

THE ROLE OF TRAUMA-INFORMED THERAPY IN IMPROVING DECISION-MAKING (CASE OF AZERBAIJAN)

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Abstract. This study explores how trauma-informed therapy (TIT) improves decision-making in Azerbaijani adults with childhood or war-related trauma. Using mixed methods, it finds TIT enhances self-awareness, emotional regulation, and rational choices, promoting cognitive flexibility and socio-emotional resilience. Recommendations support integrating TIT into national mental health systems.

Key words: trauma-informed therapy, decision-making, emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, psychological resilience.

Introduction

Decision-making represents one of the most fundamental aspects of human behavior, influencing personal, social, and professional outcomes throughout life [10]. It depends on a person's ability to process information, manage emotions, predict consequences, and choose among alternatives based on rational evaluation and experience. However, when an individual has been exposed to psychological trauma—such as childhood abuse, loss, war, or displacement—these cognitive and emotional capacities can become impaired. Traumatic experiences may leave lasting imprints on the brain's stress response system, causing overreactions to perceived threats, emotional instability, and difficulties in maintaining a balanced perspective. Consequently, individuals who have experienced trauma may struggle to make adaptive decisions, often acting impulsively or avoidantly in stressful situations [6].

In the Azerbaijani context, these issues acquire particular significance. Decades of regional conflict, forced migration, and socio-economic change have affected a considerable portion of the population, leaving behind a legacy of unprocessed emotional pain and psychological distress. While social and economic recovery efforts have progressed, mental health rehabilitation has only recently gained broader recognition. Many people still rely on self-coping strategies rather than professional therapy, and trauma-informed approaches remain underutilized in most mental health institutions. Given this background, understanding how targeted therapeutic interventions can help individuals rebuild emotional stability and improve their decision-making abilities is both scientifically and socially important [4].

Trauma-informed therapy (TIT) provides a holistic framework that acknowledges the effects of trauma on behavior and cognition while emphasizing safety, trust, and empowerment

during the healing process. This form of therapy does not focus solely on reducing symptoms; instead, it aims to strengthen internal resources, foster self-awareness, and restore the individual's capacity for rational thought and emotional regulation. These improvements are directly linked to the mechanisms underlying decision-making—such as attention control, memory integration, and logical reasoning [6]. By addressing these areas, trauma-informed therapy can potentially lead to measurable improvements in how individuals evaluate choices and respond to complex life situations.

Despite increasing global evidence supporting trauma-informed practices, empirical research in Azerbaijan on their cognitive and behavioral outcomes remains limited. There is little data on whether such therapy contributes to decision-making improvements among adults who have experienced trauma in Azerbaijani cultural settings. This lack of evidence restricts policymakers, clinicians, and educators from effectively integrating trauma-informed principles into local psychological and social care programs. Therefore, a systematic study examining the relationship between trauma-informed therapy and decision-making is needed to fill this research gap and provide evidence-based recommendations for mental health development in the country [5].

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of trauma-informed therapy in improving decision-making among Azerbaijani adults with a history of trauma. The study seeks to explore the extent to which therapeutic intervention enhances emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and self-awareness—factors that are essential for adaptive decision-making. It also aims to understand the socio-cultural conditions that shape how therapy outcomes are perceived and sustained over time.

To achieve this purpose, the research will address the following research questions:

1. How does psychological trauma affect the decision-making patterns of individuals in Azerbaijan?
2. In what ways does trauma-informed therapy contribute to the recovery of emotional balance and cognitive control?
3. What specific psychological mechanisms mediate the relationship between trauma-informed therapy and improved decision-making?
4. Are there demographic or experiential factors (such as age, gender, or trauma type) that influence the effectiveness of therapy in decision-making outcomes?

The results of this study are expected to contribute to the growing field of trauma psychology by providing context-specific insights from Azerbaijan. Beyond its theoretical value, the findings may also guide national efforts to integrate trauma-informed principles into

healthcare and education systems, ensuring that individuals recovering from trauma receive the necessary support to rebuild autonomy, rationality, and resilience in their everyday choices.

