TRAUMA NARRATIVES

Memories from “little t” traumas like a major car accident, bullying, and the loss of a significant relationship may evoke feelings of grief or insufficiency. Cases of severe trauma can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where reminders of the events trigger intolerable memories and associated emotional and physical responses like panic attacks or uncontrollable rage. Crafting trauma narratives helps people who have experienced either type of trauma to better manage trauma-related distress.

WHAT IS A TRAUMA NARRATIVE?

People who have lived through trauma often have a need to make sense of those events and the memories, thoughts, feelings, and physical responses connected to them. Crafting a trauma narrative is a psychological technique that helps people make sense of the experiences they suffered. Naturally, many of us try to avoid memories of the events to stop exposure to our difficult responses. However, this strategy can intensify the pain and can make triggers even more acute, particularly in situations where they can’t be avoided.

A trauma narrative exposes a person to memories of the experience in a safe environment and helps them reframe the experience so they can reclaim their power and autonomy. Crafting a this narrative helps to overcome the painful memories associated with the experience through the power of storytelling. A trauma narrative takes the jumbled mess of sounds, emotions, and images and forms an empowering story that can be told through writing, talking, and even artistic means.

BENEFITS OF TRAUMA NARRATIVES

The process of creating the narrative itself helps the client process and reframe their memories. Repeatedly telling the story makes the memories more manageable and helps to diminish the associated painful responses.

Trauma survivors also benefit from telling their stories because it helps them understand their reactions so they can more effectively manage them. It also gives people hope, which tends to reduce the withdrawal and isolation behaviors that are common with trauma. Additionally, this treatment provides continued support by people who listen to the story without judgment, including their therapist and loved ones. Through the repeated telling of the trauma story, the survivor gains the valuable perspective that the trauma is in the past and they have the power to move forward.

Source: https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-guide/trauma-narratives

TRAUMA NARRATIVE PROCESS

PSYCHOEDUCATION

Trauma narratives are a form of exposure therapy. Exposure therapy is a psychological treatment that was developed to help people confront their fears. When people are fearful of something, they tend to avoid the feared objects, activities or situations. Although this avoidance might help reduce feelings of fear in the short term, over the long term it can make the fear become even worse. In such situations, a trained mental health professional might recommend a program of exposure therapy in order to help break the pattern of avoidance and fear. In this form of therapy, trained mental health professional create a safe environment in which to "expose" individuals to the things they fear and avoid. The exposure to the feared objects, activities or situations in a safe environment helps reduce fear and decrease avoidance.

Trauma is one of the human experiences that can benefit from exposure therapy. When exploring trauma through the trauma narrative, it is important to remember:

- Trauma is a normal response to some experiences, and each person is unique as to how they react.
- Avoidance causes symptoms to get worse, although it may feel better to do so at the moment.
- The strength of traumatic memories will diminish with exposure to them.
- Discussing trauma can feel uncomfortable, and sessions are a safe space. If the feelings get too intense, it's ok to stop and come back to it another time.

YOU REMAIN IN CONTROL THROUGHOUT

Whether or not to engage in the creation of a trauma narrative is your choice, client autonomy is an essential part of any counseling process. If at any time you feel overwhelmed by the process, the clinician is there to support you through the use of relaxation techniques, along with expression of empathy and compassion.

CRAFTING THE NARRATIVE

Working with an individual to create a narrative will take several sessions. The number of sessions and the speed at which a person progresses varies from person to person.

1. **Begin with facts** — You will be invited to share the facts of your traumatic experience in as much detail as you can: the who, what, where, and when. If this proves too challenging, we can break down the experience into what happened before, during, and after. Once you feel comfortable with these facts, you will be invited you to write them down.
2. **Add emotions and thoughts** — Once the foundational facts of the trauma are written, you will be invited to talk about thoughts and feelings during the traumatic event. The clinician will use open ended questions and offer gentle encouragement. You will then add these details to the story they've written so far.
3. **Progress through discomfort** — Once you become more comfortable with telling and writing your story, it's time to focus on the more uncomfortable parts. The clinician will ask you to dig deeper into the worst parts of the traumatic experience and add as much detail as possible. It's ok to go as slowly as needed.
4. **Challenge irrational thoughts** — We will review your narrative together, identifying and challenging any irrational thoughts. You will be encouraged to think about how you're framing the story and to see if you want to revise any sections.
5. **Add learnings and growth experiences that have occurred since** — Once the story has been updated, you will be asked to compare your feelings now relative to when the trauma was happening and then to the time you started therapy. How have your feelings changed? Do you feel stronger as a person? What have you learned? How might you advise someone in the same situation? This part focusses on your growth and helps to carve a path forward.

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