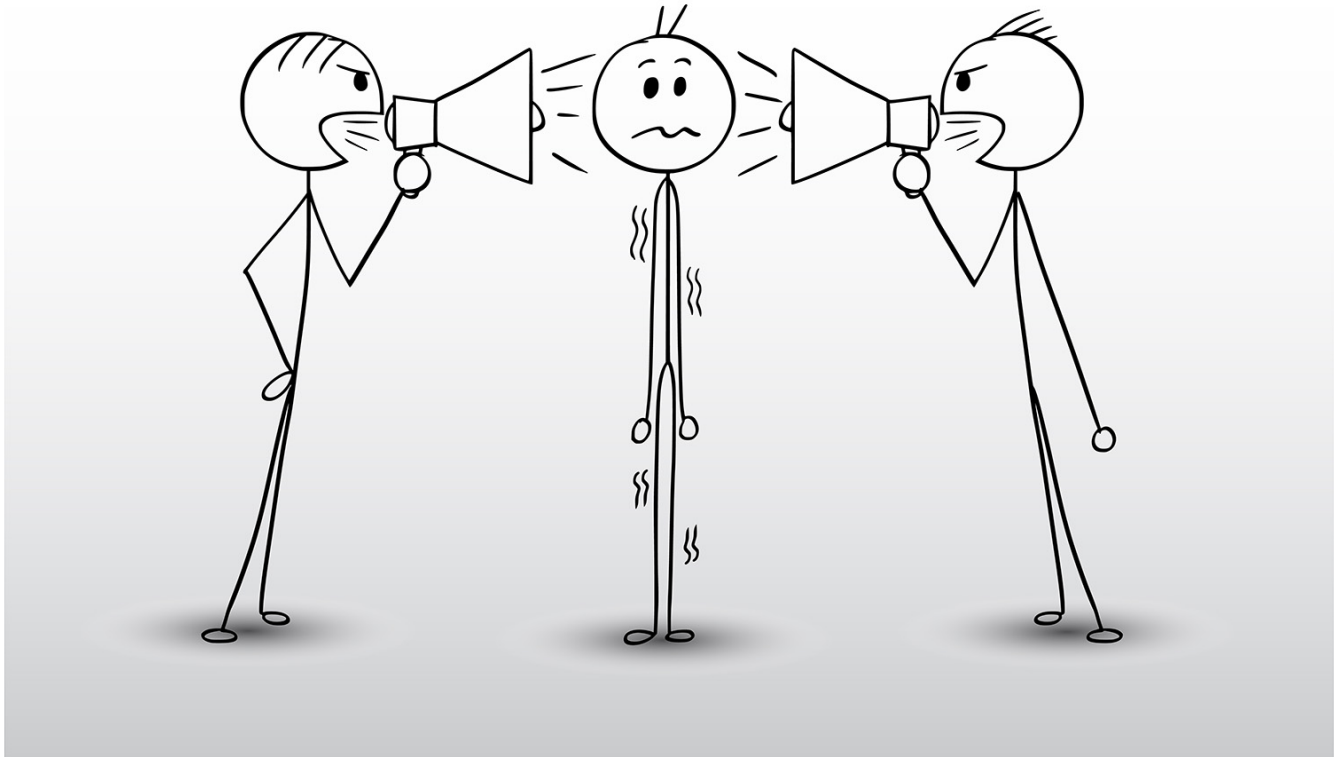


The Trauma Response and the Media

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | January 26, 2020



Normally, I leave a blog up at least a week before posting a new blog, but given the intense feedback of the previous blog, **Donald Trump and Christians: What's the Attraction**, I thought it might be helpful to go ahead and post this blog now.

It is well known that when people experience trauma (soldiers in combat, victims of abuse or assault, etc.), the brain's fear circuits (amygdala) activate and often reset to a more sensitive baseline. This means that after trauma, people are often more fearful, startle more easily, are hypervigilant, and live in threat-assessment mode, often seeing threats where none actually exist. Such a state of increased fear contributes to relationship and social problems - accusations of abuse, mistreatment, and attack, even sometimes when none really occurred.

