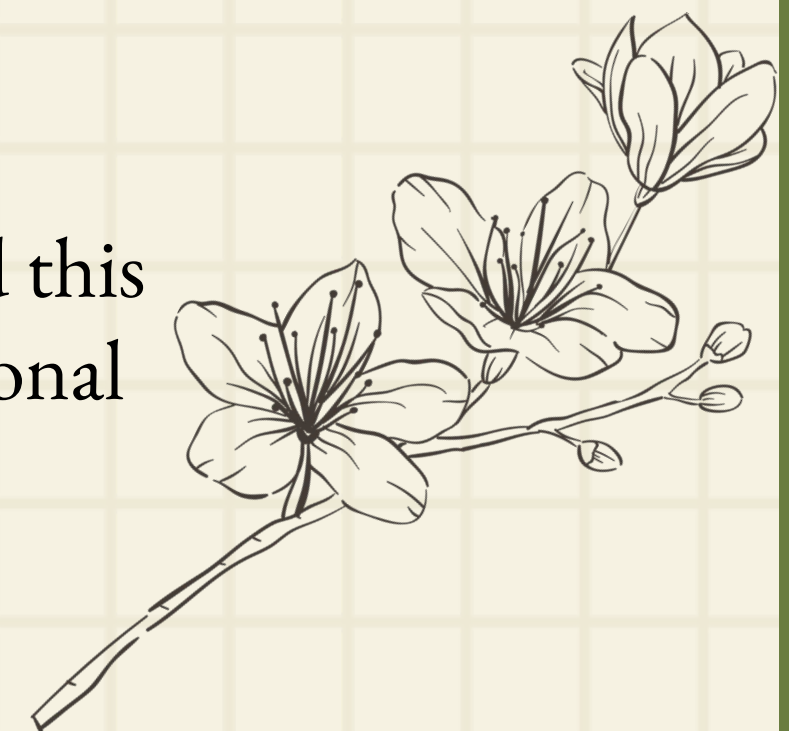
- Facilitated meeting between victim and offender
- Victim expresses: impact of crime, how offender should be held accountable, and how justice should be served
- Offender makes restitution, completes community service, and learns skills to be a productive member of society





- A program in NYC that provides accountability without incarceration to younger adults (16-26) who have committed violent crimes
- Collaborate to identify impacts, needs, solutions, with the intention of healing
- Wrap around support provided to those that were harmed

- Responsible parties complete circle agreements and violence intervention program
- Charges can be diverted from the criminal legal system if their harmed parties agree
- 90%** of survivors preferred this option compared to traditional criminal legal system



Final Thoughts

Psychological Trauma is the *lasting impact* of an extremely stressful, frightening or threatening event

Developmental Trauma is repeated, pervasive exposure to threat during sensitive periods of infant and child development. This can translate into reckless or disinhibited behaviors that lead to incarceration

Alternatives to Incarceration include: harm reduction, restorative justice, and crisis response teams/diversion programs

Trauma is driving the train towards incarceration, but being incarcerated doesn't address the underlying issues one faces







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