



Desired Dreams: Narrative therapy conversations with trauma survivors about the dreams they would like to experience

by Muhammed Nurullah Demir and Mehmet Dinç



Muhammed Nurullah Demir is a clinical psychologist and a doctoral student in clinical psychology living in Türkiye. He works as a research assistant in the Department of Clinical Psychology at İnönü University. His clinical and academic work focuses on narrative therapy, trauma, post-traumatic growth and addiction. He is especially interested in narrative practices related to dreams following traumatic events.
muhammednurullahdemir@gmail.com

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7411-8739>

Mehmet Dinç is a narrative therapist living in Türkiye. He is an associate professor and faculty member in the psychology department at Hasan Kalyoncu University. He works on psychological resilience, conducts extensive research, and has written several books on the subject.
mehmetdinc@gmail.com



 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9544-8999>

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Pronouns for both authors: he/him

Abstract

This paper introduces the “Desired Dream” practice, an innovative psychotherapy approach based on narrative therapy. It involves conversations about dream content that individuals want to see and imagine, as distinct from dreams that occur spontaneously during sleep. The practice was designed to be used with people affected by the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. It may be of use when working with people who have been through a traumatic event, whether or not they are experiencing disrupted sleep or distressing dreams. The three-step process elicits participants’ personal and cultural perceptions and knowledges of dreams, then invites them to describe in detail a dream they would like to experience. The final stage explores the meanings and emotions these desired dreams hold. The aim is to create space for people to discover values, hopes and preferred directions in life. This paper describes the application of the Desired Dream practice with 12 participants (four children, four adolescents, four adults) affected by the 2023 earthquakes Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye. The practice supported participants in constructing alternative narratives about their lives that contained hopes, values and resilience, rather than trauma-centred narratives. The dreams the participants wanted to see facilitated conversations about their search for meaning in their lives, their longings and their capacity for personal agency. The paper offers a unique approach that contributes to the consideration of dreams not only within a clinical or pathological framework but also within a cultural and relational context.

Key words: dreams; nightmares; sleep; trauma; earthquake; natural disaster; narrative therapy; narrative practice

Natural disasters can have profound consequences at both individual and societal levels (World Health Organization, 2013). Due to their sudden onset, unpredictable nature and impacts on living conditions, such events can be extremely distressing. Earthquakes, floods, storms and fires can also significantly impact social structures, affecting forms of solidarity within communities, their collective memory, and their cultural meaning systems (Cova & Rincón, 2010).

The effects of natural disasters on individuals are often framed in terms of trauma: intense reactions such as fear, helplessness and horror experienced in response to events that have threatened physical or psychological integrity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Psychology literature frequently emphasises that natural disasters can lead to mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression (Harvey et al., 2003). These can begin immediately after the event or affect individuals' mental and emotional wellbeing in the long term. Symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of the event, intense anxiety and sleep disturbances (Yehuda, 2002).

Disturbances to sleep and dream patterns constitute a critical dimension of the impact of trauma on individuals (Ross et al., 1989). Nightmares are common and often contain emotional echoes of the traumatic event (Germain et al., 2007). This can reduce sleep quality and negatively affect daily functioning. Recent research has shown that nightmares can both hinder the mental processing of trauma and reflect an individual's response to trauma (Mellman & Hipolito, 2006; Simos & Berle, 2020).

However, the relationship between trauma and sleep is not limited to psychopathological effects. Sleep and dream content can also contribute to the reinterpretation of traumatic events by reflecting individuals' emotions, thoughts and hopes (Walker, 2017). Germain (2013) noted that post-traumatic nightmares indicate confusion in the individual's emotional

processing, while also emphasising the importance of therapeutic approaches that enable new understandings of these experiences.

One such therapeutic approach, narrative therapy, assists individuals to make sense of their traumatic experiences and bring alternative narratives to the fore alongside dominant ones (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Findlay (2016) has argued that in narrative therapy, dreams can provide a basis for active narratives about unique outcomes, initiatives and reactions that individuals produce in their dreams. Carla Souza (2021) showed that dreams can reveal not only past traumas but also provide a basis for double story development. Milan Colic (2007) stated that consciously constructed dream content can play an important role in individuals' emotional healing processes. Hong-Ru Liang (2022) considered daydreams as an expressive space that can open a door to alternative narratives.

