

THEMATIC TRAUMA NARRATIVES: FOCUSING ON THE FOREST NOT THE TREES

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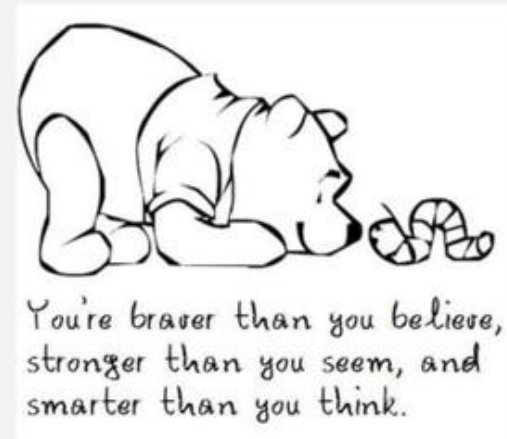


TRAUMA NARRATION = GRADUAL EXPOSURE

- Goals:
 - Reduce emotional distress related to trauma memories
 - Support memory organization and cohesion
 - Surface problematic cognitions that will benefit from restructuring in next phase of model
 - For complex PTSD, thematic narratives set the stage for cognitive processing

WHY IT'S TOUGH AND IMPORTANT

- It can be uncomfortable to be directive
- We are asking clients to do hard work that they may not want to do AND we *know* that this is the mechanism to actually reduce the distress clients are experiencing
- If we as the therapist don't guide, moderate, and direct sessions, client likely won't engage in this type of gradual exposure spontaneously



“TRADITIONAL” TRAUMA NARRATIVE

“In as much detail as you can remember, tell about your memory of the event from beginning to end. Also add in any thoughts and feelings you had back then.”

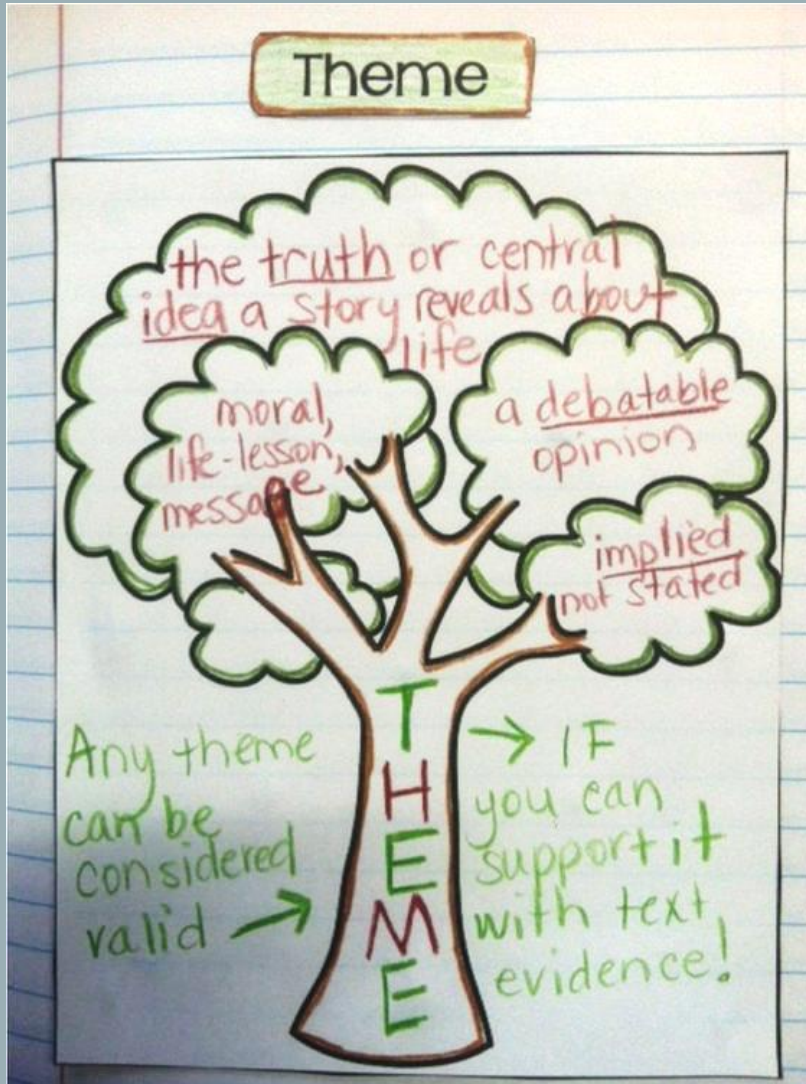
My Story: Table of Contents	
Chapter	Using your Life Timeline, choose one light and three heavy memories that you will tell about in your Life Story. You can create a title for each of your life chapters.
1	A Favorite Memory:
2	A Heavy Memory:
3	A Heavier Memory:
4	My Heaviest Memory:

