



Integrating Healing and Justice

Therapeutic Documentation (TD) is an approach that invites survivors to document their stories for justice-related processes. It was developed to help bridge the gap between mental health providers and human rights documenters or others pursuing justice and accountability.

Through engagement with trauma rehabilitation services, survivors often make significant progress towards healing. For many, however, therapy is not the end of the journey. They also long for a way to pursue justice for what they endured. Legal professionals and others documenting abuses are able to help advance societal justice and pursue collective good, but individual survivors who participate may experience significant distress and a lack of agency, and thus access to survivors willing and prepared to tell their stories can be limited. As a result, justice processes can struggle to be fully representative or inclusive of the diverse range of survivor perspectives.

There was a need to build something new, situated at the intersection of mental health and human rights documentation spaces, centered on and guided by survivors. TD builds upon the strengths of trauma-informed interviewing and 'do no harm' principles, but goes further and aims to make the experience of documentation have positive, therapeutic value for the survivor. TD constructs a locus of the transitional justice landscape around an individual survivor, centering their story, and respecting their agency to share their story in ways that are personally meaningful, including potentially sharing their documentation product with justice mechanisms.

The Therapeutic Documentation Approach

TD is an approach that must be customized and developed into a specific intervention model for each context. The TD approach involves shared:

Values and principles that define *how* all activities with survivors are approached. TD strives to be survivor-centered and trauma-informed, and to provide therapeutic value to participants.

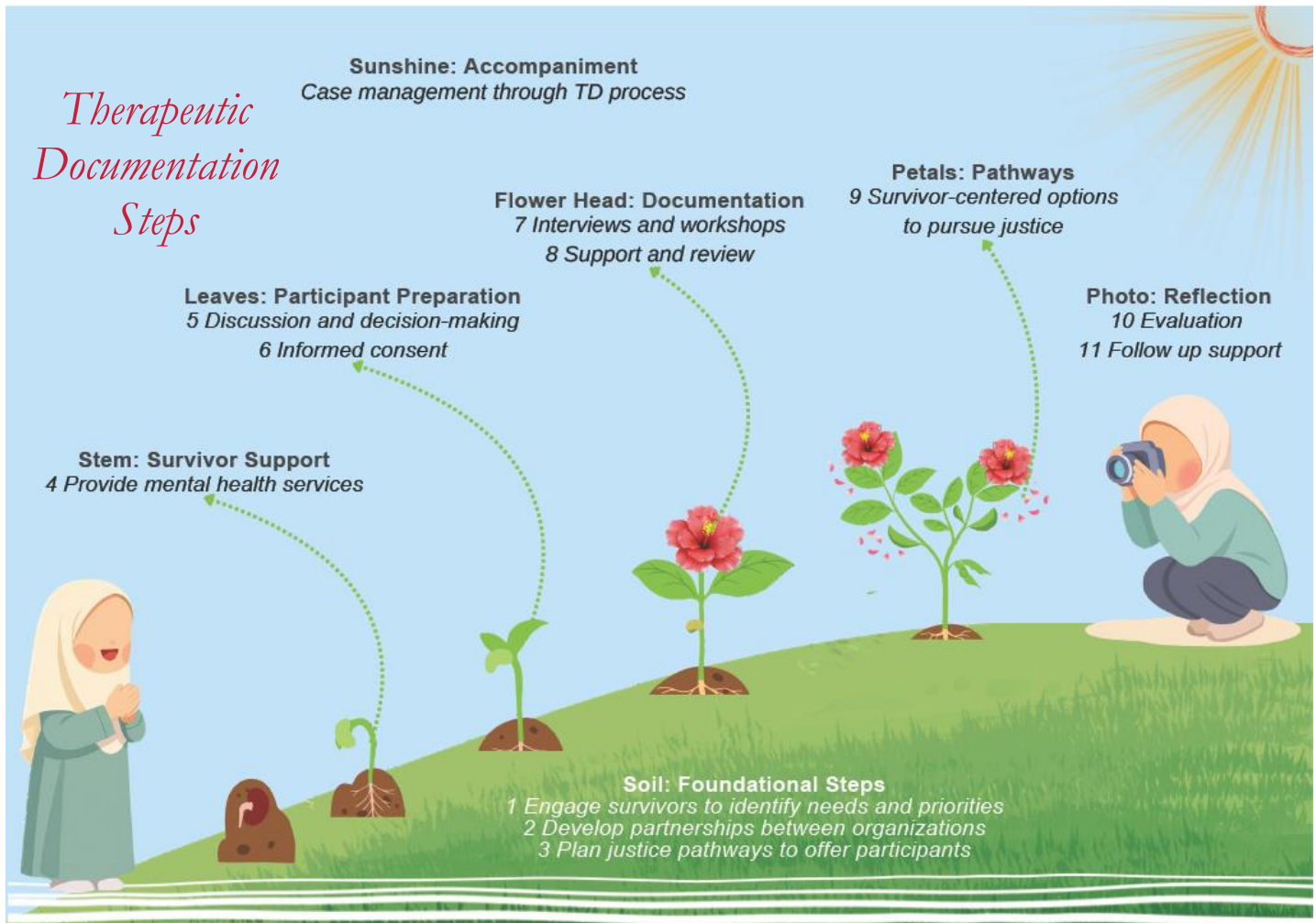
Practices, or ways of working, that specify *what* is implemented through TD. TD is customized for context, is delivered through an integrated partnership network, includes supportive case management, offers choices for survivors, and is based on recording and then sharing survivor stories.