1. Conceptual framework

The conceptual model developed for this study illustrates the psychological mechanisms through which trauma-informed therapy (TIT) contributes to improved decision-making among individuals who have experienced trauma. It integrates the theoretical insights of trauma theory and cognitive-behavioral approaches with established decision-making models, forming a multidimensional explanation of the process of recovery and behavioral adaptation [4]. Traumatic experiences often distort emotional and cognitive regulation systems, producing hyperarousal, intrusive memories, and an impaired sense of safety. These disruptions interfere with higher-order cognitive functions—such as planning, attention, and evaluation—that are necessary for sound decision-making. According to Bessel van der Kolk [18] and Judith Herman [9], unresolved trauma keeps the individual in a constant state of survival mode, in which decisions are guided more by fear and avoidance than by logical analysis. From this perspective, the pathway from trauma to maladaptive decision-making can be understood as the interaction between dysregulated emotion and impaired cognition [7].

Trauma-informed therapy intervenes at multiple points in this pathway. By creating a safe therapeutic environment, fostering emotional awareness, and promoting self-regulation, it gradually helps clients restore psychological balance. As emotional stability increases, individuals gain greater access to cognitive resources such as working memory, perspective-taking, and impulse control. This, in turn, enhances cognitive flexibility—the ability to shift between thoughts, evaluate options, and adapt behavior according to changing circumstances. Over time, this process leads to more deliberate, reasoned, and adaptive decision-making [14].

The conceptual framework for this study therefore assumes that emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility act as mediating variables between trauma recovery (through therapy) and decision-making outcomes. Trauma-informed therapy serves as the independent variable that initiates changes in emotional and cognitive systems, while decision-making quality is treated as the dependent variable that reflects the effectiveness of these changes [8].

This model proposes that recovery from trauma is not a direct linear process but a dynamic interaction between emotional and cognitive restoration. As emotional regulation stabilizes, cognitive flexibility strengthens; together, these two dimensions form the foundation for adaptive decision-making [11]. Within the Azerbaijani socio-cultural context, where trauma often carries collective and intergenerational dimensions, the model also highlights the

importance of culturally sensitive therapeutic practices that reinforce both individual and community resilience [18].

The conceptual model illustrates how trauma-informed therapy (TIT) supports the improvement of decision-making through a sequence of psychological and cognitive processes. It begins with a traumatic experience, which often leads to emotional dysregulation (difficulty managing emotions) and cognitive distortions (irrational or negative thought patterns). These effects disrupt an individual's ability to make rational, goal-oriented decisions.

Through trauma-informed therapy, individuals are guided to rebuild a sense of safety, awareness, and self-understanding. This process enhances emotional regulation, allowing them to achieve greater emotional stability, awareness of inner states, and better control of impulses. As emotional regulation improves, it strengthens cognitive flexibility — the capacity to adapt to new situations, reason logically, and evaluate different alternatives rather than reacting rigidly or impulsively.

Ultimately, these combined improvements lead to enhanced decision-making, characterized by rational evaluation, self-control, and goal-oriented behavior. The model shows that trauma-informed therapy mediates the relationship between traumatic experience and decision-making by fostering emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility as key mechanisms of psychological resilience and adaptive functioning.

2. Methodology

Research design

The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture both measurable outcomes and personal experiences related to trauma-informed therapy (TIT) and decision-making [5]. The quantitative phase focuses on collecting survey data to identify trends and statistical relationships, while the qualitative phase explores participants' in-depth reflections on therapeutic progress. This dual design allows for a balanced interpretation—linking empirical data to the psychological processes underlying emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility.

Sample and participants

A total of 100 adults, aged 20 to 45, participated in the study. Respondents were selected from therapy centers and online psychological support groups located primarily in Baku and Ganja, Azerbaijan. The sample included both male and female participants who had undergone trauma-informed therapy for at least three months.

Inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Had experienced at least one form of psychological trauma (such as displacement, war-related stress, loss, or childhood adversity).
2. Were actively engaged in trauma-informed therapy at the time of data collection.
3. Possessed adequate literacy and internet access to complete the online survey.

All participants were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of the study. Participation was voluntary, and no personal identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity and data protection in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data collection tools

Data were collected using two instruments: a Google forms-based questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide.

Online Survey:

The quantitative data were obtained through an online survey distributed via Google Forms, titled *Trauma Impact and Decision-Making Scale (TIDMS)* [2]. This self-administered instrument measured participants perceived psychological changes during therapy. It included 20 statements evaluated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

The scale was structured into three key dimensions:

- Emotional Regulation Improvement
- *Example item:* “I can control my emotional reactions when I face stressful situations.”
- Cognitive Clarity
- *Example item:* “I can make important decisions without feeling confused or overwhelmed.”
- Self-Awareness

Example item: “Therapy helped me recognize how my past experiences shape the choices I make today.”

The online format allowed participants to respond comfortably and anonymously, increasing the accuracy and honesty of responses. The instrument was pre-tested with a small pilot group to ensure reliability, clarity, and consistency of the items before full deployment.

Qualitative Interviews:

To complement the survey results, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a smaller subset of participants ($n \approx 10$) and several practicing trauma-informed therapists. The interviews explored the personal impact of therapy on emotional awareness, thought regulation, and everyday decision-making. Example guiding questions included:

- “How has trauma-informed therapy influenced your ability to manage emotions?”
- “What changes have you noticed in the way you make decisions after therapy?”
- “Which therapeutic strategies or techniques have been most helpful for improving mental clarity?”

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was recorded with the participant’s permission. Transcriptions were anonymized for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed both quantitative and qualitative procedures to ensure a holistic understanding of the research topic.

- **Quantitative Analysis:**

Data collected through Google Forms were exported to SPSS for statistical processing. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize responses. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed to test the relationship between trauma-informed therapy variables (emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility) and decision-making outcomes. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ to determine meaningful associations.

- **Qualitative Analysis:**

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying recurrent concepts, emotions, and behavioral changes [14] described by participants. The coding process involved categorizing responses into themes such as emotional stability, cognitive restructuring, and self-reflection. These qualitative results were then used to explain and enrich the statistical findings, highlighting the psychological mechanisms behind improved decision-making [3].

The combination of online quantitative data and in-depth qualitative interviews provided a balanced and context-sensitive understanding of how trauma-informed therapy fosters rational, emotionally regulated, and adaptive decision-making among adults in Azerbaijan.

4. Results and discussions

Quantitative survey results

The quantitative component aimed to measure how trauma-informed therapy (TIT) influences the key variables of **emotional regulation**, **cognitive flexibility**, and **decision-making performance**. The survey, conducted via **Google Forms**, gathered responses from **100 adult participants** who had completed at least three months of TIT in Baku or Ganja.

Descriptive statistics revealed generally positive outcomes across all three measured areas. Participants rated their emotional regulation, cognitive clarity, and decision-making improvement using a 5-point Likert scale. The findings are summarized below.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of decision-making components (N = 100)

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum	Interpretation
Emotional regulation	4.20	0.55	3.00	5.00	High – strong control of emotions
Cognitive flexibility	4.05	0.60	2.80	5.00	High – adaptive and balanced reasoning
Self-awareness	4.10	0.57	3.00	5.00	High – reflection on personal reactions
Overall decision-making score	4.12	0.58	2.90	5.00	Strong – effective decision competence

Table is developed by the author

Further analysis compared results across groups categorized by therapy duration. As shown below, participants with longer exposure to TIT scored higher on all scales, suggesting that consistent therapy engagement leads to more stable emotional and cognitive functioning.