This form of Trauma Narrative is likely very familiar to you! Let's explore another avenue for Trauma Narrative...

ADDRESSING LIFE THEMES IN TRAUMA NARRATION

Learn to differentiate between the
sound of your intuition guiding you
and your traumas misleading you

IDENTIFYING LIFE THEMES



Look at the Clues!

- Locating the theme of a story is really quite simple, once you look at the clues.
- A key clue for finding the theme would be the main character's thoughts and actions.

- The character will magnify the theme of the book or story by what he/she says, thinks and does.



VIEW FROM THE LITERARY WORLD

- Definition:
 - The underlying message of a story
 - Critical belief about life conveyed in the story
 - What the story means
 - Stories often have more than one theme
- Function:
 - Bind together essential elements of a story
 - Provide understanding of the “character’s” experiences
 - Give key insight into how the author views the world/life

VIEW FROM TRAUMA-FOCUSED THERAPY

- A “stable and coherent framework for understanding one’s experience” is an important psychological need for trauma survivors (McCann & Pearlman, 1990)
- Processing themes is an attempt to help meet that need
- Requires looking for meaning across traumas rather than within one trauma
- The meaning ascribed to a trauma often changes following exposure to subsequent traumas



CREATE
MEANING

Common Trauma Themes

Theme	Of Self	Of Others/World
Trust	I make bad decisions. I can't trust my own judgement.	People can't be trusted. Don't trust the system; authority.
Control/Power	I don't have control of future. Control is all or nothing. Must control what I can.	Life is unpredictable, uncontrollable.
Esteem	I am a bad kid. I am worthless. I am only valuable for....	People are bad, will hurt you.
Intimacy	I shouldn't get close to people.	Others will take advantage of me. Relationships cause pain.
Safety	I am unsafe. Something bad will happen to me....	Adults won't keep me safe. Adults are dangerous.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs are like magnets. They are always waiting to **attract** evidence which confirms them. The more evidence they collect, the stronger they get.

Unfortunately they **repel** anything which does not 'fit' with the belief. This makes it hard to 'see' or believe anything which would contradict or undermine them.

Core beliefs are not facts. With persistence they can be altered.