What is less well known is that the same trauma response can occur without an objective threat or danger, but with only a perceived threat.

Imagine a person who has a baseline fear of snakes who has been put in a situation in which they suddenly have a snake thrown in their face or on their lap. They immediately panic, scream, hyperventilate, and run and tell their friends and family about the horrible wrong that was done to them. Only later do they discover that it was actually a rubber snake. They initially refuse to

believe it, convinced that it was a real snake. But conclusive video evidence documents with certainty that it was a rubber snake. They begrudgingly finally admit that it was a rubber snake, but their cognitive acknowledgement of the fact doesn't reduce their apprehension about encountering snakes in the future. In fact, since this same exact experience has happened on several occasions and while they later admitted each event was a rubber snake, they still live in a heightened emotional state in which they *feel* under increased threat and fear that there are snakes around every corner.

The real problem was not from snakes, but from the pranksters who were throwing rubber snakes in their face!

Sadly, I see this process happening in America and around the world today on a huge scale: The media is throwing falsehoods - "rubber snakes" - concocted to induce fear, especially in the face of those who already have some baseline fear. Even when facts come out later to refute the initial story, many viewers are already "traumatized" (amygdala reset to a higher sensitivity) and now live in a heightened state of fear. Worse, they fail to see that they were traumatized by the media and instead live in fear of "snakes" because they initially believed the false story.

Here are a few examples of this process in recent history:

- **The Jussie Smollett Hoax:** Smollett, a black, gay movie star, alleged he was assaulted in Chicago by two white men who yelled racial and homophobic slurs, poured an unknown chemical on him, tied a rope around his neck, and yelled, "This is MAGA country." It turned out to be a hoax. In reality, two black men were hired by Smollett to fake the attack. Yet, the media took this story and fanned the flames of racial and homophobic intolerance, which they attributed to President Donald Trump and his administration.[1] [2]

No doubt, this story heightened the fear and anxiety of millions of people of color and the LGBTQ community. A "snake" had been thrown in their face, and it was done so repeatedly and intensely by the media, who specifically linked it to the Trump administration. Amygdalas across America were activated; fear increased, and a sense of being less safe was heightened. Eventually the hoax was exposed, and those traumatized begrudgingly accepted that *this* episode was a hoax - but their amygdalas didn't calm, and they now live in a state of increased threat assessment, fear, and insecurity, which they tie not to the media that threw this "rubber snake" on them, but rather to the Trump administration, which was falsely blamed for it.

- **Nick Sandman and the Covington Catholic Students:** Most people now know the truth behind this story: Students were confronted by activist people of color and remained calm and said nothing in response. However, the media took biasedly edited video of the encounter and created a false narrative that Sandman, in his MAGA hat, verbally abused people of color.[3] This wasn't a single news story, but a media blitz of hate, fear, and insult - and again ultimately suggesting that it had been a hate crime that originated with President Trump. The misrepresentation and falsehood were so egregious that CNN settled a \$275 million lawsuit with Sandman.[4]

No doubt, this story also caused fear, anxiety, and a loss of security and safety in millions of people of color. Their amygdalas activated when the "snake" of Trump's MAGA intolerance was

thrown in their face. No doubt, they watched the multiple media reports covering this incident, told their friends, and reinforced their fears, becoming ever-more certain of the dangers of the Trump administration.

But, again, with reluctance, these traumatized people finally admitted that the initial reporting was wrong. Sandman and his friends demonstrated no hostility, intolerance, or ugliness toward the Black Hebrew Israelites or the Native American activist. But accepting this truth didn't calm the amygdalas of those who were frightened by the story. They now live with a greater sense of fear, feel as though society is less safe, and see threats to their freedoms around every corner. Sadly, they don't attach their fear and revulsion to the media, who threw this "rubber snake" in their face, but instead live with ever-increasing fear and dislike for President Trump and those wearing MAGA hats.

