Using Timelines in CBT: Concise Guide

Ken Laidlaw, PhD
Professor of Clinical Psychology
Making use of life experience in therapy

• Timeline in Therapy:

DoB

Idiosyncratic list of significant life events

Current Date

when a person reviews their life they may do so in an abstract overgeneralised way and may confirm negative age stereotypes (e.g. Levy, 2009: ).

Asking people to reflect on difficult life experiences in structured way can help them develop a more elaborated account of their recall.

• It helps the individual to recognise their resilience in the face of difficult circumstance – increases confidence in their coping.

Timelines afford a targeted and specific review of past experiences and facilitate a discussion about how clients have coped with setbacks.

The emphasis is from the abstract to the concrete. Its also about enhancing positive affect
How do you make sense of life experiences?

I have never tried to block out memories of the past, even though some are painful. I don’t understand people who hide from their past. Everything you live through helps to make you the person you are today.

Sophia Loren
Making use of lifeskills in CBT

• Step one: Develop a timeline (homework) Acknowledge strengths and resilience

• Step Two: Consider specific experiences from the past that evoke some emotion – *Examine them as factually as possible.*

• Step Three: When examining past experiences agree certain rules apply:
  • Reflection rather than blame – Shame is not helpful or constructive
  • No hindsight bias – Assess on what was known at the time.

• Step Four: Ask client is there a time in your life when you did something wise... or when you coped with adversity?

• Step Five: Can these skills/competences in handling ambiguous situations help the client deal with their current problems?
Key Questions to use when reviewing a timeline:

• when examining a life event on a T/L: looking back on that now, what does that tell you about yourself?

• Events from the T/L can be used to help people with difficult decisions: Have you been in a similar position in the past? If so how did that turn out? How does this help you?

• Enhancing sense of resilience: If you could somehow go back in time, as you are now and talk to your younger self, what would you say to yourself about how you coped?

• Encouraging Self-acceptance/compassion: In the past, in times of crisis how, and in what way, has being self-critical been helpful to you.

• Realist appraisal of coping: Looking back at this timeline, what do you learn from dealing with crises? What does that tell you?
1938: Passes 11+ and goes to grammar school. Sometimes feel others look down on her.

1943: ‘Joined up’ and becomes an ATS (women’s branch of the British Army during WWII). Becomes Sergeant in the army.

1953: Marries Andrew after short engagement, a happy contented.

1961: Hospitalised because of blood.

1963: Moves into new home. Marital home for rest of their life together.

1970: Periods of physical health problems.

2001: Golden Wedding Anniversary

2006: Social group “Used to drive them...made myself content”

2007: Pacemaker fitted

2012: Closest friend dies.

2017: Celebrates 90th Birthday.

1939: WWII evacuated to live and work on an isolated farm. Separated from her parents and brother and sister.

1945: Goes to work in a department store.

1954: Problems starting a family become apparent.

1958: Talks to Doctor and decides to stop investigations into fertility.

1970s: Takes up golfing and expands circle of friends. Happy time.

1980s: Independent. Happy and content with good circle of friends. Does lots of charity work.

2002: Husband develops cancer and is nursed at home.

2004: Husband dies peacefully at home. “don’t know how I coped, I just did...we used to go everywhere together.”


2016: Brought home in a wheelchair.

Dec 2015 Falls and breaks pelvis. Requires at home care. “I feel pretty useless. Don’t think I will get out of this, not with this gammy leg.”
Name: ________________________  Date of Next Appointment: ___/___/______

Life is full of ups and downs, and experiences may sometimes challenge our beliefs about ourselves or may ‘teach’ us something. Everything we live through helps make us the person we are today. This worksheet may help you review your own ups and downs in your own lifetime. When completing this sheet try not to evaluate whether the experience is good or bad or even whether you are good or bad. It may be that as you look back on your life (your timeline) you can identify a few key moments in life. These may be events you are proud, but equally they be events that evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment. Alternatively there may be some bittersweet moments. **When you complete this task, think of your whole lifetime and add all that you think is important.** If you need to, please use the back of this sheet to add additional events. Please complete the ‘timeline’ here by first putting your date of birth at the top of the timeline and under the bottom horizontal line write today's date. Use this space in-between to note events across your life you consider important. Use both sides of the line to make the most of the space. Your therapist will want to review your timeline with you at your next appointment.

DoB

Today’s date