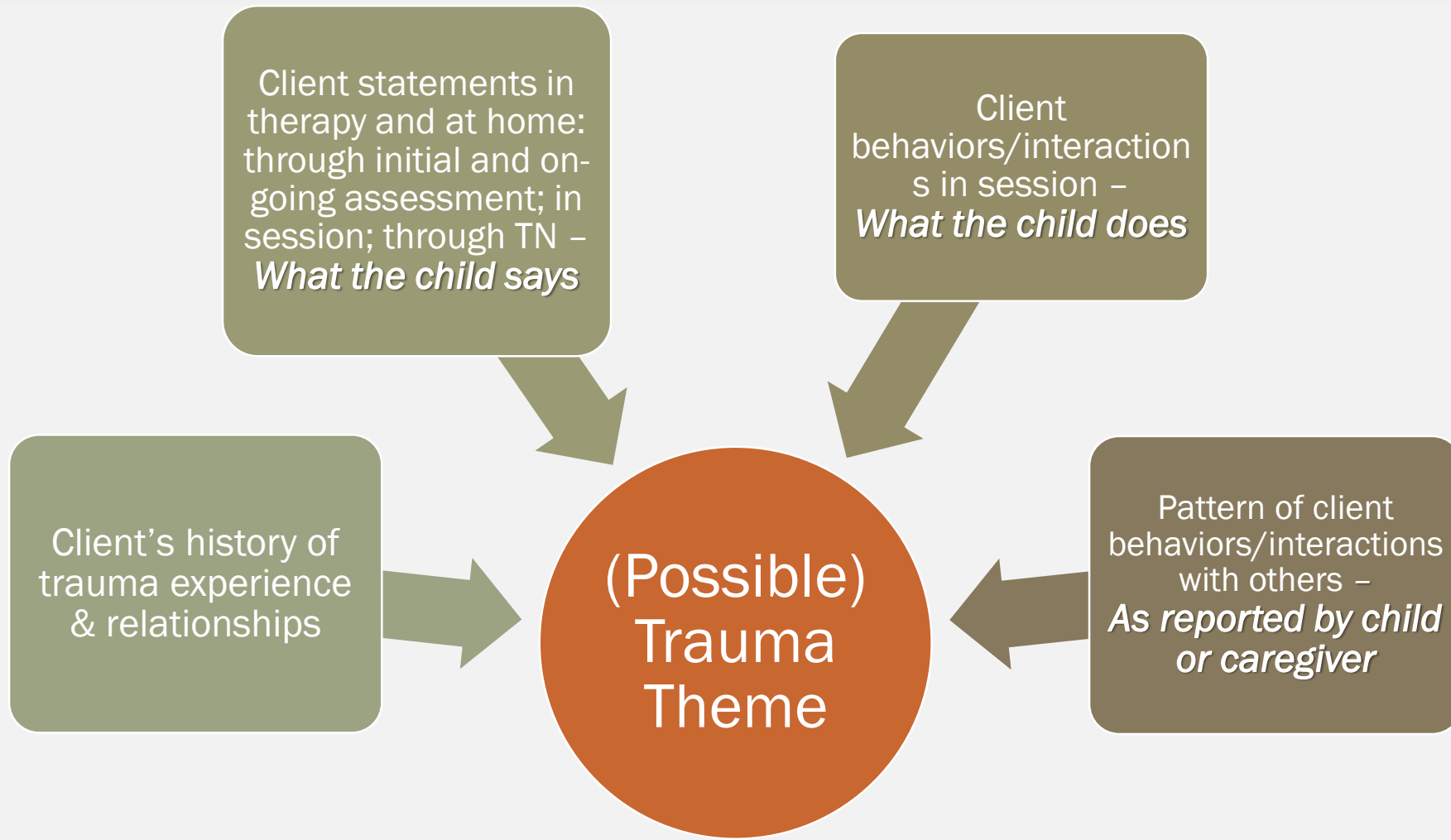
- I failed my exams when I was 15*
- I'm dyslexic and my teacher at school said I'd never amount to anything*
- I lost my temper & shouted at my children*
- I have successfully run my own business for 23 years*
- I won the pub quiz with my friends*
- My hobby is photography and I have exhibited pictures in a national event*



- My mother never told me she loved me*
- I've never had a boyfriend for more than 6 months*
- My friends went to a party without inviting me*
- My current partner says he loves me*
- I'm a kind person, and I have all the qualities that I would find lovable in other people*
- My sister and I have a close relationship*

