



Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Introduction

Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is a treatment that is helpful for children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. Trauma is defined as anything that a child experiences, witnesses, or learns about that involves actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence.¹ TF-CBT is designed to help children and adolescents and their non-offending parent, caregiver, or trusted adult role model.⁶ TF-CBT is an evidence-based treatment, meaning that many studies support its effectiveness in helping families improve trauma symptoms.⁴ There is no current evidence showing that TF-CBT works for individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) because research is not yet available. Current efforts to address this gap and early studies suggest it might be useful for individuals with developmental disabilities.⁷ The following factsheet will help you understand more about TF-CBT.

This fact sheet will explain:

- 1) How TF-CBT works;
- 2) What a person can expect to do in TF-CBT therapy;
- 3) How to make therapy successful; and
- 4) How to find a TF-CBT provider if you feel that TF-CBT is the right option for you.

How TF-CBT Works

To allow the time it takes to address trauma, TF-CBT is done in three phases:

Phase 1: Stabilization and skill building

Phase 2: Trauma narration and processing

Phase 3: Review of what has been learned and closure of treatment

Phase 1

Phase 1 of treatment is about teaching the caregiver and child the skills that will help improve trauma symptoms. During Phase 1, caregivers are educated about the effects of trauma and hope for recovery. Caregivers are also taught strategies that they can use to help manage their child's behavior struggles. In this phase children and caregivers learn helpful coping skills including: ⁴

- teaching distraction activities that children can do to “turn down the volume” of difficult emotions;
- mindfulness activities that help children get in touch with the present moment and relax;
- learning to see other people's emotions more accurately;
- building awareness about how other people might perceive them; and
- identifying unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more helpful thoughts.

Phase 2

Once the child, caregiver, and provider feel confident in the child's ability to use the skills they have learned to help manage distressing thoughts and feelings, Phase 2 can start. Phase 2 involves processing the trauma story. During these sessions, the provider and the child work together to write a story about the traumatic experience(s). While the child describes their life experiences, the provider helps them come to new understandings about the meaning of these events by challenging the child's unhelpful beliefs. The provider will also share the trauma story with the caregiver so they can better understand what the child has gone through and how they can help support the child. As the trauma story is written, the child and provider will identify certain

people, places or things that remind them of their traumatic experience, which are called “trauma reminders”. The provider will help the child process these trauma reminders with a technique called gradual exposure. Gradual exposure is when the provider guides the child in using coping skills to face their trauma reminders, starting with the least distressing one and working up to the most distressing ones.⁴

Phase 3

The purpose of Phase 3 is to help the child feel safe even after the therapy ends. The first goal of phase 3 is to help the child continue to apply the skills they have learned. The second goal is to help the child and caregiver build a trusting relationship so they feel comfortable talking about the trauma, similar to the relationship the provider formed with the child. To help in reaching this goal, the provider will meet with the child and caregiver at the same time and assist them in making a plan to help the child feel safe after their therapy has ended.⁴

What to Expect in Therapy

There is a common process most providers use when doing TF-CBT. When treatment begins, the provider meets with the caregiver(s) and children separately for equal amounts of time each week. Later in the treatment (usually during Phase 3), caregivers and children will meet together with the provider. You can expect TF-CBT therapy to last for about 12-15 sessions, but up to 25 sessions may be appropriate depending on the complexity of the situation.⁵

When first meeting with a provider, they will tell you a little bit about how therapy works and ask if you have any questions or concerns. Be sure to ask any questions you have about the therapy process and let the provider know if you do not understand what is being said. It is important that you feel comfortable asking questions, expressing your needs, and that your relationship with the provider is a good fit. Let the provider know if you will need accommodations so they can be made ahead of time.⁸

The provider will likely ask the caregiver questions about the trauma that the child has experienced, the child’s behavior, and parenting style. As therapy continues, the provider will help the caregiver and

child learn about the effects of trauma and practice skills to cope with it. The child will spend their time in therapy learning coping skills, telling their trauma story, and practicing using skills to cope with trauma reminders. The caregiver will spend time in therapy learning coping skills to help the child use at home, how to use various parenting techniques to help the child improve their wellbeing and behavior, how to better understand the child’s experience, how to manage distress so it does not negatively affect the child, and how to strengthen the parent-child relationship.⁴

Helpful Questions to Ask Your Provider

- 1) **Are you comfortable working with someone with a developmental disability?**
- 2) **What is your experience working with children and trauma?**
- 3) **How do you meet your client’s needs?**
- 4) **Can you help us set some goals that focus on our strengths?**
- 5) **What will my treatment plan look like?**

How to Make Therapy Successful

Though the mental health provider will have tools and activities that can be helpful, the client also plays a significant role in making therapy successful. Before seeing a provider, start thinking about the goals that you want to accomplish in therapy and ways that you would like life to improve.² When you meet with a provider, it is important to form a trusting relationship with them. As you talk more about your goals for therapy, make sure that your provider is willing to support your goals. If you ever feel hesitant about your goals or the therapy

process, be honest with your provider and let them know how you feel.⁸

It is very important that the nonoffending parent, caregiver, or trusted adult role model is committed to the therapy process and supporting the child in therapy. To make TF-CBT successful, it is important that the caregiver helps the child practice their skills outside of therapy so that they can apply their skills to real life situations. The caregiver should also be open to possible changes in parenting style that support the child's healing.⁶

How to Find a TF-CBT Provider

If you feel that that TF-CBT would be helpful for your family, the next step would be to find a TF-CBT provider. Providers often have websites or online profiles where they will share information about the method of therapy they use. You can also call their office to ask. Some websites have the option for you to search for providers that use TF-CBT methods. Providers might say that they use TF-CBT methods in their therapy, or they might be officially certified in TF-CBT. If they are certified in TF-CBT that means they have done additional TF-CBT training and were observed by experts in TF-CBT to make sure they follow the model correctly. Having a provider who is certified in TF-CBT is not required to have a successful experience in therapy, but it could be helpful if you are looking for someone who has extra experience and expertise.

Websites that allow you to search for providers:

[Find a TF-CBT Certified Therapist Tool](#)

[Psychology Today's Types of Therapy and Therapist Search Tool](#)

[GoodTherapy's Find a Therapist Tool](#)

Conclusion

TF-CBT is a method of therapy that helps both caregivers and children cope with the effects of the child's trauma. If your child or a child you know has experienced trauma or has developed behavior issues that you think could be related to trauma, TF-CBT might be a good fit.⁶

Contributors

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