

Guidelines for Managing the TN Before, During and After Treatment

Creating a Trauma Narrative (TN) is a therapeutic element of CBT for trauma and TF-CBT. The clinical purpose of a TN is exposure and cognitive processing. It serves as a method for the child to learn to tolerate remembering without significant distress and to arrive at a true and helpful way of understanding what the trauma means in their life so that it can be put in the past. In some cases, it is an account of aspects of the trauma, the context, and the aftermath. These accounts are not intended to be factual accounts of the event(s); the primary focus is on the impact on the child: feelings, and thoughts. The TN can be done many ways, including just talking about it, writing a story or letter, or creating a poem, song, picture, collage, or video.

It is a well-established practice standard that the TN is not entered into the treatment record, paper or electronic. It is considered similar to other drawings, work sheets, handouts, or other products of therapy sessions.

At the end of the therapy, the TN belongs to the child/family. The provider makes a clinical decision about what is the appropriate way to manage this transfer. The caregiver of younger children should become the guardian of the TN if they choose to preserve it. For older children/youth, it is appropriate to have a conversation about the possible risks of sharing their trauma experiences or the TN. Symbolically destroying the TN may in some cases be incorporated as a part of the therapy.

In cases where the child is a witness or victim of a crime and there is an active criminal prosecution, there is a small possibility that the TN is requested or subpoenaed by the prosecution or the defense. The goal is to use the TN to either bolster or undermine the child's credibility. There are a number of possible actions providers can take to prevent misuse of the TN in a legal proceeding. They can explain to the lawyers that the TN is a clinical procedure and does not reflect a factual account of the trauma. They can advise the parent not to give the TN to either the prosecution or the defense because of the possibility of misuse. The courts have the option to subpoena the TN. The family can be encouraged to seek out a lawyer to represent the child's interest in maintaining the confidentiality of the TN, or at minimum request an in-camera review by the court. Or the family may decide based on ongoing prosecution to destroy the TN.

Any kind of misuse of a TN is rare and concerns about the possibility should not be overblown. The therapeutic process of exposure and processing is the goal of doing a trauma narrative. Decisions about what to do with the specific TN vehicle should respect the child's preferences and autonomy at a developmentally appropriate way.