Based on these perspectives, we propose the concept of the "desired dream". A desired dream is not a dream that a person experiences spontaneously during sleep; it refers to exploration of dream content that the person would wish for, imagines and constructs. Participants are both the narrators and interpreters of the "dream" in this process. This approach allows individuals to move away from trauma-centred narratives and create alternative stories that strengthen their connection to hopes, values and relational bonds. Thus, the Desired Dream practice is presented here as a method that highlights the cultural and relational dimensions of dreams and is consistent with a narrative therapy approach.

The significance of the Desired Dream practice

Dreams have held a special place for me (Muhammed Nurullah Demir) since my childhood. As a child, I would excitedly tell my family about the dreams I had, and with their positive interpretations, I would transform these dreams into a hopeful story. With my

psychology education, my curiosity about dreams took on an academic dimension, and I turned to Freud's and Jung's dream theories. Treating my dreams as messages, I often asked myself questions like "What is my dream trying to tell me?" or "What hidden message is my dream conveying?" However, interpreting my dreams through generalised psychoanalytic theories eventually had a negative impact on my ability to remember them. I noticed that the more I approached my dreams this way, the less I remembered them. When I set aside psychodynamic interpretations and approached my dreams with a more open and nonjudgemental attitude, I began to remember them again. This personal experience marked the beginning of my awareness that the relationship we establish with our dreams can directly affect how they are remembered and how we make sense of them.

This personal awareness was compounded by my firsthand experience of the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake in February 2023. I experienced the earthquake in Adiyaman and stayed onsite in a tent for about a month. Fear dominated the first few days; however, helping those trapped in the rubble, sharing food and water, neighbours supporting each other, and the solidarity of volunteers from different cities replaced fear with a sense of coping together. Spending the nights with dozens of other campers, I witnessed people grinding their teeth and having nightmares. When I started working with clients after the earthquake, they expressed intense difficulties related to sleep and dreams. All these experiences increased my desire to investigate more closely how dreams can be related to traumatic experiences.

Discussions between Muhammed Nurullah Demir and his then doctoral supervisor Mehmet Dinç encouraged M. Nurullah to develop the idea of working with dreams within the framework of narrative therapy. Focusing on the concept of "a dream one would want to have" rather than "a dream experienced during sleep" opened up an exciting new horizon for M. Nurullah. The idea that dreams are not only a reflection of past

traumas but also a source of hope and alternative narratives for the future formed the basis of my approach. I encountered a similar perspective in David Epston's (1989) work on "counter-dreaming". Epston aimed to offer new perspectives on the client's life narrative by writing positive fictional dreams for the client. This approach was inspiring in that it showed how dreams could emerge from the shadow of traumatic experiences and open the door to alternative narratives.

In the psychology literature, Freud (1900) viewed dreams as a reflection of repressed desires, while Jung (1964) argued that dreams reflect the personal and collective unconscious. Modern neuroscience, on the other hand, has mostly associated dreams with cognitive functions and memory consolidation processes (Stickgold, 2005). All these approaches have largely prioritised the therapist's knowledge in interpreting dreams, pushing the individual's wisdom about their dream experience into the background. In contrast, in the Desired Dream practice, the client is both the "screenwriter" and the "interpreter" of the dream. This builds on White and Epston's (1990) statement that positioning the individual as the narrator and interpreter of their own life story contributes to psychological wellbeing.

In conditions such as PTSD, nightmares re-experiencing the trauma can negatively affect sleep patterns and emotional wellbeing (Germain, 2013; Mellman & Hipolito, 2006). Behavioural approaches such as exposure and response prevention or EMDR use repeated exposure techniques to desensitise the person to the traumatic experience (Shapiro, 2001). In contrast, in the Desired Dream practice does not elicit accounts or re-enactments of traumatic dream content; instead, the client is invited to construct a dream they would wish to have. This method allows the individual to move beyond traumatic events and construct narratives they desire for their life. Thus, the Desired Dream practice can support the thickening of alternative narratives and the construction of empowering life stories for individuals exposed to traumatic experiences.

