

Deception Timeline Exercise Directions

Deception shows up in our lives in various ways. It is often an intrinsic part of escape patterns or trauma responses. Understanding the pervasive influence deception has had on our life and our connection to others can be an important part of the healing process. We do this through the creation of a timeline, using the same format we use for other timelines so it can be compared to them. Often, it's helpful to have the other timelines you've completed available as deceptions may be connected to acting out behaviors (sexual or substance), traumatic events, or even life events.

Let's start by defining types of deception. Overt lying is often the most obvious form of deception. This involves being asked a direct question and deliberately giving a false answer.

In some cases, when asked a direct question, gaslighting is used as a response. This is a form of lying as it involves muddying the water so the truth can't be seen. Gaslighting is when one person tries to confuse the other person's reality so the first person can stop the second person from calling the first person on something or seeing something. The acronym for gaslighting is DARVO – Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. This means you deny what they are saying to you and attack them instead, acting as though you are the victim instead of the offender (i.e. – “How could you think I would do that? What kind of person are you? Don't you even trust me? Does this mean YOU'RE doing that?”), or the reverse – that someone does that to you. Recognize that it is possible to gaslight yourself (i.e. – “How could I think they would do that? What kind of person am I? Don't I even trust them? Does this mean I'M doing that?”)

Another type of lie is a lie of omission. Lies of omission happen when information is deliberately withheld (consciously or unconsciously). This is different than sharing in a bounded way. Boundaries create safety for you and others. Lies of omission deliberately mislead others, sometimes by leaving information out, sometimes by presenting the information in a misleading way, and sometimes by avoiding mentioning the topic.

A fourth type of deception is denial, which is deceiving yourself. While denial as a stage of grief is healthy and necessary, staying stuck in denial beyond the time when it's necessary to survive the situation becomes unhealthy. It involves continually refusing to look at the truth of a situation and refusing to take any steps to heal it, repair it, or create boundaries we may need in relation to it.

There are several tools related to deception. Justification is one – coming up with a reason why it's ok for you to lie or deceive in one way or another. People-pleasing is another tool, which is similar to justification. People-pleasing is saying and/or doing what you think someone wants (or not doing what you think might upset them) because you want to be liked or you want to avoid conflict.

Now that we understand deception a little more thoroughly, let's consider how it has shown up in your life. There are two parts to this timeline. One is ways others have deceived you. The second is ways you have deceived yourself or others. As you go through this process, divide the deception up even further. Pick a color for your primary partner, a separate color for your parents, and a third color for yourself. If there are any other major people in your life

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where your connection to them involved significant deception (either on your part or theirs), pick a color specifically for them.

Make a list (word documents are often helpful as they are easy to edit) that starts with your earliest memory of any deception – what you saw, did, heard, said, etc. This may be something you did, something you saw or heard, or something that was done to you. Include how you learned about dishonesty/deception.

Continue by listing every experience with or patterns of deception. For patterns, summarize the pattern rather than focusing on listing each instance. However, if it wasn't a pattern of behavior then try to list each time. Try to list each person who lied to you and each lie you told. It may be difficult to remember each one. Include any that stick out to you. Don't question if they were important or not – if you remember them, they were important to you. Again, if this shows up as a pattern, list the general pattern rather than getting stuck on each one.

Consider the beginning and end of each important relationship you have been in and consider if deception was part of each relationship.

Review your escape cycles, including acting out, sobriety and relapse dates (or patterns over time using the same format explained earlier) if applicable and how deception was involved in what you did. Consider deception to others, self-deception, and deception from others. As with the other experiences, try to remember your age at each event and list them in chronological order.

Review your trauma cycles. What role did deception from others have in those cycles? What role did self-deception have? What role did you deceiving others play?

Once you've completed the list to the best of your abilities (keep in mind that additional memories may surface as you process your timeline and that's ok – don't wait until it's perfect, just do your best), create a horizontal timeline from your list. The easiest way to do this (and to be able to add to it later) is to get a 24" roll of paper, or several pieces of graph paper taped together, and some colored markers. Start by making marks in black at benchmark ages. Your benchmark ages depend on your history. You may need a longer sheet of paper depending on the number of experiences. Make sure to use the same spacing that you've used in other timelines.

If needed, discuss your specific case in session with your therapist and they can help you with the general lay out, but it will be simple math. If you are 60 put a 6" line at each lineal foot and a 3" line half-way between each of the 6" lines. The tall lines are age 10, 20, 30, etc. and the short ones are 5, 15, 25, etc. This should leave enough space for you to fill in your sexual history between the lines where appropriate. The example here will be 6' long. You can make it any length you want, just make sure the spacing between the lines is uniform.

If you feel significantly triggered or a shame cycle, or feel very uncomfortable, it is good to stop and come back to it later. Also, please let your therapist know this next time you meet. If the trigger is overwhelming, contact your therapist for an appointment rather than waiting until the next scheduled appointment.