Trauma and its consequences are ubiquitous in the courtroom. How traumatic experiences affect memory is of great importance to the legal system. Past research on memory for trauma and the development and maintenance of PTSD suggests there is reason to suspect that a traumatized person may be prone to memory errors. Research has also shown that jurors’ views of witnesses are important and that they tend to mistrust evidence given by witnesses that they believe cannot provide accurate memory reports. If traumatized people are prone to errors, is there a way to safeguard against those errors and make jurors more trusting of their memory reports?

In Part One, I polled participants on their views toward traumatized people and trauma memory (Study 1) then compared these beliefs to the actual memory performance of people exposed to an analogue traumatic event (Study 2). Results from the first study suggest that, overall, people have somewhat positive views of traumatized people’s memory and competency to testify. However, a significant proportion of participants were neutral in their views, implying that they may not know how to assess traumatize people’s memory reports. Results from the second study indicate that these views may be unsubstantiated: Participants exhibited a large degree of memory distortion regardless of condition.

Specifically, in Study 2, participants watched a traumatic film with missing scenes. Some saw the scenes unfold in their correct temporal sequence; others saw a random sequence. I manipulated participants’ conscious processing of that film via an instruction: some were told to focus on the meaning of the event (conceptual), some on the sensory details (data-driven), and some received no
instruction (control). A week later, I gave participants a memory test. False recognition of missing clips was high and memory errors and analogue symptoms did not differ across groups. However, experimental participants were more likely than controls to falsely remember the traumatic, compared to non-traumatic, missing clips. In addition, self-reported disorganization appeared more important to the malleability of people's trauma memories than objective measures.

In Part Two of this project (Study 3), I investigated whether cross-examination safeguarded participants' memory reports. Again, participants watched the same traumatic film utilized in Study 2. Then, participants underwent direct examination, which included misleading questions. Two days later, participants returned for an unexpected cross-examination and memory recognition test. During direct examination, participants were, overall, quite accurate on specific questions, but they frequently yielded to misleading questions. Cross-examination adversely affected their overall accuracy in the interview and recognition test. Participants misremembered clips that were asked about in cross-examination more often than clips that were not. This research lends further evidence for the malleability of trauma memories and the need for the general public to be educated about this issue. Possible theoretical and practical implications are discussed.