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# One of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Science vs. The Senate

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Staff Piece

Dr. Christine Blasey Ford: A woman who has quickly become a household name in the United States. Praised, but also condemned by many, psychologist Dr. Ford spoke out against Judge Brett Kavanaugh during a Senate hearing for his Supreme Court nomination. Ford claimed that 36 years ago, when they were teens, Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her at a party. Unfortunately, this is a common theme we have come to know all too well.

Victims of sexual assault are often encouraged to speak up and reach out, identify their attacker, and come to terms with what happened. However, that usually includes an in-depth interrogation where victims are essentially asked to relive the encounter, often resulting in an onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a slew of other psychological struggles. A review published in the *McGill Journal of Medicine*, entitled "[Sexual assault and posttraumatic stress disorder: A review of the biological, psychological and sociological factors and treatments](#)" defines sexual assault, and how victims can move forward through various treatment options.

The article states that "PTSD is caused by exposure to a traumatic event and intense psychological distress occurs as a result of re-experiencing the event." When victims are asked to recount what happened at the time of the assault, it triggers a response in the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis in the brain. Cortisol is the primary hormone in this system, which also happens to be the body's stress hormone. Trauma, such as assault and the recounting of it, triggers the HPA to increase cortisol levels, which creates a feeling of stress in the victim. This is what is referred to when the term "trigger warning" is used. It means that the following content may trigger PTSD or an onset of stress due to personal experiences. This can be incredibly devastating to victims and hinder their psychological recovery.

It is because of this that most victims choose to not speak out. They would rather have the assault go undocumented than come forward. This is why Dr. Ford's testimony was integral to so many victims of assault. However, she was only met with backlash in the name of her own profession.

According to an article published by the San Diego Union-Tribune entitled "[The science of long-term memory gets short shrift in Ford-Kavanaugh showdown](#)," eight unbiased psychologists and neuroscientists weighed in while questioned by the Union-Tribune. They chose to analyze the phrase "100 percent" that Dr. Ford used in regard to her certainty of Kavanaugh being her assaulter.

Using her own profession against her, a psychology professor from Fordham University stated that certainty is not a factor. "A person can be 100 percent certain—and be 100 percent wrong," he stated, which is a common occurrence in sexual assault cases. So, what does that entail?

There are three steps to memory: seeing it, remembering it, and recounting it. All three steps are extremely volatile. The more traumatic an experience is, the more vividly it is remembered. However, the amount of time between remembering and recounting the said event, determines how accurate the memory is. This is the degree to which Dr. Ford's claims were challenged. She could not recall how she got home, how she got to the party, or where it was. Though this is common throughout all victims of sexual assault, to only focus on the attacker and not the other details, it was not enough for this testimony.

On October 6, Judge Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court by the Senate. This leaves many people with unanswered questions. Assault victims are questioning if it will ever be worth it to speak out. Scientists are questioning how politicians could deem whether Ford's testimony was accurate when psychologists and neuroscientists could not do it themselves. The American people are questioning the integrity of the country and the beliefs it was founded upon. Where does everyone go from here?

I, for one, am astounded by the bravery of Dr. Ford to publicly defend herself. I believe her testimony can provide hope for victims of assault. It proves that the assault does not define you, and the ability to be successful afterwards is achievable. Scientists are still analyzing Ford's testimony, trying to use body language, facial expression, and vocal cues to locate moments of distress or other emotional signals to determine the integrity of the claim.

There is an influx of support to the field of psychology and neuroscience. In the past, psychology has been referred to as a "junk science." Times are changing, though, and its role in society is becoming more prominent. The combination of psychology and neuroscience bridges the gap between soft and hard sciences, and people are beginning to recognize their importance in everyday life, not just in a lab setting. It is my hope that

they are able to provide closure in regard to this tragedy, and use Dr. Ford as a push to further scientific research efforts in the topics of sexual assault and PTSD, so that victims feel validated rather than condemned.

If you, or anyone you know has ever been sexually assaulted, there is a 24-hour National Sexual Assault Hotline. It can be found at 1-800-656-4673.

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