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Accessing the Healing of Sexual Trauma through Expressive Arts Therapy Interventions

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Accessing the Healing of Sexual Trauma through Expressive Arts Therapy Intervention

Presented by Stormy Saint-Val

Defining Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent. Sexual harassment, incest, rape, forced prostitution, and inappropriate touching are examples of sexual abuse.

Statistics

- 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse.
- Self-report studies show that 20% of adult females and 5-10% of adult males recall a childhood sexual assault or sexual abuse incident.
- During a one-year period in the U.S., 16% of youth ages 14 to 17 had been sexually victimized.
- Over the course of their lifetime, 28% of U.S. youth ages 14 to 17 had been sexually victimized.
- About 1/3 of victims that disclose the traumatic experience develop PTSD in their lifetimes.

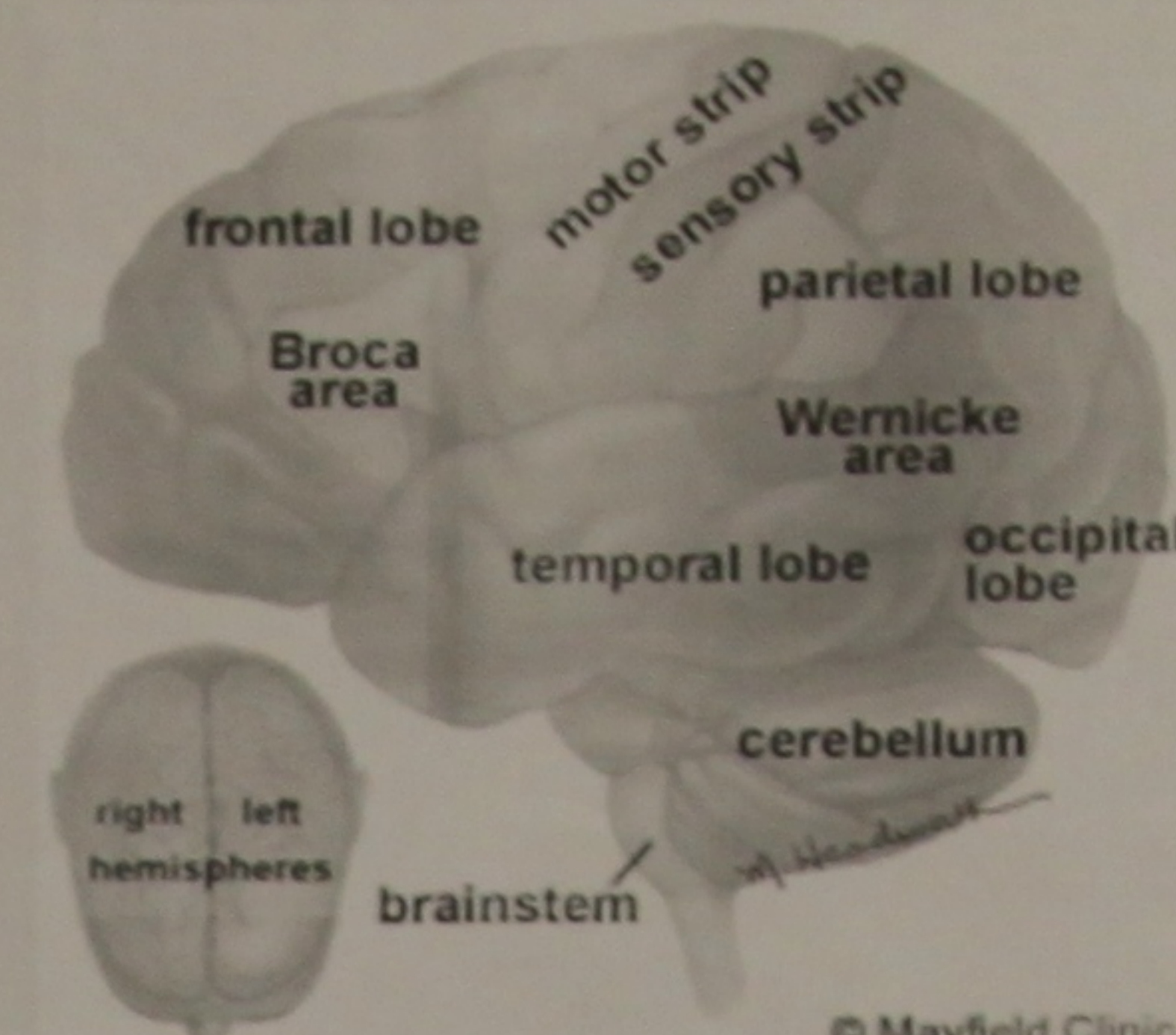
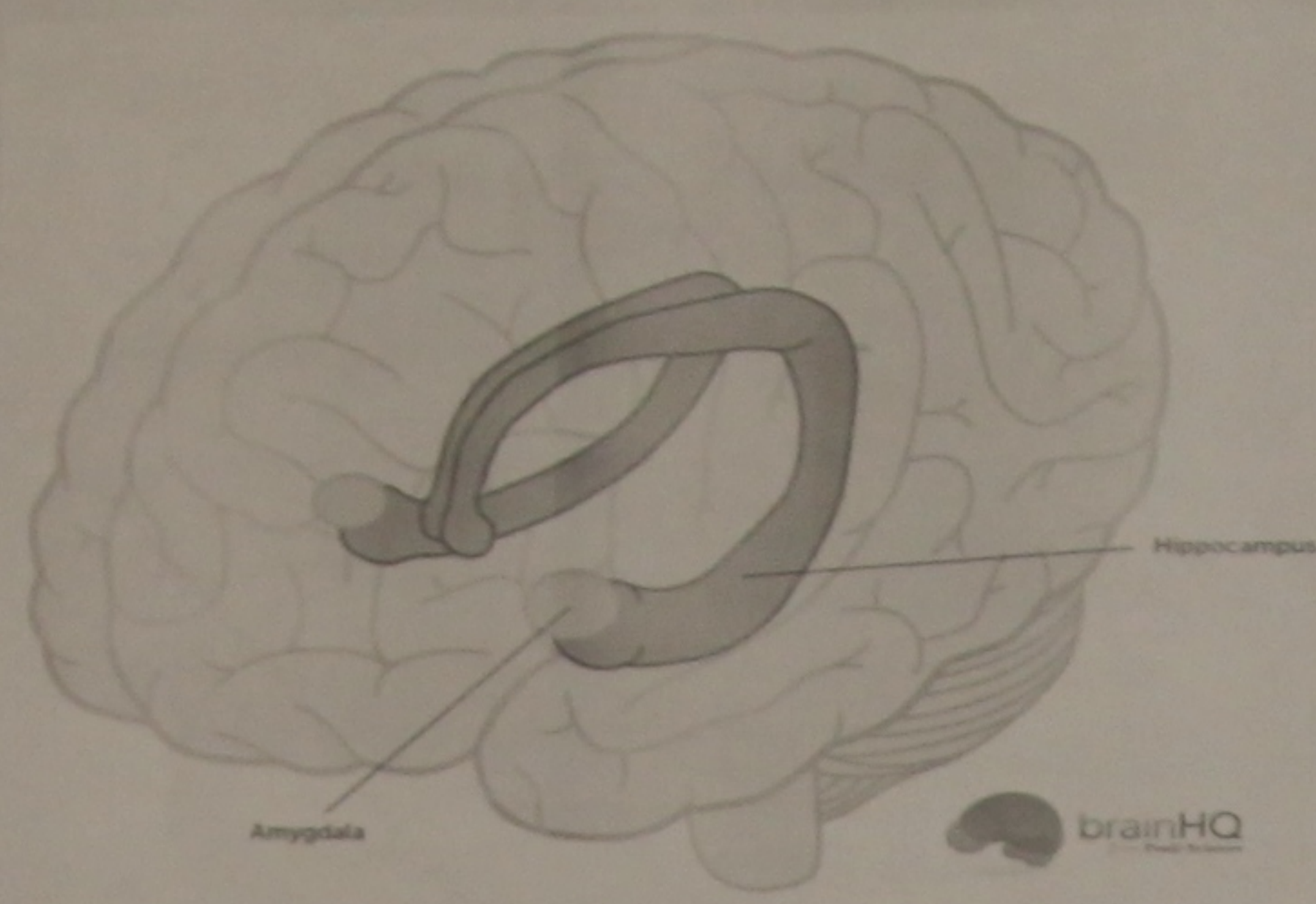
Symptoms