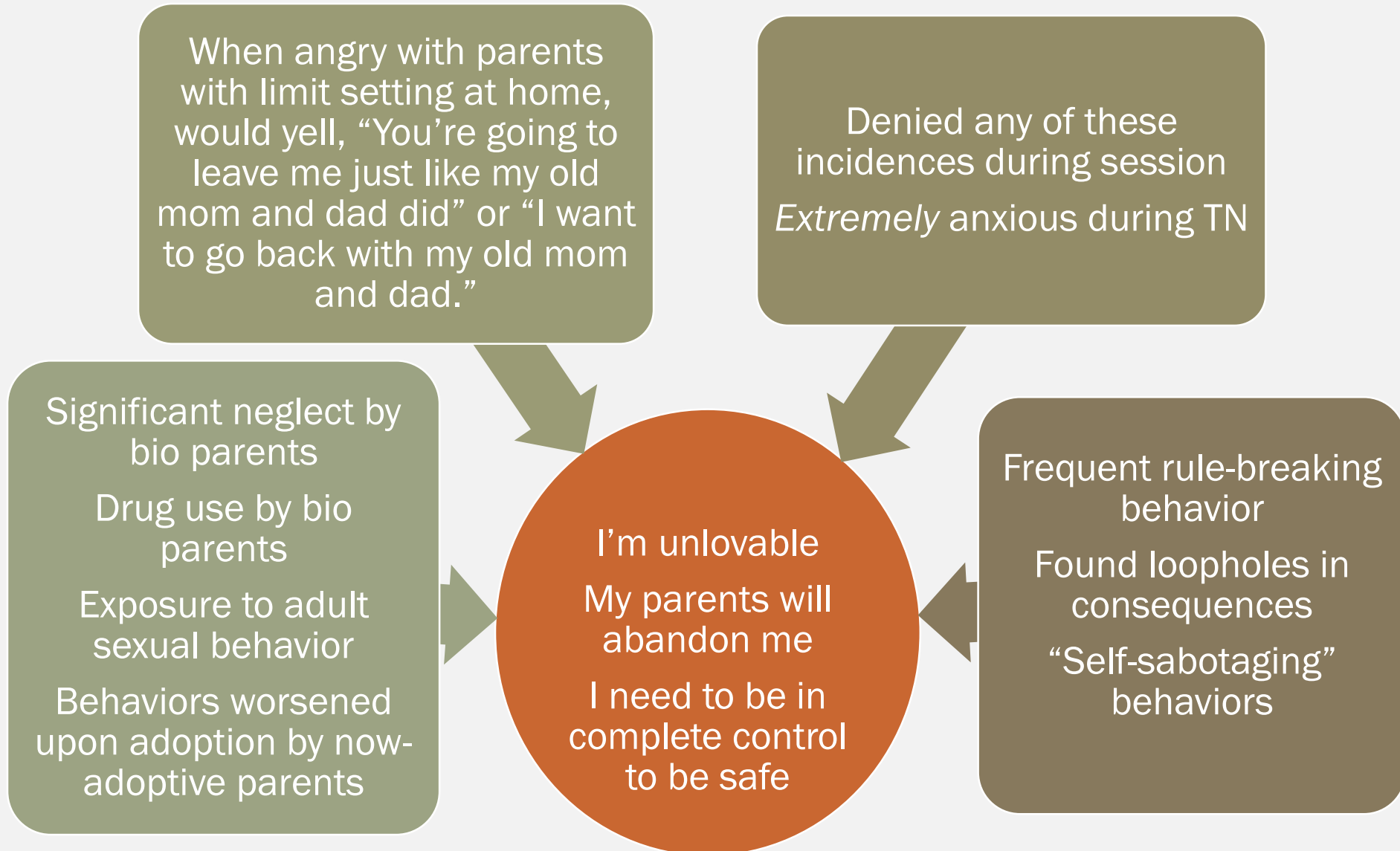
IDENTIFYING TRAUMA THEMES

Throughout treatment, listen and watch for clues on how trauma has impacted child's (and caregivers) beliefs about self, others, & world.



PETER
AGE 7

IDENTIFYING THEMES: PETER – AGE 7



JAMAL
AGE 13

IDENTIFYING THEMES: JAMAL – AGE 13

- Negative statements about self nearly every session
- “You told me to pray to God to protect me, I did, and He didn’t protect me.”

- Conflict with group members
- Avoidance of trauma and denial of its impact

- Numerous instances of physical discipline by teachers and physical fights with peers
- Family abandoned by father
- Home-schooled because of behavior
- ADHD and questionable autism diagnosis

I cannot trust adults
I am the only one who can protect my family and me
I’m destined to be like my dad, so why bother?