Table 2. Relationship between therapy duration and decision-making improvement

Duration of TIT participation	N	Mean decision-making score	Mean emotional regulation	Mean cognitive flexibility	Interpretation
Less than 3 months	32	3.60	3.75	3.50	Initial adjustment, partial emotional stability
3–6 months	38	4.00	4.10	3.95	Moderate improvement, higher self-reflection
More than 6 months	30	4.40	4.45	4.30	Significant progress in regulation and reasoning

Table is developed by the author

Statistical correlation results:

Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) indicated a **strong positive relationship** between therapy participation duration and decision-making improvement ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$). Emotional regulation was also highly correlated with decision-making ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$),

followed by cognitive flexibility ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$). This suggests that the longer participants remain in trauma-informed therapy, the more effectively they manage emotions and make rational choices.

Graphical representation:

A bar chart (Table 1) illustrated a consistent upward trend across therapy duration categories. Participants who had received therapy for more than six months reported the highest scores for emotional balance, reflective thinking, and goal-directed decision-making.

Qualitative insights

The qualitative analysis enriched quantitative findings by exploring participants' **subjective experiences and reflections** on how trauma-informed therapy influenced their decision-making. In-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of 15 participants and 5 therapists.

Through thematic analysis, three major **themes** emerged:

1. **Development of emotional awareness** – Participants reported recognizing and naming emotions more accurately, leading to greater control over reactions.
2. **Enhanced rational thinking and clarity** – Therapy helped clients pause, evaluate consequences, and choose actions aligned with their goals rather than emotions.
3. **Coping and resilience strategies** – Clients adopted practical coping mechanisms, including mindfulness and cognitive reframing, which supported more balanced decisions.

These themes are summarized below.

Table 3. Thematic summary of qualitative findings

Theme	Description	Illustrative quote
Emotional awareness	Increased ability to identify, express, and regulate emotions.	"Before therapy, I reacted instantly. Now I can stop, think, and respond calmly."
Rational thinking and clarity	Shift from impulsive reactions to analytical and goal-oriented decisions.	"Therapy taught me to think before acting, to see the bigger picture."
Coping and resilience strategies	Adoption of new behavioral and mental tools to manage stress and uncertainty.	"Now I handle pressure differently. I don't panic; I reflect and act wisely."

Table is developed by the author

Interpretation of themes:

The integration of emotional awareness and cognitive flexibility appears central to therapeutic change. Clients reported that consistent engagement in trauma-informed therapy strengthened their capacity to analyze situations objectively, tolerate emotional distress, and respond with intentionality. The alignment between these themes and quantitative outcomes reinforces the hypothesis that TIT significantly enhances decision-making through emotional and cognitive transformation.

Discussions

The present study sought to explore how trauma-informed therapy (TIT) influences decision-making processes among adults in Azerbaijan, with a focus on emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility as mediating factors. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of how psychological healing translates into improved cognitive and behavioral decision-making capacities. The findings align with the trauma theory developed by van der Kolk [18] and Herman [9], which describe trauma as a disruption of emotional and cognitive integration. Participants in this study displayed patterns consistent with these theoretical insights: initial emotional dysregulation and cognitive rigidity were gradually replaced by stability and flexible reasoning after undergoing TIT. This transformation reflects how trauma-informed interventions help restore the individual's sense of safety, self-regulation, and agency, which are essential preconditions for rational decision-making.

From a decision-making perspective, results also support the dual-process model proposed by Kahneman [16], distinguishing between automatic (System 1) and deliberative (System 2) thinking. Before therapy, participants tended to rely on emotional, impulsive judgments—indicative of System 1 dominance. Following therapy, however, the qualitative narratives and quantitative data show a clear shift toward System 2 processing, characterized by reflective thought, reasoning, and goal-oriented behavior. Neuropsychological consistency with Levine [11] and Van der Hart et al. [17] suggest that TIT may enhance neural integration and executive control. It suggests that TIT plays a crucial role in facilitating the transition from emotionally driven to cognitively balanced decision-making. The positive correlations observed between therapy duration and decision-making improvement ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) emphasize the cumulative benefits of consistent therapeutic engagement. Emotional regulation emerged as the strongest predictor of rational decision-making ($r = 0.72$), reinforcing the idea that emotional control is not only a psychological outcome but also a core mechanism through which individuals make better choices. Cognitive flexibility, also significantly correlated ($r =$

0.65), complements this process by enabling individuals to adapt to new information, consider multiple perspectives, and select actions aligned with long-term goals.

