

Truth and trauma

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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