- Changes in sleeping habits
- Hypervigilance
- Persistent inquiry about father
- Literal running away from conflict
- Mother’s input on timeline

*Let's practice
together!*

MOLLY
AGE 16

**What the youth says in sessions, at home,
in assessment, in TN, etc.:**

- "I'm so stupid for sending those photos of myself. I should have known he'd hurt me."*
- "These foster parents aren't my real parents. I probably won't be with them for long, so why should I get to know them."*
- "Letting people in only gets you hurt. They leave you or let you down."*
- "It's safer not to feel."*

What the youth does in session:

- Was initially quiet and disengaged in first couple of sessions. Said she didn't want to be in counseling and that she didn't want foster parents involved in sessions*
- Has warmed to treatment across the 8 TF-CBT sessions and is actively engaged in treatment components; Has improved her attitude about combined time with foster parents in each session*
- Gets distressed when sexual abuse is brought up in psychoed, especially the sexting incident*

Trauma Theme(s)

Youth's trauma history:

- Deaths of family members: grandmother (Molly – age 3), aunt (Molly – age 8), father (Molly – age 13)*
- Age 2-13: Exposure to parental substance abuse and domestic violence exposure. Dad died of OD when Molly was 13*
- Multiple foster placements from ages 5-6, 13 to present*
- Sexual abuse: age 5, 9-10, 14*
- Mom parental rights termination when Molly was 14*

**Youth's behaviors/
interactions with others:**

- History of self-harm to cope*
- Tries to "parent" younger brother & sister*
- Isolates from new foster parents of 3 months*
- Pressured to send nude pics to classmate*
- Few close friendships*

DEVELOPING THEMATIC NARRATIVES

There are moments which
mark your life. Moments when
you realize nothing will ever
be the same and time is
divided into two parts -
before this, and after this.

"Fallen"

THEMATIC TRAUMA NARRATIVE WORK

- ❖ Allows youth to reflect on common themes in their life and how their trauma history has shaped their views of self, others, the world and their future
- ❖ A thematic trauma narrative plan may blend gradual exposure to specific trauma incidents with review of overarching themes across experiences

TRADITIONAL AND/OR THEMATIC TN?

- What is the major source of distress?
- Where are PTSD symptoms clustering?
 - Re-experiencing (Category B) or Avoidance (Category C) symptoms high?
 - ✓ Gradual exposure to specific memories may be most beneficial
 - Negative Beliefs (Category D)?
 - ✓ Thematic review may be helpful

Trauma Narration Planning: Trees *and* Forest?



Specific Trauma Events

- Desensitization
- Who, what, when, where, how?

Thematic Experiences

- Meaning making
- Why?

WHAT'S A “TREE” CHAPTER?

- Single incident trauma
 - When the tornado happened
 - When the accident happened
- Could be one of multiple similar event types, but holds greater emotional distress when the youth remembers it as compared to others
 - The first time the sexual abuse happened
 - When family fighting happened again and my mom had to go to the hospital

WHAT'S A “FOREST” CHAPTER?

- Overarching theme related to multiple life experiences:
 - The people I love most died
 - My many moves
 - People can't be trusted
- Significant relationships impacting youth's life:
 - Dad's addiction
 - My relationship with mom
 - My controlling ex-boyfriend

CONSIDERATIONS

- The thematic narrative is still gradual exposure
- Collateral information + timeline = effective narrative
- A thematic narrative is organized