Developing the Desired Dream practice

The work described in this paper was conducted in Adıyaman, one of the provinces affected by the 7.7 and 7.6 magnitude earthquakes centred in Kahramanmaraş on 6 February 2023. Located on the East Anatolia Fault Zone, these earthquakes impacted 11 provinces, causing 50,783 deaths and 107,204 injuries (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, 2023). Alongside immense destruction, the disaster revealed strong solidarity and coping practices. Shared life in tents and containers strengthened neighbourly ties, and experiences of mutual aid entered participants' dream narratives.

M. Nurullah worked with 12 participants equally distributed by gender and developmental stage: four children, four adolescents and four adults. The work was carried out 22 months after the earthquake on a voluntary basis. One participant had been trapped under rubble and lost a first-degree relative; the others had not had these experiences.

Before the practice, a literature review and expert consultations informed the development of open-ended questions and age-appropriate guidelines for the Desired Dream practice. A test group with six volunteers from each age group helped to refine the process. Based on feedback and expert input, the guidelines were finalised and applied in conversations with the participants.

Stage 1: Cultural perceptions of dreams

In the first stage of the Desired Dream practice, questions were asked to understand the participants' perceptions of dreams and the familial and cultural contexts of these perceptions. This starting point aimed not only to gather information but also to establish a relationship of trust with the participants and to allow them to express their worlds in their own terms. This approach is a direct reflection of narrative therapy's emphasis on local knowledge and

meanings arising from individuals' everyday life practices. According to White and Epston (1990), individuals shape their identities not only through individual introspection but also through social contexts, cultural narratives and collective memory. Therefore, understanding how participants position their dream experiences within their families, communities and cultural backgrounds in the first step of the practice was critical to grasping what kinds of values, hopes or meanings the imagined dreams could be built upon in subsequent stages.

Through open-ended questions – such as: Do you remember your dreams? How are dreams addressed in your family? What do you think about dreams? – we explored individual meaning production in relation to dreams and the familial and cultural foundations of these meanings. This approach reflects an ethical and narrative position that centres participant knowledge rather than expert knowledge by allowing participants to speak within their own linguistic and cultural contexts. At the same time, this method allowed dreams to be approached not only as an individual mental process but also as an experience intertwined with collective meanings.

This initial phase also used the “small question” technique, one of the basic techniques of narrative therapy. In narrative therapy, instead of asking individuals big and abstract questions, simple, small questions are asked to help them understand their worlds. This approach is important for ensuring the participant's involvement in the process (White & Epston, 1990). The small question technique helps participants generate meaning about their own lives without being overwhelmed by big questions. This technique also allowed clients to express their dreams in a less judgemental way.

Examples of the first stage of the Desired Dream process are provided below, beginning with Yusuf, who was seven years old.

M. Nurullah: Do you remember your dreams?

Yusuf: No. I don't remember.

M. Nurullah: So you don't remember your dreams? Do you always forget the dreams you see?

Yusuf: I always forget them.

M. Nurullah: If you remembered a dream, would you like to tell someone about it?

Yusuf: Of course.

M. Nurullah: Who would you like to share it with?

Yusuf: My mom, dad or brother.

Yusuf did not generally remember his dreams, but expressed his willingness to share his dream experiences with his family. To prevent performance anxiety among the participating children, the Desired Dream exercise was presented as an activity rather than a homework assignment. The work with Yusuf was conducted with the consent of his family and with Yusuf's approval.

The conversation format was adapted to adolescents, as in the following conversation with Aysima (16 years old).

M. Nurullah: Aysima, what do you think about dreams?

Aysima: I didn't think about dreams before. I had no idea before, but now it just seems like something bad. It's scary for me.

M. Nurullah: You said you were scared in your dream. What do you see in your dream?

Aysima: Silly things ... Even if they aren't real, I always see bad things. I see silly, meaningless things. When I wake up in the morning, I say to myself that I don't want to see this person's face today.

M. Nurullah: Your dreams seem meaningless and bad to you. Do you often remember your dreams?

Aysima: Well, I do remember them, teacher, but not all of them. I remember some things, I don't remember others, and I try to get those things out of my head.