State of Negativity

- >In October 2017, NPR reported the following on Pew research: "Fully two-thirds of news stories about Trump from his first 60 days in office were negative... - more than twice the negativity seen in stories from the first 60 days of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, or Barack Obama's presidencies."[5]
- In October 2018, the Media Research Center reported 92 percent of media reporting on Trump was slanted negative - with further biases in the topics covered on stories such as the Mueller investigation, while ignoring successes in the economy and trade.[6]
- In January 2019, the *Washington Times* reported that 90 percent of the media coverage about Trump remained negative.[7]
- In November 2019, Fox News reported that the Media Research Center found that 96 percent of stories on Trump were now negative.[8]

This process of conditioning people to react with fear, not fact, to become phobic of Trump, appears to be the goal of the liberal-dominated media. And, sadly, it is working.

As Christians, our goal is to be lovers of truth - to act on love, truth, and freedom. We should not be quick to accept stories without evidence, to embrace propaganda without fact. Further, we are to have discernment to learn from experience; we need to stop living in fear of "rubber snakes" and, instead, realize that we should stop trusting those who keep throwing "rubber snakes" in our face.

No - This Isn't About Trump

My goal with this blog is not to support President Trump or his administration; rather, it is to **expose a process** of how the media manipulates people with fear and how, once fear is aroused, it may not remit, despite facts exposing their initial stories as false. **The very same warning applies to pro-Trump media as much as it does to anti-Trump media.**

There are multiple things that I would do differently than Trump, and he has policies that I do not support. But I don't base my positions on media-induced fear and hysteria, but on *facts, evidence, and principles*. If you have better ways than this (or any future) administration to bring healing to people, to our nation, and to our world, then move those ideas forward with truth, love, and evidence. Don't allow fear to *rule* in your heart - fear is a tool of the enemy of love and always leads to division and hostility.

If you find that you are afraid and would like to have this fear removed from your heart, then for the next three months, do not watch any news broadcasts, read any news articles, or listen to any politics. Instead, spend at least one hour each day meditating on the life of Jesus, God's design of love, His creation, or some other aspect of God's character - for the purpose of seeking to enter into intimacy of heart with God.

It is by beholding that we are changed (2 Corinthians 3:18). That's why Satan wants to get our minds focused on politics, climate change, or other threats - real or imagined - to increase our fear and to destroy our peace and wellbeing, so fix your eyes on Christ, the author and finisher of your faith (Hebrews 12:2).

When we keep Christ and His methods central, we can engage with people who don't know Him, or worse, who promote principles contrary to God's - yet maintain our sense of peace, our demeanor of grace, our faith and confidence in our Creator God; we can dialogue without hostility; we can discuss without enmity; we can disagree without hate; we can love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, pray for those who spitefully use and persecute us - for we are not children of this world but children of our God in heaven (Matthew 5:44,45).

[1] <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/15/entertainment/jussie-smollett-attack-details/index.html>>

[2]
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2019/01/29/empire-star-jussie-smollett-assaulted-possible-homophobic-attack/2709986002/>

[3]
<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covington-catholic-kid-nick-sandmann-tells-today-he-was-silent-ncna961736>

[4]
<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/cnn-reportedly-settles-lawsuit-with-covington-catholic-high-school-student>

[5]
<https://www.npr.org/2017/10/02/555092743/study-news-coverage-of-trump-more-negative-than-for-other-presidents>

[6] <https://www.investors.com/politics/editorials/media-trump-hatred-coverage/>

[7]

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/jan/15/a-broadcast-tradition-90-of-trump-coverage-remains/>

[8]

<https://www.foxnews.com/media/broadcast-news-trump-impeachment-inquiry-negative-coverage>