The pattern of increasing mean scores across longer therapy durations demonstrates that trauma recovery is time-dependent and process-oriented. Sustained therapy enables clients to internalize new coping strategies and strengthen neural pathways associated with reflective cognition, consistent with the neuropsychological findings of van der Kolk [18] and colleagues regarding post-traumatic brain integration.

The qualitative results provide emotional depth and narrative validation to the statistical trends. Participants described how therapy sessions improved their awareness of emotions, clarity of thought, and ability to remain calm under stress. These subjective transformations indicate that TIT fosters both cognitive restructuring and emotional literacy, allowing clients to interpret internal experiences without being overwhelmed by them. For example, one participant's reflection — "Now I can pause and think before reacting" — encapsulates the transition from impulsive emotional responding to intentional decision-making. This aligns with cognitive-behavioral frameworks, which emphasize mindfulness and self-observation as tools for enhancing self-control.

Additionally, the development of coping and resilience strategies, such as mindfulness, journaling, and rational self-talk, highlights the empowerment aspect of trauma-informed therapy. Rather than perceiving themselves as victims of their trauma, clients begin to see themselves as agents of change, capable of directing their thoughts and behaviors.

Cultural context: The case of Azerbaijan

The Azerbaijani context adds a unique dimension to these findings. In societies where discussing psychological trauma is often stigmatized, trauma-informed therapy provides a safe and non-judgmental environment for emotional expression. Participants' narratives suggest that TIT helps bridge traditional cultural attitudes toward resilience (often equated with silence or endurance) with modern therapeutic understandings of emotional openness and regulation.

Furthermore, therapists' qualitative feedback indicates a growing need for culturally adapted TIT approaches that respect local values while integrating evidence-based practices. The observed improvement in decision-making among Azerbaijani participants reflects not only the effectiveness of therapy but also a broader cultural shift toward psychological self-awareness and personal responsibility.

When viewed holistically, the results of this study suggest that emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility act as mediating variables linking trauma recovery to improved decision-making. Trauma-informed therapy strengthens these capacities by fostering safety, trust, and

self-awareness, which, in turn, enable rational and purposeful decision-making. This integrated model contributes to existing literature by empirically demonstrating the pathway from trauma to improved cognitive functioning within a post-Soviet, transitional cultural context. It bridges psychological theory and applied mental health practice, suggesting that TIT can serve as a catalyst for both personal and social resilience.

These findings have important implications for mental health professionals, policy-makers, and educational institutions in Azerbaijan. Integrating trauma-informed approaches into mainstream psychological services can improve clients' long-term functioning, not only emotionally but also cognitively and behaviorally. Moreover, incorporating decision-making and self-regulation skills into therapy curricula and community mental health programs could significantly enhance psychological well-being at a population level.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of trauma-informed therapy (TIT) in improving decision-making processes among adults in Azerbaijan, emphasizing the mediating influence of emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility. By employing a mixed-methods design, the research integrated quantitative data from online surveys and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews to provide a comprehensive picture of how trauma recovery reshapes psychological and cognitive functioning.

The quantitative analysis confirmed a significant positive relationship between therapy participation and improved decision-making. Participants who engaged in TIT for extended periods reported higher levels of emotional stability, reflective thinking, and rational problem-solving [18]. These findings demonstrate that consistent therapeutic exposure strengthens individuals' ability to balance emotional impulses with logical evaluation—key aspects of effective decision-making.

