

# The Tree of Life

The Trauma Tree · a way to tell your story from a place of strength

**A map, not a test.** There are no right answers and nothing here is graded. You can write, draw, or just talk it through with your therapist. You decide the pace, and you decide what to leave out.

## ABOUT THIS EXERCISE

The Tree of Life is a narrative therapy exercise developed by Ncazelo Ncube and David Denborough at the Dulwich Centre in 2006. It began as a way of working with children in southern Africa who had lived through loss and hardship, and it is now used around the world with people of all ages who have been through difficult things.

Instead of starting with what went wrong, it starts with you: where you come from, what you can do, who stands with you and what you hope for. The storms get their turn only once the tree is standing.

## WHY A TREE

Trauma can shrink a life story until it is only about the storm. A tree holds the whole story. It has roots that were there before the storm, a trunk that bent and did not break, and leaves that fall and grow back. Mapping your life as a tree puts the storm back in proportion.

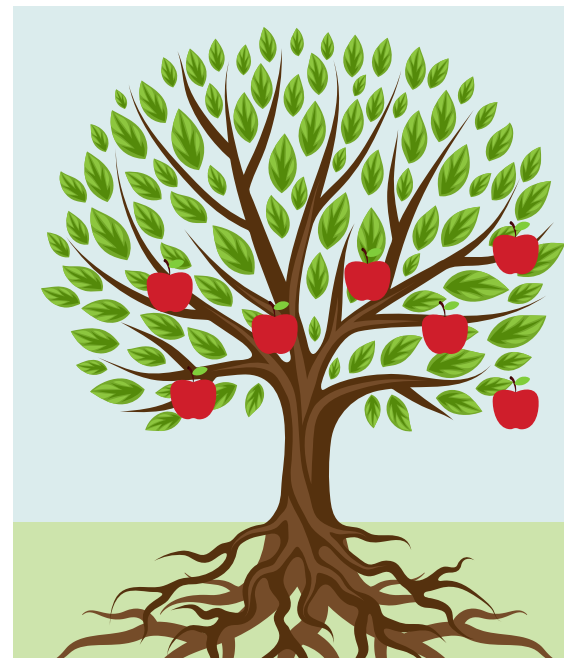
## HOW TO USE IT

- 1 Start at the roots and work upward: roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, fruit (pages 3 to 5).
- 2 Only then, and only if you want to, the storms (page 6). Naming a storm is optional.
- 3 Finish with *Looking at my tree* (page 7).
- 4 Bring it to your next session. We will read your tree together.
- 5 Keep it. Trees keep growing, and so will this one.

## THE PARTS OF YOUR TREE

|                 |                    |      |
|-----------------|--------------------|------|
| <b>ROOTS</b>    | where I came from  | p. 3 |
| <b>GROUND</b>   | present life       | p. 3 |
| <b>TRUNK</b>    | skills             | p. 4 |
| <b>BRANCHES</b> | dreams             | p. 4 |
| <b>LEAVES</b>   | significant people | p. 5 |
| <b>FRUIT</b>    | gifts              | p. 5 |
| <b>STORMS</b>   | challenges         | p. 6 |

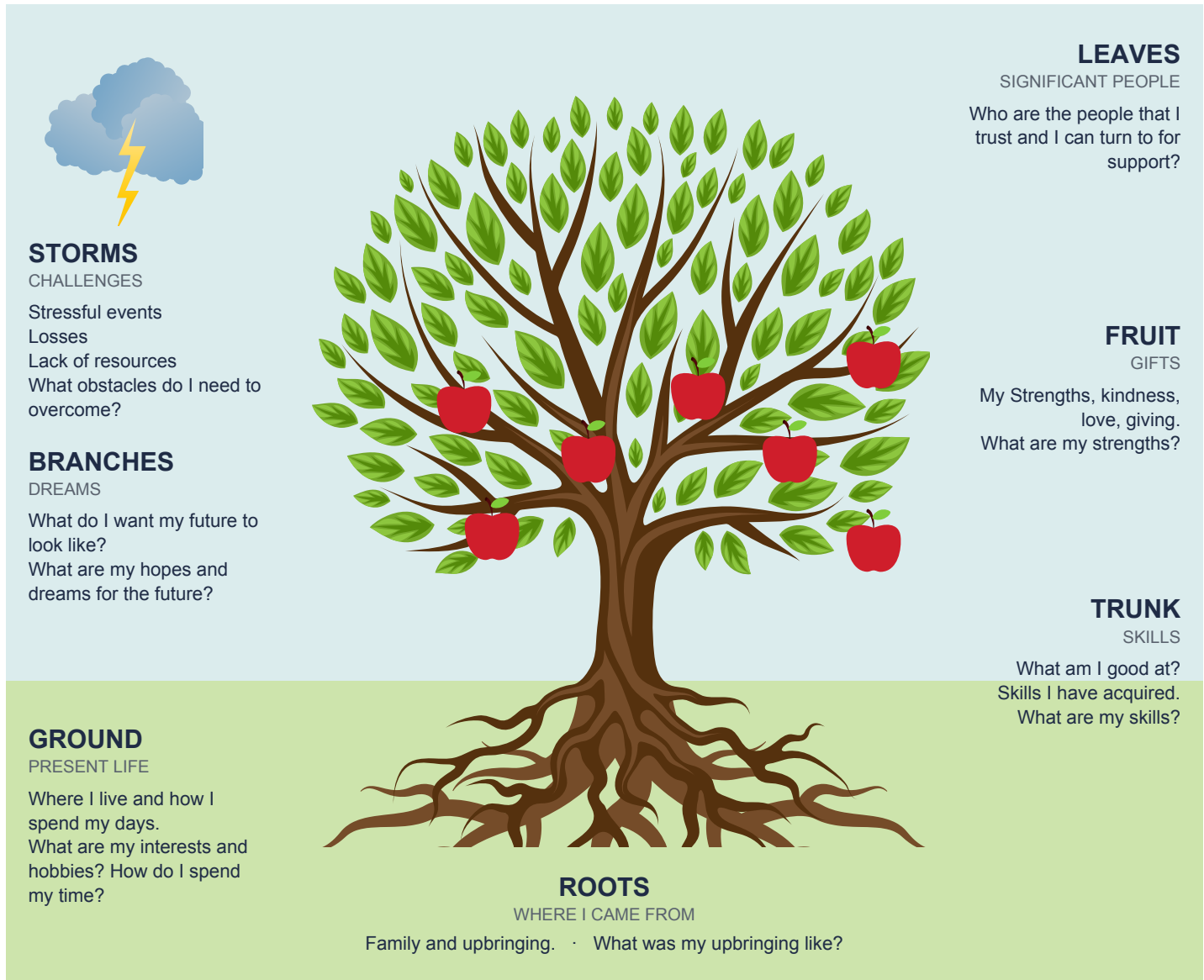
Page numbers refer to this worksheet.