Long-term responses to unresolved sexual trauma include:

- Eating disorders
- Perceived powerlessness
- Self-blame or shame
- Substance abuse
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sexual compulsivity
- Intimacy disorders
- Somatic issues
- Destructive behaviors
- Interpersonal problems
- Multiple personality disorders
- Flashbacks
- Hyperawareness
- Dissociation
- Isolation
- Irregular sleep patterns
- Suicidal thoughts/ideations

Most of these symptoms are recognized as disorders associated with PTSD and directly related to the trauma of child sexual abuse.

The Brain's Response to Trauma



- **Amygdala** is responsible for interpreting situations as being dangerous or safe. When trauma is experienced, it is held in this part of the brain and is set on repeat causing the individual to feel constantly threatened and respond to life accordingly.
- **Hippocampus** stores memory. Release of stress hormone and high state of arousal cause damage to the left hippocampal areas, which harms the memory capacity of the brain.
 - **REM sleep contributes to memory capacity and is also disturbed when one experiences unresolved trauma.**
- **Right and Left Hemisphere**-Activity in the left hemisphere decreases due to the lack of involvement in non-verbal and language processing. The right hemisphere of the brain increases its activity level as it compensates for the damaged areas of the left hemisphere.
- **Frontal cortex** recognizes incoming stimuli and plan appropriate behavioral responses and to interact with portions of the brain that are related to memory and learning. When the frontal cortex is damaged, individual's personality exhibits change.
- **Broca Area** is responsible for speech, language processing, comprehension, and facial neural control. Traumatic experiences inhibits the process to generate words that associate to the experience.
 - **The Broca area illustrates absolutely no activity within CT-scan while remembering a traumatic event**

What is Expressive Arts Therapy?

The use of the expressive arts in a therapeutic setting multiplies the avenues by which a person in therapy may explore and find meaning, clarity, and healing. It deepens and transcends traditional talk therapy by acknowledging that each person's process is unique. While one individual may like talk therapy, another person may prefer to use journaling, movement, art, or a combination of different experiences during therapy. The engagement of one expressive art form awakens the creative energy of another to achieve self-actualization.

Benefits of Expressive Arts Therapy for Sexual Trauma Intervention

1. Uses a "neurosequential approach" via expressive arts therapies to stabilize the body's responses.
2. Identifies of the body's reactions to stressful events and memories through trauma-informed evaluation and sensory-based activities using expressive arts.
3. Responds to the body's reactions to traumatic events through somatic and sensory approaches to self-regulation.
4. Reinforces a sense of safety through reconnection with positive attachment and self-soothing.
5. Builds strengths by using the arts to normalize and enhance resilience.

Different Types of Expressive Art Therapy Modalities

Music Therapy- Making music, creating sounds, and listening to music evoke specific feelings and memories that assist the healing process.

Psychodrama- The process of enacting or reenacting relevant aspects or roles from current and past events to instill hope in clients who are facing life issues.

Movement Therapy- Using every part of the body to explore and articulate feelings and memory. Within the process, the survivor becomes aware of disabling movement and repetitive patterns and uses mindful expression as a vehicle for insight and change.

Bibliotherapy (Poetry/Creative Writing)- The use of poetry and creative writing helps the survivor explore immediate sensations, questions, insights, and feelings to gain a richer understanding of one's self. For example, free writing enables complete honest expression without worrying about spelling, grammar, or judgment of the self. Each person's journal is private, and the individual is always the judge of what to share with others. The journal's only purpose is to be a mirror.

