

KEY LIFE EVENTS -- INVENTORY AND TIMELINE

“The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside of oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences.” (Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD)

Purpose: To understand the impact of relational trauma in your life

Overview: All of us have key life events that alter our lives for good or bad. Relational trauma can be a confusing issue to deal with, partly because it is cumulative, it is not one incident but many small attitudes, incidents, and dynamics that span time. It’s easy to lose track of when something happened, how often it happened or what exactly it was that was painful, particularly if the trauma was some form of neglect, emotional abuse or disinterest. Filling in a timeline helps to make these issues and dynamics visible. It can also reveal which were significant incidents, which were ongoing dynamics and what periods felt relatively safe and happy.

Identifying Key Events: In this assignment, your task is to identify the significant events (negative and positive) that have changed your life beginning as far back as you can remember. Take into account big events such as the death of a loved one, moving, your first sexual experiences, etc. Note: neglect can be traumatic as well as abuse, divorce in the family, addiction, siblings or parents leaving, accidents, hospitalizations, family illness, etc. . . . Other things you might include: parents fighting, a parent with mental health challenges or substance abuse problems, being bullied on the playground, difficult school or team experiences, etc. The idea here is to understand how you experienced it, not whether or not it fits some criteria as to what is formally called trauma.

Some of these events may have also happened in your adult years (e.g. health problems, job loss, etc.). Write down as many experiences as you can think of in whatever order they come to mind. Note the age at which it occurred (as best as you can remember) and rate the significance of the event on a scale of 1-10 (ten being the most significant).

Once you are done with identifying the key events place them along the timeline. Next, do some writing to include more details about the most significant events. You can use this handout as just a template, listing out the actual events and creating the timeline in a notebook.

| Event | Age | Rate 1-10 |
|-------|-----|--------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Timeline

|-----|

Process Writing

Choose the top five events (most significant) and write out as many details and feelings as you can remember from that event. Note any common themes from the events and answer the following questions:

- What jumps out at you as significant when you look at your timeline?
- What relational dynamics from the past are you still living out today?
- What were the silver linings, what were the gifts of trauma?