Qualitative findings deepened this understanding by revealing personal transformations that accompany the therapeutic process. Clients described gaining emotional awareness, the capacity to pause before reacting, and new coping strategies that enhanced both resilience and self-control. These changes align with the trauma integration theory [9] and the dual-process model of decision-making [10], supporting the idea that emotional and cognitive healing are interdependent. Within the Azerbaijani cultural context, this study highlights the growing relevance of trauma-informed approaches as society becomes more open to discussing psychological well-being. In a culture that has historically valued endurance and silence over emotional expression, TIT offers a framework for self-awareness, empowerment, and healthier cognitive functioning.

The study demonstrates that trauma-informed therapy enhances decision-making by restoring emotional balance and mental flexibility, enabling individuals to engage in more deliberate, goal-oriented actions [12]. These findings contribute both theoretically—to understanding how trauma affects cognition—and practically—to the improvement of psychological services in Azerbaijan.

Based on the empirical evidence and theoretical analysis, several recommendations can be proposed for practice, policy, and future research:

1. Integration into mental health practice. Mental health professionals in Azerbaijan should incorporate trauma-informed principles into therapeutic and counseling practices, ensuring that clients' experiences of trauma are recognized and addressed through empathy, safety, and empowerment. Training programs for psychologists and social workers should include modules on trauma-informed decision-making to bridge emotional regulation with cognitive interventions.

2. Development of national trauma support programs. The Ministry of Health and relevant NGOs should develop community-based TIT initiatives focusing on post-conflict, domestic violence, and displacement-related trauma, all of which are relevant in the Azerbaijani context. Such programs should provide both individual therapy and group resilience workshops to reinforce decision-making and coping skills across different social groups.

3. Research and data expansion. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings across regions, age groups, and trauma types. Longitudinal research is recommended to track how decision-making evolves over time as therapy progresses. Quantitative instruments should be further refined to capture neurocognitive aspects of trauma recovery, including executive function and attention control.

4. Integration into education and workplace training. Universities and professional organizations could offer psychoeducation programs focused on trauma awareness, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility. Workplaces should adopt trauma-informed leadership and decision-making frameworks to promote well-being and improve performance under stress.

5. Cultural adaptation and public awareness. It is essential to adapt TIT techniques to Azerbaijani cultural values, incorporating traditional concepts of community, family support, and resilience. Public education campaigns and media programs should normalize mental health discussions, reducing stigma and encouraging individuals to seek psychological assistance.

This research provides empirical evidence that trauma-informed therapy does more than alleviate psychological distress—it cultivates self-awareness, rational thinking, and emotional

regulation, the foundations of sound decision-making. In the Azerbaijani context, where societal transformation and modernization are ongoing, fostering trauma-sensitive mental health practices can significantly contribute to individual well-being, social cohesion, and national resilience. By bridging clinical theory with cultural reality, this study underscores the power of trauma-informed therapy to transform both the individual mind and the collective understanding of mental health in modern Azerbaijan.

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TRAVMA-MƏLUMATLI TERAPİYANIN QƏRARVERMƏ BACARIQLARININ YAXŞILAŞDIRILMASINDAKI ROLU (AZƏRBAYCAN NÜMUNƏSİ)

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Xülasə. Bu tədqiqat uşaqlıq və ya müharibə ilə bağlı travma yaşamış Azərbaycan yetişkinlərində travma barədə məlumatlı terapiyanın (TIT) qərarverməyə təsirini araşdırır. Qarışıq metodlardan istifadə nəticəsində TIT-in özünü dərk etmə, emosional tənzimləmə və rəşional seçim bacarıqlarını artırdığı, kognitiv çevikliyi və sosial-emosional dayanıqlılığını gücləndirdiyi göstərilmişdir. TIT-in ölkə səviyyəsində psixi sağlamlıq sistemlərinə inteqrasiyası tövsiyə olunur.

Açar sözlər: Travma-məlumatlı terapiya, qərarvermə, emosional tənzimləmə, kognitiv çeviklik, psixoloji dayanıqlılıq.