

Grade Point

Why many rape victims don't fight or yell

By James W. Hopper June 23

James W. Hopper, PhD, is an independent consultant and part-time instructor in psychology in the Department of Psychiatry of Harvard Medical School. He has conducted research on the neurobiology of trauma, and trains investigators, prosecutors, judges, and higher-education professionals on its implications. Here, he offers his explanation of why people don't always respond to an attack the way others might expect:

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In the midst of sexual assault, the brain's fear circuitry dominates. The prefrontal cortex can be severely impaired, and all that's left may be reflexes and habits.

In the Washington Post's recent [series on college sexual assault](#), many victims describe how they reacted – and did *not* react – while being assaulted. [Another article](#) also published this month, in the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, shows that some responses have been programmed into human brains by evolution.

[\[One in five women say they had unwanted sexual experiences while in college.\]](#)

[\[Women describe traumatic experiences.\]](#)

Bringing together the accounts of those who have been assaulted with the neurobiology of trauma can play an essential role in supporting healing and the pursuits of accountability and justice.

For example, *freezing* is a brain-based response to detecting danger, especially a predator's attack. Think deer in the headlights.

As one woman told the Post, "I didn't say no, but I didn't really know what to do. I just kind of froze."

Freezing occurs when the amygdala – a crucial structure in the brain's fear circuitry – detects an attack and signals the brainstem to inhibit movement. It happens in a flash, automatically and beyond conscious control.

It's a brain response that rapidly shifts the organism into a state of vigilance for incoming attacks and avenues of escape. Eyes widen, pupils dilate. Hearing becomes more acute. The body is primed for fight or flight. But as we shall see, neither fight nor flight necessarily follows.

Simultaneously with the freeze response, the fear circuitry unleashes a surge of “stress chemicals” into the prefrontal cortex, the brain region that allows us to think *rationally* – to recall the bedroom door is open, or that people are in the dorm room next door, for example, and to *make use* of that information. But the surge of chemicals [rapidly impairs the prefrontal cortex](#). That’s because, despite our dominant role on the planet now, we evolved as *prey*, and when a lion or tiger is upon us, stopping to think is fatal.

Indeed, no one understands better than the military that intense fear impairs our prefrontal cortex and capacity for reason.

When bullets are flying and blood is flowing, you had better have some *really effective habit learning* to rely upon. That’s why combat training is rigorous and *repetitive* – to burn in habits of effectively firing weapons, executing combat formations, etc.

But what if you’re being sexually assaulted and there’s no [effective habit learning](#) to fall back on?

What if you’re a woman and the only habits your brain cues up are those you’ve always relied upon to ward off unwanted sexual advances – like saying, “I have to go home now” or “Your girlfriend will find out”? Those phrases, and passive behaviors that go with them, may be your only responses, until it’s too late.

Countless victims of sexual assault describe just such responses. Too often police officers, college administrators, even friends and family think to themselves – and say out loud – “Why didn’t you run out of the room?” “Why didn’t you scream?”

For those who assume a functional prefrontal cortex – including many victims as they look back on what happened – passive habit responses can be baffling. They seem exactly the opposite of how they surely would – or should – have responded.

But when the fear circuitry takes over and the prefrontal cortex is impaired, [habits](#) and [reflexes](#) may be all we’ve got.

And if the fear circuitry perceives escape as impossible and resistance as futile, then not fight or flight, but *extreme survival reflexes* (which scientists call “[animal defense responses](#)”) will take over. These can activate automatically when the body is in a predator’s grip – and when, as half of rape victims report, we fear death or serious injury.

One such response is *tonic immobility*. In freezing, brain and body are primed for action. But in tonic immobility, the body is literally paralyzed by fear – unable to move, speak, or cry out. The body goes rigid. Hands may go numb.

Collapsed immobility is another. Think possum, playing dead. To see what this looks like (and get a humorous break from this difficult topic), you can watch the YouTube videos that come up for “[passes out on Slingshot ride](#).”

Some people describe feeling “like a rag doll” as the perpetrator did whatever he wanted. And thanks to rapid drops in heart rate and blood pressure, some become faint and may even pass out. Some describe feeling “sleepy.”

Too often, from precinct stations to courtrooms, victims are met with disbelief: *How could it be rape if you were sleepy?!*

Another, more common reflexive response is *dissociation*: spacing out, feeling unreal, disconnected from the

horrible emotions and sensations of such an intimate violation.

Unless someone is drugged or intoxicated into unconsciousness, eventually the brain's fear circuitry will detect the attack.

Most victims will freeze, if only briefly. Some will fight back, effectively. Some will resist in habitual, passive ways. Some will suddenly give in and cry. Others will become paralyzed, become faint, pass out or dissociate.

Few who have experienced these responses realize that they are brain reactions to attack and terror.

They blame themselves for “failing” to resist. They feel ashamed. (Men especially may see themselves as cowards and feel like they're not real men.) They may tell no one, even during an investigation. Sadly, many investigators and prosecutors still don't know some or all of these brain-based responses.

[Men with unwanted sexual encounters often fear they won't be taken seriously.]

None of these responses – in women or men – entails consent or cowardice.

None is evidence of resistance too insufficient to warrant our respect and compassion.

They are responses we should *expect* from brains dominated by the circuitry of fear (just as we should expect fragmented and incomplete memories).

May the day come when everyone who knows someone who has been sexually assaulted – which is all of us, whether we know that yet or not – understands these basic ways that our brains can react to such attacks and uses this knowledge to foster healing and justice.