**Pace is your choice.** If any part brings up more than you want to hold right now, put the pen down, use a grounding skill you know, and come back later or finish it in session. You do not have to describe anything painful to complete this worksheet.

# Your tree at a glance

Each part of the tree carries one question. Read it before you start writing.



**Reading order.** Roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, fruit. Storms last, and only if you choose. Each part has its own page with room to write.

**Would you rather draw?** Some people prefer to draw their own tree on a blank sheet and write their answers onto the roots, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. That works just as well. Use the questions on this page as your labels.

**In session.** We will read your tree together, from the roots up. You choose which parts to read aloud and which to keep on the page. Nothing on it has to be explained.

## ROOTS · WHERE I CAME FROM

*The people, places and history you grew out of.*

### Family and upbringing.

### What was my upbringing like?

Places, people, traditions, music, food or beliefs that shaped you.

Who or what has been there the longest? Roots can include people who are gone, and roots you chose for yourself.

## GROUND · PRESENT LIFE

*Where you stand right now.*

## Where I live and how I spend my days.

**What are my interests and hobbies? How do I spend my time?**

A typical week: who you see, what you do, and what you look forward to.

What in your present life steadies you, even a little?

## TRUNK · SKILLS

*What you can do, and what holds you up.*

## What am I good at?

### Skills I have acquired.

## What are my skills?

Count the everyday ones too: listening, fixing things, making people laugh, keeping going.

Where did you learn each skill, and who taught you? What have you had to get good at to get through hard times?

**BRANCHES · DREAMS**

*Where you are reaching.*

## What do I want my future to look like?

### What are my hopes and dreams for the future?

Hopes for yourself and hopes for the people you love. Big or small, near or far.

Where did these hopes come from? Who in your life shares them with you?

**LEAVES · SIGNIFICANT PEOPLE**

*The people who matter to you.*

**Who are the people that I trust and I can turn to for support?**

Friends, family, pets, mentors, a teacher, a neighbour, people from your past, people who have died, people you have never met but who inspire you.

What does each of them bring out in you?

## FRUIT · GIFTS

*What you have been given, and what you give.*

**My Strengths, kindness, love, giving.**

### What are my strengths?

Gifts you have received: care, lessons, chances, kindness. Gifts you give to others.

What would the people in your leaves say your gifts are?

**Before you begin.** You can name a storm without describing it. A word or a date is enough. Trees do not cause storms, and storms pass. Leave this section blank if today is not the day.

STORMS · CHALLENGES

*The weather that has come through your life.*

- Stressful events
- Losses
- Lack of resources
- What obstacles do I need to overcome?

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STANDING THROUGH THE STORM · WHAT KEEPS ME UPRIGHT

- What has helped you stay standing in past storms?
- Which parts of your tree do you lean on when the weather turns: roots, trunk, leaves, fruit?
- What or who shelters you? What is still here after the storm?

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# Looking at my tree

Read your tree from the roots up. Then answer whatever feels true today.

What stands out when you look at your whole tree?

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Was anything surprising, or something you had not said out loud before?

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Which part of your tree would you like to grow next, and what would help it grow?

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What would you like your therapist to know about your tree?

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## MY TREE IN ONE SENTENCE

I am a tree that

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## SHARING MY TREE

Trees do not grow alone; together they make a forest. If you chose to share your tree, who would you show it to, and what would you want them to notice?

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