How to… Create a timeline

A timeline is a piece of work that can be done with an individual to gather information from them about the events in their life that are significant to them. In social work, you will become used to creating chronologies (see HOW TO – Chronologies) which are usually pieced together from information from varying professionals and while this is a similar piece of work, the events reflected will likely be very different due to them being told from the service users’ perspective.

# Planning

The timeline process may need a number of sessions depending on the age and experiences of the person you are working with so you will need to think about this when planning this piece of work. It is also important to be aware that this may be a difficult experience for some people as they are likely to be talking about deeply personal and sometimes traumatic events. As such, be mindful of the time of day you plan the session, the location, what commitments they may have after the session (e.g. collecting a child from school/nursery; having to go straight to work) and what support they have around them. Doing this on a Friday afternoon may not be the best option as many services are not available on weekends.

# What do you need?

Using a large piece of paper such as a roll of paper or flipchart paper is usually the most effective way to document a timeline. A roll of backing paper is always handy for these exercises. You will want pens or pencils, perhaps coloured markers or felt-tips so the timeline can be colour coded if this is helpful (e.g. events relating to different people might use certain colours for that person). If doing this exercise with a child or teenager, you may want pictures, for example, from magazines or downloaded to help them tell their story.

Most importantly, you need time, space, a non-judgemental viewpoint and a good rapport with the service user. Trying to do this exercise with a reluctant service user is likely to be ineffective or produce a timeline that is not an accurate reflection of their story as they see it.

# Starting a timeline

A good way to explain a timeline to a service user is that it is their opportunity to tell their story. Too often we hear that what is recorded in assessments is not ‘true’ according to the person the assessment is on, and while there are likely to be different pieces of information from professionals that a service user does not agree with, a timeline exercise gives them the opportunity to tell their story from their perspective. In this respect, it can be an empowering and informative piece of work.

You might be tempted to challenge the person you are working with about their interpretation of events if your service holds information that is contradictory; however, rather than challenging, you might want to ask supplemental questions such as who else was involved, how did that happen, how would you describe what happened. While challenge is an essential part of the social work relationship, the purpose of this exercise is to allow the person to tell their story from their perspective and reflect on this.

Beginning the process usually starts with marking the service users’ birth on the left hand side of the paper and then asking them to identify significant events – positive or negative – throughout their life and plotting these on the paper. It may be useful to include dates where these are known and note any feelings or thoughts alongside the event. You may wish to include positive events above the mid-line and negative events below the line to provide a clear demarcation or colour code events to provide this differentiation. It is up to you and the service user whether they write things down or if they want you to; however, if you are writing, be sure to use their words and check back with your understanding of what they are saying.

Feb 2019

Danny lost it, he couldn’t keep trying to fool social services and went mental n smashed the place up. The neighbours called the police and he was arrested and charged. He’s on remand now. I’ve blocked his number and all his family. The Family Worker has been so supportive.

Sept 2015 - Annaliese started school. She loves it so much. I was glad she HAD to go too as Danny hadn’t let me take her to nursery or playgroups.

21/01/ 2013

We had Peggy, she cried a LOT with croup.

1999/2000?

Mum and Josh split up – was good as it meant they weren’t arguing all the time but then mum had no money when he went.

2006 - 2008

Gemma was getting in to loads of trouble at school and the police were involved. We had a social worker but they didn’t really speak with me, it was all about Gemma n I just avoided them by being out when they came round or refusing to speak to them. I was getting worse but they didn’t seem to notice as Gemma was a nightmare.

12/07/ 2011

We had Annaliese, she was such a good baby.

2011

Danny got really protective when I was pregnant. I thought it was really sweet at the time but looking back now, he was really possessive and controlling and it got worse when Annaliese was born.

June 2010 Met Danny and we got together. He was so funny, and hot!

Sept 2008 - 2011 got first job at take-away

Year 10/11 – 2006-08

Met Ruby. She was my only friend and I thought she was the coolest. We’d go out and rob stuff and get drunk at her dad’s house when we would bunk off school.

Sept 2003 - July 2008

High school - HATED IT, bullied a lot and was late a lot as had to take Gemma to school first, but the teachers didn’t listen or care.

18 Apr 1996

Gran died - everyone was really sad. Things got more all over the place as she wasn’t around to look after us when mum went out.

Sept 1996 - July 2003

Started primary school – really liked it, got me out of the house and I got lunch every day.

21/01/1994

Gemma born

07/07/1992

Joanna was born

2019

1992

November 2018

Another social worker came out as Annaliese had told her teacher what happened. I couldn’t lie to them this time. Fair enough, hit me, but don’t ever lay a finger on my babies. I was so scared though, both of him and of social services. It was so difficult.

Oct 2018

He hit Annaliese. I just lost it. She’s a goddamn child, my baby, how could he? I just kept hitting and hitting him and he cried.

Jan 2016

Annaliese told her teacher about Danny hitting me over Christmas and a social worker came out. I was petrified. They did a few sessions and I managed to convince them it was something she’d seen on tv. Danny was such a charmer with them, they were totally fooled by him.

07/07/2013

My 21st birthday. Danny hit me for the first time. He was mad that I asked him not to drink so much as I was worried about baby coming any time soon and wanted him at least to remember it if she did come early. I was just so shocked. He grabbed my hair and punched me in the side of the head.