Intended outcomes that guide *why* TD is implemented. TD aims to contribute to both justice and healing for individual survivors, as well as to contribute to collective transitional justice goals.

The TD methodology typically includes 11 steps (see illustration on the next page). It begins with foundational stages, including using interviews to identify survivor perspectives on justice in a given context and establishing an integrated network of participating organizations. Then, survivors are offered the opportunity to receive psychosocial support prior to engaging in documentation. They are provided options for how they would like to document their story, then they record their stories in a therapeutic environment. Supported by case management, participants make decisions about which pathways they will take to share their story.

The development of "pathways" fit to a given context is a key feature of TD, essential to help the participant experience healing and justice. For example, one pathway may connect participants to a legal organization compiling testimony for future criminal trials. Another pathway may connect to a community group that is building a memorial of a particular massacre. Another may facilitate participants joining a national advocacy organization to share their story with policymakers. Other survivors may wish to document their experiences for their own personal or family uses. Ideally multiple justice pathways are established so that survivors can choose one or more that are most meaningful to them.

TD brings together documentation, advocacy, and other pathways that align with survivor perceptions of justice. To build upon existing efforts, streamline resources, and avoid duplication, CVT partners with organizations already doing trusted, effective work in these areas.



Learning and Development

CVT has refined the TD approach based on learnings over time. Starting in 2017, CVT and partner organizations, including survivor-led groups, envisioned TD for the Syrian context. The approach provided documentation options to Syrian survivors of human rights violations as routes towards justice that they could pursue, in addition to the legal accountability mechanisms based largely outside of Syria.

A pilot evaluation in Jordan included interviews throughout TD to understand how different stages of the process affected survivors. Findings supported the initial core premise that the documentation interview itself could have positive, therapeutic value, under the right conditions. Since then, CVT and partner teams in Türkiye (working with Syrian survivors), Iraq, and Uganda have also implemented and further advanced the TD approach and associated models.

After completing TD, participants are invited to share their reflections through evaluation interviews. To date, more than 80 percent of interviewees reported that TD helped them make progress towards their personal healing and justice goals.

These participant evaluation interviews, combined with interviews and observations from CVT and partner staff, suggest:

- The approach has high **acceptability** and perceived **utility**. Participants and staff appreciate that TD focuses on the individual survivor experience, rather than only the collection of information. At the same time, TD situates the individual as part of a broader context, leading to the recognition that healing is not only individual. This is seen as something unique and needed.

- There are **feasibility** challenges, as TD can require significant resources, including budget, timelines, and staff expertise in mental health and documentation. This has created implementation gaps when organizations have insufficient resources or when there is instability in a context that can cause extended timelines or disruptions in participant engagement.
- There is evidence from survivors and staff that TD can be effective in supporting in **healing**. TD helps participants feel safe and valued as they share their stories, particularly giving them time and space to tell their story in as much depth as they would like to share. Through connecting with others in workshops, events, and other pathway activities, participants report feeling cared for, supported, and less isolated. Through giving participants an ongoing role that does not end with the interview, survivors experience feelings of empowerment and an increased sense of agency.
- There is varied efficacy in **justice** outcomes. Many participants report progress towards justice, appreciating feeling like they are contributing to a broader effort, helping make the truth known, and combatting denialism. Many also clearly describe how experiencing some justice directly facilitates their healing process. However, some participants remain frustrated by the lack of justice options available generally, particularly in closed political spaces or during ongoing conflict. It can also be challenging for organizations with limited resources to be able to make a full range of pathways available to survivors, requiring organizational decisions about what to prioritize. Ensuring that these decisions are made in line with survivors' expressed priorities and needs is essential to TD.

Next Steps

CVT and other organizations are continuing to develop the TD approach, in Uganda, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. For example, there are efforts to refine the methods for group documentation interviews and to think about more types of non-interview based documentation options. Teams are also considering a lighter touch variation of TD that would address some feasibility challenges, while maintaining the core components of the approach that seem essential to positive outcomes. Future evaluation efforts should focus on identifying more precisely the causal mechanisms associated with a variety of outcomes and also on evaluating collective-level impacts of TD implementation.

For questions, contact info@cvt.org.

Related Resources

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Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation. 2023. "Guidebook on a Victim-Centered Approach to Transitional Justice." <https://www.csvr.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Guidebook-on-VCA-to-TJ-Toolkit-6x9-EN-final-single-pages-1-1.pdf>

Global Survivors Fund. Global Reparations Study. <https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/how-we-work/global-reparations-study/>

Golden, Shannon, Joel Innocent Odokonyero, Brian Jakisa, Diana Amito, and Noor Saleem. 2025. "Repairing the Wrongs in Northern Uganda: Survivor-Defined Justice for Mothers and their Children Born of War." The Center for Victims of Torture.

<https://www.cvt.org/wp-content/uploads/Repairing-the-Wrongs-in-Northern-Uganda.pdf>

Herman, Judith. 2023. *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*. Basic Books. <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/judith-lewis-herman-md/truth-and-repair/9781541600546/?lens=basic-books>

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Murad Code. 2022. "Global Code of Conduct for Gathering and Using Information about Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence." <https://www.muradcode.com/murad-code>

Transitional Justice Evaluation Tools. Transitional Justice Perception Surveys. <https://transitionaljusticedata.org/en/surveys.html>