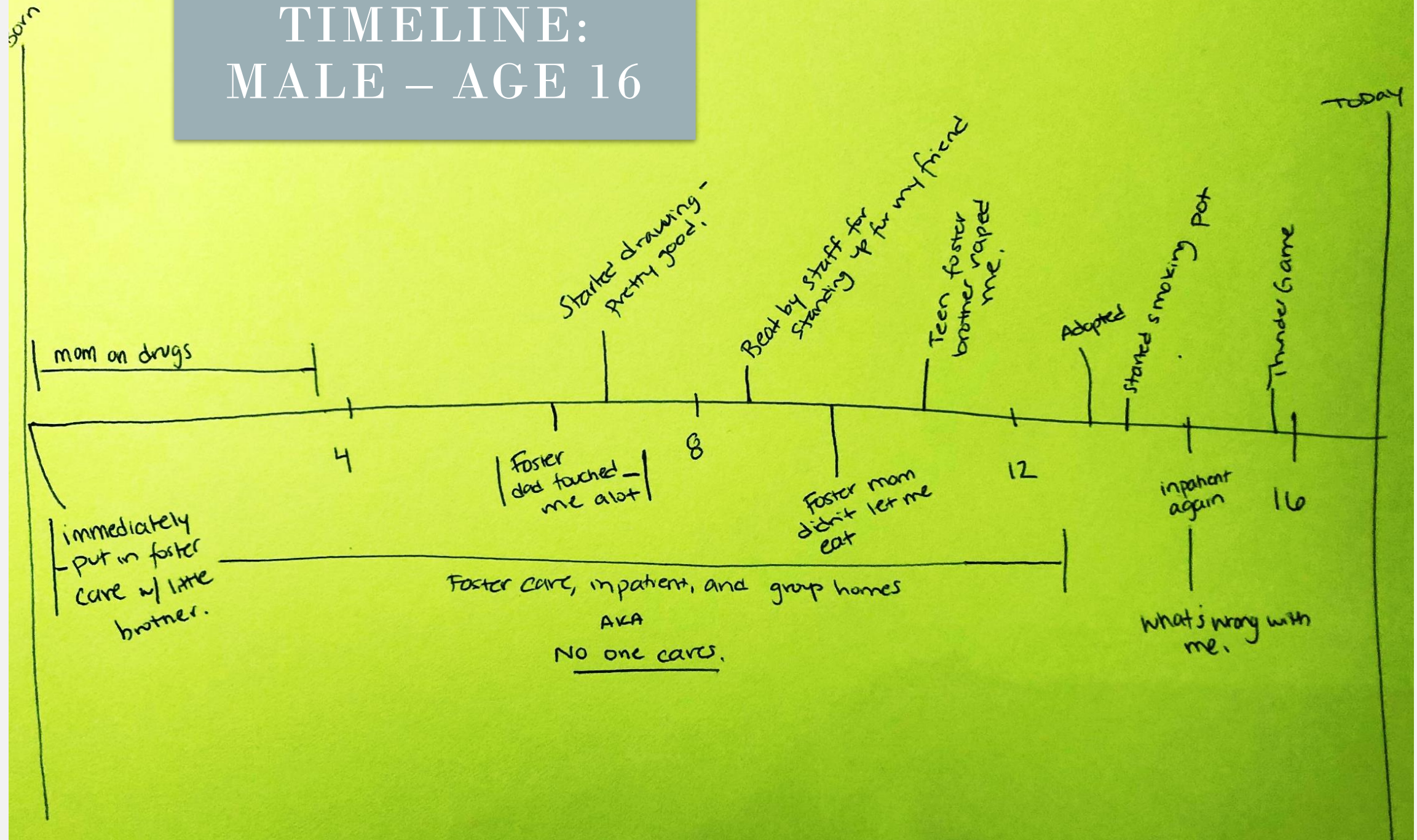
TIMELINES HELP TO DEVELOP THE THEMATIC PATHWAY



TYPES OF TIMELINES

- Sequencing of events
- Time periods
- Themes

TIMELINE: MALE - AGE 16



CONSTANTS IN MY LIFE

MAKE DUMB CHOICES

- Dated 3 guys that hurt me / forced me to have sex
- Friends all are 2-faced
- I cut + ~~run~~ run away

People leave

- Dad left before I was born
- Mom chose drugs over us
- "Friends" are gone
- I don't have anyone

When people hurt me - its been my face

- Slapped, choked, punched - always my face / neck
- Hate looking in mirror

TN THEMATIC HIERARCHY



Chapter 1 Title: Phone sur prise
I Got an Phone



Chapter 2 Title: Where's my father

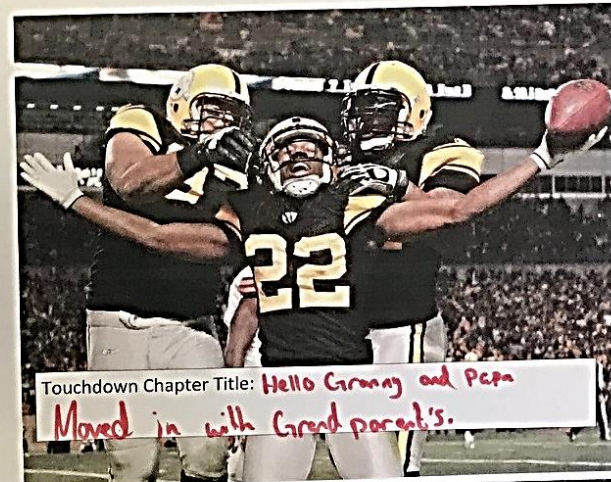
Father left my
life for a little
white



Chapter 3 Title: Mother don't
Drink or smoke

MOM
My is addicted
to ~~Alcohol~~ Drinkin'
and Smokin'

Chapter 4 Title: Don't leave me brother
Big brothe left.

