



# The effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) on internalized problems in bereaved children

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Journal of  
Applied Family Therapy

eISSN: 2717-2430

<http://Aftj.ir>

IN PRESS

## Original research article

### How to Cite This Article:

Mirzaian, N., Mirzaian, B., & Abbasi, Gh. (IN PRESS). The effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) on internalized problems in bereaved children. *Aftj*.



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Received:

23.04.2021

Acceptance:

26.04.2023

### Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy on internalized problems in bereaved children. **Methods:** The research method was semi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population was all children aged 9 to 11 years old in Sari city who lost one of their parents due to covid-19 disease. In order to select a statistical sample, 30 people who met the criteria of the study and were willing to receive treatment were selected and assigned to an experimental group and a control group (each group contains 15 people) by a simple random method. The experimental group received Cohen, Mannarino and Knudsen's (2004) trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy in a group method during 16 90-minute sessions, and the control group did not receive any intervention until the follow-up test. The instruments used in this study included the Achenbach Child Behavior Inventory (CBCL, Achenbach & Rescurella, 2001). The data obtained in the three stages of pre-test, post-test and follow-up were analyzed using SPSS-22 software by variance analysis with repeated measurements. **Results:** The results showed that the trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy led to the reduction of the internalized problems in bereaved children ( $P < 0.01$ ). The results also showed that the effect of the treatment was permanent during follow-up. **Conclusion:** The research results provide evidence that trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy is a suitable method for reducing internalized problems in children and can lead to improving the mental health of bereaved children.

**Keywords:** *trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, internalized problems.*

## Introduction

Death is a phenomenon that happens to everyone in an unpredictable and universal way. Children lose their parents due to various reasons such as natural death, disease, war and natural disasters. Each type of loss has its own impact that is different from other losses (Martin et al., 2018). Children, unlike adults, do not have the cognitive and emotional ability to fully understand the process of death. Children's experience of loss is associated with many psychological and physical problems (Surmanti and Balan, 2011). Especially children in such conditions suffer from anxiety, depression, bereavement symptoms, and traumatic psychosocial consequences such as poor academic performance, poor executive functions, communication problems, and behavioral issues. Adjustment and adaptation to loss and bereavement is difficult and complex for children (Markle & Hauer, 2010). The phenomenon of bereavement is important in terms of the complex psychological reactions it creates after experiencing the death of loved ones (Bailey et al., 2000). Mourning is a state of sadness and intense inner discomfort in response to the loss of a person, or a specific thought and a set of feelings, thoughts, actions and behaviors. It includes symptoms such as separation grief, feelings of disbelief about the death of the deceased, and feelings of meaninglessness in life (Prierson et al., 2009).

Similar to adult complicated grief, childhood traumatic grief (CTG) is an emerging construct not yet included in DSM-5. Based on empirical data, it appears to involve a combination of unresolved grief and posttraumatic stress symptoms that occur with significant impairment in important areas of functioning (Brown & Goodman, 2005). Examples of unresolved grief symptoms include longing or searching for the deceased and failure to accept death (Brown & Goodman, 2005). Typically, post-traumatic stress symptoms in CTG are similar to those seen in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Melham et al., 2004); Avoiding traumatic memories and emotional numbness; Physiological hyperarousal, irritability or anger (Brown & Goodman, 2005; Melham et al., 2004). Children with CTG may also experience depressive symptoms such as sadness, hopelessness, and survivor guilt (Brown & Goodman, 2005; Cohen & Mannarino, 2004).

The experience of bereavement in children affects their behavior, relationships with others and their growth and leads to a sense of insecurity and difficulty in adapting to the surrounding environment (Sam, 2011). The death of parents has a short-term and long-term effect on the child's psychological adjustment. Although most children who experience parental death adjust within the first year (Worden & Silverman, 1996). However, many of them experience symptoms of depression, social withdrawal and long-term academic difficulties after the death of a parent.

Children who survive traumatic events are treated by social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals. They are treated through many methods in the hope of reducing their stress, but most of these treatments are not highly effective because they are not focused on trauma (Sildron and Wagner, 2006). Therefore, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), which is considered a relatively new treatment, has not been implemented on children who experience the trauma of the death of a parent, and its effectiveness has not been investigated. By conducting this research, it is possible to provide a suitable method for children who have faced the trauma of losing a parent to be used in

clinical centers so that it is more effective in treating these symptoms and preventing the consequences. Considering the high incidence of traumatic events, as well as the vulnerability of children and adolescents to it, the results of this research can be useful and beneficial for clinical centers, mental hospitals, therapists and researchers. The current study seeks to answer the question of whether trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy is effective on the internalized problems of bereaved children caused by the covid-19 disease.

### **Method**

The research method was semi-experimental with a pre-test and post-test design with a control group. The statistical population was all children aged 9 to 11 years old in Sari city who lost one of their parents due to covid-19 disease. In order to select a statistical sample, 30 people who met the criteria of the study and were willing to receive treatment were selected and assigned to an experimental group and a control group (each group contains 15 people) by a simple random method. The experimental group received Cohen, Mannarino and Knudsen's (2004) trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy in a group method during 16 90-minute sessions, and the control group did not receive any intervention until the follow-up test. The instruments used in this study included the Achenbach Child Behavior Inventory (CBCL, Achenbach & Rescurella, 2001). The data obtained in the three stages of pre-test, post-test and follow-up were analyzed using SPSS-22 software by variance analysis with repeated measurements. Results: The results showed that the trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy led to the reduction of the internalized problems in bereaved children ( $P < 0.01$ ). The results also showed that the effect of the treatment was permanent during follow-up.

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### **Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the effectiveness of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) on children's internalized problems. It was found that the group of 9-11-year-old children who received cognitive behavioral therapy focused on trauma showed a significant change in terms of internalized symptoms compared to children who did not receive this treatment. TF-CBT has been successfully adapted in traumatized pediatric populations. The adaptation of this intervention in the children's population is based on the level of children's cognitive, social and psychological performance, as well as their abstract ability. This, Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy is a suitable method for reducing internalized problems in children and can lead to improving the mental health of bereaved children.

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