

Substance Use Timeline Exercise Directions

Substance use may or may not be connected to other aspects of your life, such as addictive behaviors or trauma responses. Often it is difficult to see the connection unless your primary addiction or trauma response is related to substance use. In some cases, substance use may not be connected to addictive behaviors, but may affect other aspects of your life or may be problematic for you. On the other hand, it may not be problematic at all. The best way to determine if addressing substance use might be helpful for your recovery is to complete a substance use timeline and compare it to other timelines you've completed.

Make a list of all substances you've used throughout your life. This may include: alcohol, heroin, crack cocaine, methamphetamine, cocaine, tobacco, amphetamine, cannabis, GHB, benzodiazepines, ketamine, methadone, mephedrone, butane, anabolic steroids, ecstasy, qat/khat, LSD, buprenorphine, and mushrooms. Additional substances are consistently being developed, such as Kratom, which is just now being seen as addicting and damaging, so if there are others you've used, include those. Include any medications you were prescribed. Indicate if you use them as directed or not as directed.

Creating a horizontal timeline. 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 substances. Pick one color for each. For example, use purple for alcohol and yellow for tobacco and red for Zoloft.

Continue by listing every substance you've used. For patterns, summarize the pattern rather than focusing on listing each instance. For example, if you regularly have a glass of wine with dinner, just indicate that between the ages X and Y. Include any exceptions to the patterns, for example, if you got very drunk a few times in your life, include those and the circumstances around them. Include specific incidences that stick out in your mind as well. However, if it wasn't a pattern 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.

If you start to see patterns and 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.