

## Trauma Timeline Exercise Directions

Let's start by defining what a trauma is. Claudia Black defines traumas as "anything less than nurturing". Another way to define trauma is "an event beyond the person's ability to master at the time" ([www.dissociativeidentitydisorder.net](http://www.dissociativeidentitydisorder.net), 2021). Traumas can be big T or little t. Big T traumas are overtly identifiable as traumas: war, violence, life-threatening experiences, physical injury, deaths, chronic extreme neglect or abuse, frequent moves, divorce. Little t traumas can affect us just as deeply as big T traumas, but often they aren't recognized as such. Little t traumas are experiences that are highly distressing for us and affect us on a personal level. If you remember an event in your life vividly and there are painful memories attached to it, chances are, it's a trauma. Almost every client I work with around trauma says "well, it wasn't as bad as \_\_\_\_\_". There will always be something you can compare to that will seem worse. That doesn't invalidate the pain you went through.

Make a list (word documents are often helpful as they are easy to edit) that starts with your earliest memory of anything that felt painful for you – what you saw, did, heard, said, etc. Start with your earliest memory. This may not be something you did, but may be something you saw or heard, or something that was done to you.

Continue by listing every painful experience or pattern. For patterns, summarize the pattern rather than focusing on listing each instance. For example: if as a teen you were regularly bullied, then don't try to list every time; just indicate that between the ages X and Y, you were bullied daily at school. Include specific incidences that stick out in your mind as well. However, if it wasn't a pattern, for example, if you were bullied 3-4 times total during high school, then try to list each time. Try to list each experience. No experience 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. For example, if you were left in a hot car as a baby and they returned and had to resuscitate you, that was likely traumatic, but you very well may not remember it.

List the beginning and end of each important relationship or friendship you have been in and try to list why each one ended. List the failures you think you have experienced and how you felt about each. List the losses you've had, including pets, friends, toys, homes, people, etc.

Please also list any abuse, either individual instances or repeated patterns, including the name of the perpetrator. Review the definition of abuse with your therapist to help identify instances and patterns that may be abusive. If you would

like to understand more about different types of abuse, I recommend Defiant Hope by James Leehan. For patterns of abuse, try to list when it started and how and when it ended and why (if you know – if you do not know, state that). Include spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse is when you were guilted or shamed into doing something or not doing something with the threat of eternal consequences.

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 trauma you've experienced. For example, losses, moves, deaths, violence, bullying, emotional abuse, physical abuse, spiritual abuse, neglect, etc. Pick one color for each. For example, use light blue for losses 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.