Aysima described her dreams after the earthquake with words such as "evil", "fear" and "meaningless". She stated that the dreams she experienced were generally negative in content and that for this reason, on certain days, she did not want to meet certain people. Aysima remembered some of her dreams but did not want to remember others and tried to get them out of her mind.

In one of the sessions with adults, Fatma (37 years old) shared her family's practice of interpreting dreams through their opposite meanings.

M. Nurullah: How does your family approach and interpret your dreams?

Fatma: For example, in a dream where I cry a lot, they tell me I will laugh ... When I share a dream where I see my father passing away with my mother or sister, they say, "His life has been extended". That's how they interpret it.

M. Nurullah: When you have a sad dream, they interpret it as meaning you will be happy. What about when you have a happy or pleasant dream? How do they interpret that?

Fatma: They interpret those as sadness too. So when I'm happy or joyful [in a dream], they say I'll be sad.

Stage 2: Description of the Desired Dream

In the second stage, participants were encouraged to describe in detail a dream they would like to experience. This aimed to allow individuals to express their imaginations and explore meanings. Questions included:

- Can you describe a dream you would like to experience?
- How would you describe the setting of your dream?
- Is this setting familiar to you or is it new?
- Who is in your dream?

These questions encourage participants to provide rich descriptions of the dream they wish to see and to gain insight into their hopes.

The nature-themed dream description of Hüseyin (16 years old) is noteworthy.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe a dream you would like to experience?

Hüseyin: First of all, it's far from the current world, a bit like what they call the realm of imagination. An environment where I feel at one with nature and peaceful. Like a house with a garden, with a dog and a cat inside. Far from technology, alone with nature. And when I wake up, I want to feel really good from the dream.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe your dream in a bit more detail?

Hüseyin: So, a two-story house, a small vegetable garden in the yard, a doghouse and a small family. But a happy family.

M. Nurullah: A happy family, a small house with a garden. What's in the garden? What are you growing?

Hüseyin: Tomatoes, lemons, tangerines. Maybe oranges. There will be vegetables, there will be oranges. So the whole focus is on the vegetable garden. And then there are the creatures there, the animals. But I also want a small family. A small family too.

M. Nurullah: Can you tell me a little about this family?

Hüseyin: So, there could be a spouse and children. There could also be a mother and father, but they're a bit happy.

M. Nurullah: What do you think they do there right now?

Hüseyin: Away from the troubles of this life, just happy, you know? Breakfast, reminiscing about old memories together in the garden.

M. Nurullah: So you're having a lovely breakfast together in the garden, reminiscing about the past, happily. You said away from troubles. What troubles would you want to be away from?

Hüseyin: Away from which troubles? Well, the ones we're thinking about now, the ones that stress us out even when we think about them, like financial difficulties ... And the wars in the world. Things like that.

M. Nurullah: When you say the wars or troubles in the world, would you like to elaborate on that a bit?

Hüseyin: There's the Palestinian-Israeli war. It's been going on for about a year. It's been over a year. It bothers us, and every day, along with the pain of it, along with the difficulties they are experiencing, we are also being tested, and that's why we can't really relax, to be honest. Because while they are giving their lives there, it's not right for us to be comfortable here. So if their troubles end, if there is peace and happiness everywhere in the world, then it would be easier for these things to happen.

Hüseyin gave considerable space to nature and peace in his Desired Dream. These descriptions provided openings for conversation about Hüseyin's desire to escape the stress of his daily life and be in a more peaceful environment.

His sensitivity to the humanitarian crises that have occurred during Israel's long occupation of Palestinian territories and his desire to support the just struggle of the Palestinians are evident. Hüseyin's dream of a world filled with peace and tranquillity shows that he is not only seeking personal peace, but also expressing a longing for peace and social justice.

Ahmet (44 years old) wished to dream about life before the earthquake.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe a dream you would like to see? Can you describe it in detail?

Ahmet: What kind of dream should I describe?

M. Nurullah: For example, if we asked you to describe a dream you would like to see when you sleep, what would you describe?

Ahmet: What would I describe? For example, I would like to see what life was like before the earthquake.

M. Nurullah: If you were to describe a life before the earthquake, which part, which place would you want to see?

Ahmet: I would want to see a memory related to my old life. I lost my wife in the earthquake. I would want to see those things with her. It could be at home. Old home life and such.

