

Life Events Timeline Exercise Directions

Life events are memorable dates, experiences, or milestones. These might include births, deaths, moves, friends, schools, vacations, jobs, injuries or illness, awards or achievements, losses, marriage, divorce, engagement, personal discoveries, revelations either to you or from you, etc.

Make a list (word documents are often helpful as they are easy to edit) that starts with your birth. In some cases, there may be important life events that happened prior to your birth (like your father leaving while your mother was pregnant), and you can include those as they likely influenced your life. As you go through these events, they may not all feel like they happened TO you, but if they happened around you and may have affected you, include them.

Continue by listing every event or pattern. For patterns, summarize the pattern rather than focusing on listing each instance. For example: if your parent switched jobs frequently, just indicate that between the ages X and Y, your parent switched jobs about every 2-3 months and how that affected you. Include specific incidences that stick out in your mind as well. However, if it wasn't a pattern, for example, if your parent only switched jobs twice while you lived with them, then try to list each time. No event is too small to include if it sticks out to you. You can include stories you may have been too young to remember but were told about.

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. Use the same spacing and format you used for every timeline you complete, so you can easily put them together and see correlations between them. 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.

We can discuss your specific case in session and 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 trauma 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 can, color code the events/experiences. Categorize the types of events included. For example, births, deaths, moves, friends, schools, vacations, jobs, injuries or illness, etc. Pick one color for each. For example, use light blue for births and green for deaths and red for moves.

If you feel yourself start to spiral into a trauma response or trigger, 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.