Meditation- Being quiet and receptive through breathing and awareness exercises draws a person inward to prepare for self-expression. Meditation also decreases anxiety, regulates healthy sleep patterns, and creates self-trust.

Art Therapy- Using color, line, form, and imagery to focus on the process of making art to discover and articulate the inner self.

EMDR (eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing)- Helps the reconnection and reprocessing of traumatic memories.

Conclusion

Natalie Rogers developed Person Centered Therapy based on her belief that only in a psychologically safe environment where people are assured of not being analyzed and criticized by others, can we discover one's inner self. This sense of comfortableness and awareness can be achieved by engaging in a multi-modal intervention. Approximately twenty-five treatment approaches are currently utilized with child sexual abuse cases. Talk therapy is the most commonly used intervention, though this form of therapy lacks the ability to explore deeply rooted responses to trauma. Increased awareness of this discovery will generate future research that will enable the development of a multi-expressive Person-Centered Therapy program within rape crisis center to provide a more effective healing process for survivors of sexual abuse.

Citation

- Lewis, M. (2011). Handbook of Child Sexual Abuse: Identification, Assessment, and Treatment. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved from
- Rogers, N. (1993). The creative connection: Expressive arts as healing. Palo Alto, Calif: Science & Behavior Books.
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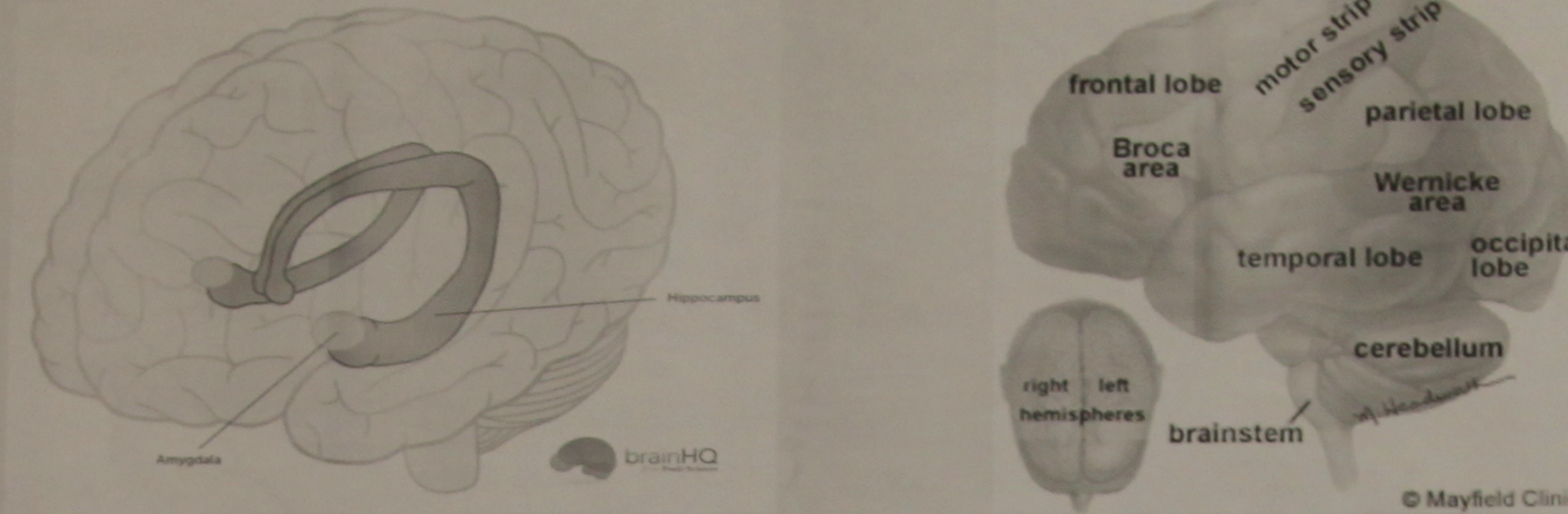
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