M. Nurullah: You want to see the old house. Your wife is there. Who else is there?

Ahmet: The children.

M. Nurullah: How many children do you have?

Ahmet: I have two children. A daughter and a son. Thank God my children are healthy. My wife passed away.

M. Nurullah: My condolences. I wish you and your children a long and happy life. You're

thinking about a time when you were all together like before. What time of day?

Ahmet: It doesn't matter what time. Any time.

M. Nurullah: If you had a preference, what time would you choose?

Ahmet: For example, when I come home from work, I would like to see my wife. After I get home from work.

Therapist: Is this the house you used to live in, the one you know? What do you do there, for example?

Ahmet: Well, when I go home, I'd like her to greet me. I don't know, the food ... You miss it. Her cooking, all kinds of food. It was usually ready. She would greet me.

Ahmet's Desired Dream focused on a scene from his life before the earthquake. He wanted to see an ordinary but meaningful moment spent at home with his wife and children. Ahmet's narrative opened space for conversation about the warmth of his memories of his wife and his desire to reconnect with those moments.

Stage 3: Meanings and feelings related to the dream

The final stage of the desired dream application explores the meaning of the dream in the individual's life, how this dream makes them feel, and any symbolic values. I asked questions such as:

- What do you think about the dream?
- How did this dream make you feel?
- What is the meaning in your life of the people in the dream?
- Can I learn the meaning in your life of the place in your dream?
- What might this dream be trying to tell you?

- What do the symbols and objects in your dream mean to you?
- What might be the reason for your desire to have such a dream?

Participants are encouraged to interpret their dreams in relation to their past experiences, emotional states and relationships. The questions posed to participants are designed to elicit responses that connect the figures and symbols in their dreams to significant elements in their lives. For example, the question “What is the meaning in your life of the location of your dream?” helps participants make sense of their environmental and personal contexts. This process offers participants the opportunity to reframe their life experiences within a new framework of meaning. Narrative therapy emphasises meaning-making. Questions such as “How did this dream make you feel?” are used to help participants explore their emotional responses and relationship with symbols while thickening alternative narratives. Participants are also asked about whether the Desired Dream conversation has been useful to them.

The following conversation was with seven-year-old Ali. Ali was exposed to the February earthquakes and then had to leave his city for a while. He wished to dream about Heaven.

M. Nurullah: How did seeing this dream make you feel?

Ali: Very good.

M. Nurullah: You wanted to see Heaven, right? Would you like to say anything about Heaven?

Ali: There will be beautiful things there. I will go there. I will go there with my money. I will buy a red fan.

M. Nurullah: Why do you want it to be red?

Ali: I want it to be red. It's always black. It's always black anyway.

M. Nurullah: Why did you choose Heaven?

Ali: No-one dies there. No-one dies.

M. Nurullah: Who dies?

Ali: No-one, but I think they never actually die.

M. Nurullah: No-one dies in Heaven. That's why you chose it, as far as I understand. Why else did you choose it?

Ali: Why else did I choose it? Because it's a very beautiful place. You eat chicken, yum.

In interviews with Ali's family, it was noted that Ali often asked questions like: Why did the earthquake happen? Why did God create the earthquake? Did God create the earthquake to kill people? His family explained that earthquakes are natural events, and that God has established rules governing the workings of nature. They emphasised that earthquakes themselves are not bad things, but that many people suffer harm due to irresponsible human behaviour. They also told Ali that they believe in the existence of Heaven after death and that it is a beautiful place full of happiness.

Ali described Heaven as a “beautiful place” where “no-one dies”. In describing his dream, Heaven took shape as both a safe space and a source of happiness.

Ömer (14 years old) reflected on the meanings of his Desired Dream.

M. Nurullah: How did describing your Desired Dream make you feel?

Ömer: Describing this dream makes me feel peaceful, happy, calm and clean.

M. Nurullah: What does your dream tell you? You mentioned some people in your dream. Even some animals. You mentioned a cat. You mentioned a tree, right? What else was there? You mentioned a house, a place far from technology, and there were people. Your mother, father, siblings, relatives. What do these people mean in your life?

