

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

What is TF-CBT?

TF-CBT is a therapy that helps children and their families who have been affected by traumatic events. Traumatic events include physical and sexual child abuse, rape or assault, exposure to domestic or community violence, serious accidents, natural or human disasters, violent crime, violent or sudden death, or any other experience that creates threat or fear. The child may actually experience the event, witness the event or have a close loved one who experienced the event.

How to tell if a child needs TF-CBT.

TF-CBT is mainly for traumatic stress, but it works for depression and other anxieties that might go along with the traumatic stress. Traumatic stress is reactions to the trauma event that are very upsetting or cause problems for the child at home, school or other activities. Traumatic stress includes having upsetting memories or being upset at reminders, sleep problems or night mares, avoiding people or situations that are reminders of the trauma, shutting down or becoming numb, having concentration problems, being irritable or being overly alert or jumpy.

An assessment of the child to find out how much traumatic stress s/he has is the way it is decided. If the child has significant traumatic stress then TF-CBT is the right therapy. Finding this out includes talking to the child and the parent/caregiver and giving standardized checklists for traumatic stress.

How do we know that TF=CBT is effective?

Many studies have shown the children's traumatic stress and depression improve more with TF-CBT than non-specific therapy. Children with all kinds of different traumas, boy and girls, and children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds benefit just as much.

What does TF-CBT involve?

TF-CBT has specific components:

1. Psychoeducation. The child and parent/caregiver learn about traumatic stress, typical reactions and why they happen; about the systems that may be involved (e.g., CPS, police and prosecutors, etc) and may affect reactions; the connection between thoughts, feelings and behavior,

what is involved in therapy. An important piece of information is that most children will recover especially if they have effective treatment.

2. Emotion regulation. The child and parent/caregiver identify typical trauma-related emotions such as fear or anxiety, sadness or grief, anger, shame and learn specific skills to handle these negative emotions in constructive ways.
3. Correcting maladaptive beliefs. The child and parent/caregiver identify typical trauma-related unhelpful beliefs like self-blame, no one can be trusted, or the world is very dangerous all the time. They learn more accurate and helpful ways to think about what happened.
4. Trauma narrative. The child becomes able to remember and talk about what happened without being really upset or avoiding the memories and how to handle trauma reminders. The child and parent/caregiver come up with a way to put the trauma into perspective as a bad experience that is in the past so it does not overly influence the present. This is the main part of TF-CBT.
5. Positive parenting. This component is for parents/caregivers and is to help them learn to handle behaviors the child is showing that are difficult or are interfering with family relationships.

What to expect in TF-CBT.

This is a structured intervention where the child and parent/caregiver learn new and better ways to handle the negative feelings and more helpful ways to think about what happened. A very important part of TF-CBT is practicing the skills for handling feelings and thinking in more constructive ways in between sessions. Usually there is homework to practice.

The trauma-focused part means that the child and parent/caregiver face up to what happened and the child becomes able to share the experience. This is sometimes hard in the beginning because both the child and the parent/caregiver may have strong feelings when they remember or think about the trauma. It is understandable that both the child and the parent may want to avoid remembering or worry that having to remember will make things worse. But remembering the experience in a safe environment is the best way to lower the negative feelings. When the feelings become less strong and more manageable it makes it possible to put the trauma into perspective and make it a part of the past.

How long does TF-CBT take?

The average length of treatment is about 12 to 15 sessions. Some children and parents/caregivers can complete the treatment in fewer sessions and some take more sessions.