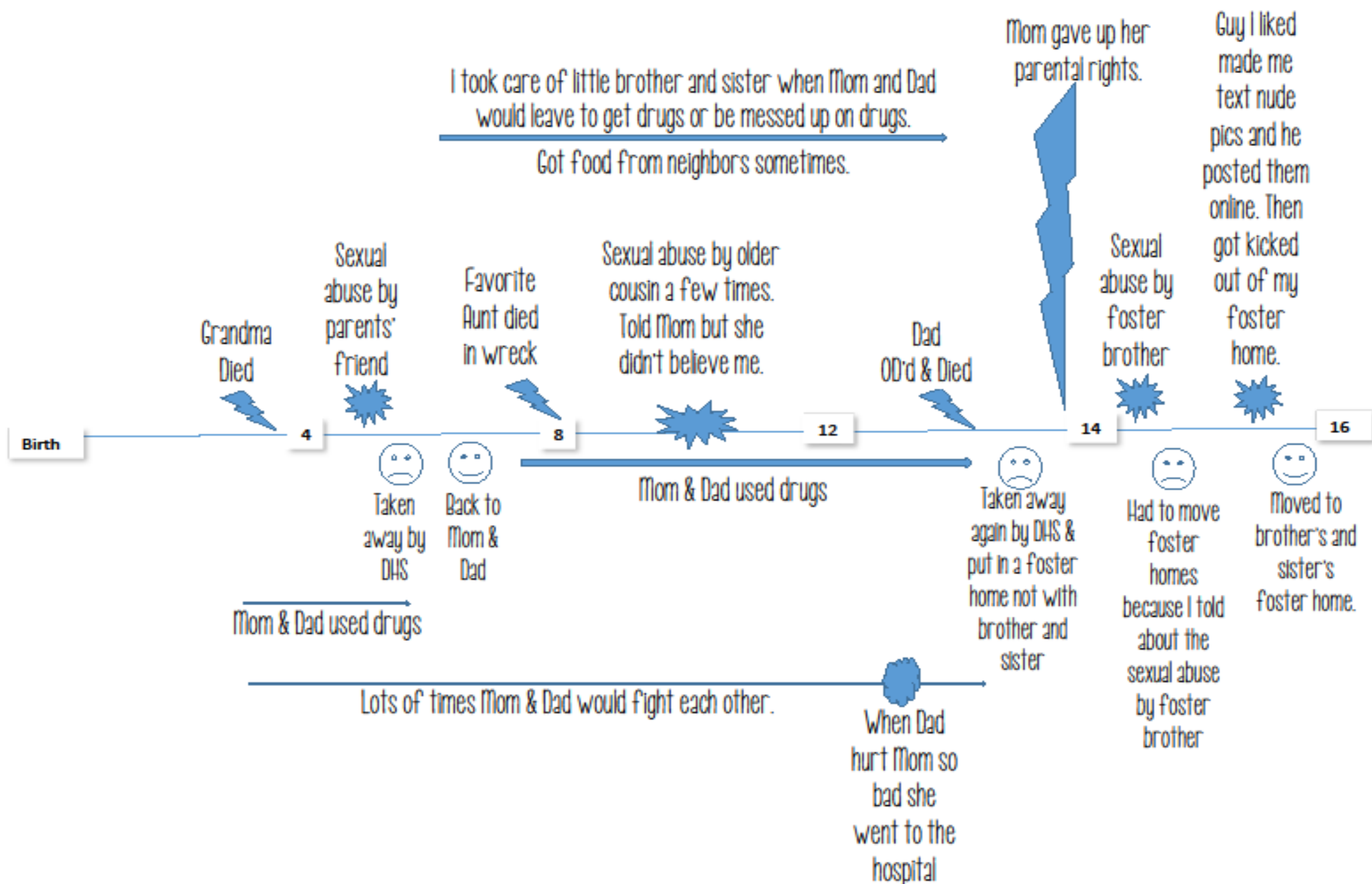


Touchdown Chapter Title: Hello Granny and Papa
Moved in with Grand parent's.