- Ömer: These are people who have been by my side since I was born. People who held my hand when I started school. Generally, people with whom I have memories of growing up together.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think the place in this dream means, the one you mentioned, the house ... What do you think this place means in your life? Can we learn that? What does such a place mean in your life?
- Ömer: I think such a place is just imagination. Apart from that, a few more wishes can be added. Imagination and wishes. The desire to be supportive. That is, being with family, being away from trouble and worries, being comfortable, carefree, beautiful, closer to God, remembering, and such wishes.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think this dream is trying to tell you?
- Ömer: What is this dream trying to tell me? I mean, everyone has desires. We have to strive to achieve these desires. I think we should live our lives without forgetting God and without distancing ourselves too much from the people around us. That's what I'm trying to say.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think is underlying your desire to have such a dream?
- Ömer: I think it's because I can't fully experience most of the things I want.
- M. Nurullah: Which one do you feel you can't experience the most? Which one?
- Ömer: I live in the middle of the city. I mentioned rural areas as an example. We can't live in the countryside. We don't. I mentioned a two-story house. A garden, things like that. Other than that, we don't have much technology in our house. We communicate well. We live close to our relatives anyway. I experience them, but other than that, a garden, a quiet environment in the house, birds chirping, clean air. These kinds of things are things I don't have much control over.
- Like Hüseyin, Ömer described a house, garden, silence and being surrounded by nature in his dream as a world that made him feel peaceful, clean and happy. Ömer's dream was peopled with close relationships, such as with his mother, father and relatives, with whom he collects memories. He described these people as holding his hand in life. Linking the places in his dream to "imagination and desire", Ömer said these spaces meant being together with his family, getting away from troubles and spiritual closeness.
- Enes (24) reflected on the relationships and locations in his Desired Dream.
- M. Nurullah: How did describing this dream you wanted to see make you feel?
- Enes: It made me feel happy. I felt happy, honestly.
- M. Nurullah: Now, you mentioned some people in your dream. For example, your mother, your siblings, your fiancée. What would you like to say about the place and meaning of these people in your life?
- Enes: My wife will be my companion, of course. She'll be a friend from marriage, sir. She'll be a guide when needed. Maybe I'll tell her things I can't tell my mother or siblings.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think the place in your dream means in your life?
- Enes: We always lived in a family home. Being together all the time feels a bit heavy to me. I want to be in a house with a garden, a beautiful house, a more peaceful environment.

M. Nurullah: For example, you mentioned some symbols and objects in your dream. You mentioned greenery and fruit trees. What do these objects mean in your life?

Enes: I've always admired village life. Maybe working with the soil, producing something with my own labour, would be good for me.

Enes's Desired Dreams reflected his longings and needs. The setting and symbols contain information about Enes's life. Expressions such as village life, garden and greenery provided openings to explore Enes's connections with nature.

Conclusion

This Desired Dream practice was conducted within the framework of narrative therapy principles to enable individuals exposed to traumatic events to re-examine their experiences through the dreams they wish to see and to express their individual desires in this process. The Desired Dream method enabled participants to rediscover their perceptions of their traumatic experiences, and the meanings produced about these experiences in an individual and cultural context.

The constructed dreams reflected wishes and desires that would make individuals feel good in their post-traumatic life. For example, the participant who was trapped under rubble and lost first-degree relatives dreamed of

returning to peaceful memories from the past. Participants who did not experience the loss of first-degree relatives and did not have the experience of being trapped under rubble generally wanted to see dreams full of hope for the future. This is consistent with Souza's (2021) view that dreams can be a means of giving meaning to an individual's current life and expressing their hopes for the future.

We found that with children whose verbal communication skills are not yet developed, drawing dream descriptions may be more effective than verbal communication. This reflects narrative therapy's respect for clients' unique forms of expression.

The Desired Dream practice enabled individuals to make new meaning of their perceptions of traumatic events and to position themselves as authors of their own stories. Through dream narratives, participants not only moved away from trauma-focused stories but also expressed hopes and values in life. Dreams can be used as part of conversations making meaning of traumatic experiences and creating new narratives after trauma. This approach, based on narrative therapy, offers an effective method that supports people's capacity to create meaning in their lives in post-traumatic processes. Future studies are recommended to examine the application of this method in different cultures, its long-term effects, and its impact on clients experiencing different forms of distress.

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