THEMATIC TN STRUCTURE PRACTICE

MOLLY
AGE 16





Building a Structure for Molly's Thematic Narrative	
Chapter Types	Possible Chapters
Specific trauma events that may need standard gradual exposure	
Themes present across trauma history that may benefit from a chapter review	
Relationships that may benefit from a chapter review	

Building a Structure for Molly's Thematic Narrative	
Chapter Types	Possible Chapters
Specific trauma events that may need standard gradual exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When Dad hurt Mom so bad she went to the hospital • Specific Episodes of Sexual Abuse • Aunt's Death
Themes present across trauma history that may benefit from a chapter review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental Substance Abuse History and Neglect of Molly and her Brother • Multiple Moves • Loss of Beloved Family Members • Repeated Sexual Victimization/Objectification
Relationships that may benefit from a chapter review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship with Mom Ending in Parental Rights Termination

FACILITATING THEMATIC NARRATIVES



THIS IS MY
STORY

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS TO BUILD THEMATIC NARRATIVE

Regarding a **specific person**:

- Tell me about _____.
- Tell me about the best time you had with _____.
- Tell me about the worst time you had with _____.”
- “What does this person believe about you?”
- “What do you believe about yourself because of your relationship with _____?”
- “What do you believe about _____ because your relationship with _____?”

Theme	Of Self	Of Others/World
Trust	I make bad decisions. I can't trust my own judgement.	People can't be trusted. Don't trust the system; authority.
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EXAMPLE QUESTIONS TO BUILD THEMATIC NARRATIVE

Regarding a **specific theme**:

- “When are times _____ happened in your life?”
- “What does _____ mean to you? What does it look like?”
- “Tell me about some times in the past when you have felt _____. Tell me about some times in the past when you haven’t felt _____.”
- “What does your idea of _____ look like moving forward?”

THEMATIC NARRATIVE

Male

Age 16

- History of numerous instances of physical abuse, sexual abuse, placement changes, and inpatient stays
- Trauma narration chapters:
 - Example TREES:
 - Instance(s) of sexual abuse
 - Instance of being hurt by caregiver or staff member
 - Example FOREST:
 - “No One Cares”

QUESTIONS ASKED TO BUILD THEMATIC CHAPTER ABOUT “NO ONE CARES”

- Tell me about the first time you felt like no one cared about you?
- When did you start to believe this? Did you always believe this? What about before?
- What do you believe about yourself because of your belief that no one cares?
- What were some of the things that people did that showed you they didn't care?
- Are there any times that people have shown they've cared? What happened?
- When is the last time you felt like someone cared?
- What would someone have to do to show you that they cared? What does caring about you look like?

THEMATIC NARRATIVE

James

Age 17

Chapter 4: “The Curse – Everyone leaves me no matter what I do”

My *Exhibit A* is the first memory I have of my grandpa, the only good guy I ever knew, he died. I was four. I remember...

My *Exhibit B* is that my dad left when I was eight...

My *Exhibit C* is my brother bounced like a few months after my dad left...

My *Exhibit D* is my boys who died. Like I saw _____ shot in front of me last year...

What does this say about you?

That anyone who's around me is gonna die.
That's why people never stay. I got a curse.
That's the curse. Anyone who gets close to me
is gonna suffer cause I'm cursed.

What does it say about the world?

So here's what all this crap says about my
family...

(Traditional and/or Thematic)
Trauma Narrative



...Sets us up for...
processing!

Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)

I N THE MIDST OF HATE, I FOUND THERE WAS,
within me, an invincible love.

In the midst of tears, I found there was,
within me, an invincible smile.

In the midst of chaos, I found there was,
within me, an invincible calm.

I realized, through it all, that ...

In the midst of winter, I found there was,
within me, an invincible summer.

And that makes me happy.

For it says that no matter how hard the world
pushes against me, within me,
there's something stronger,
something better, pushing right back.

Thank you!

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