**How to do a lifeline - a very quick guide**

**Preparation**

Get your:

Flowers

Stones

Sticks

Candles

Post It notes

Pen

Ribbon

Something to take a picture

Tell client in advance you will be doing a lifeline. It may take 1.5-2 hours

Give yourself time

**Setting up**

‘Today we are going to lay a lifeline. I am laying out this ribbon/rope on the floor. The ribbon/rope represents your life from your birth until the present day. This end is your birth, the other end is the present day. The coiled-up section is to represent the life you haven’t lived yet; the future. So, if this is your birth [point] and this is you now in the present day [point], then this is when you were x years old [point to half-way point of ribbon and say the age that is half their age.] Are you happy with the way I have laid it down – please do change it if you wish?

The lifeline will represent an overview of your life. We are going to start at your birth and work through your life in order. I will ask you to tell me about significant events/periods of time in your life. For each, I will ask you to choose:

* flowers to represent significant positive/happy events/times in your life or people who are good to you
* stones to represent significant bad/fearful/traumatic events – things that have made you sad or afraid
* sticks for acts of violence perpetrated by you
* candles for bereavements/losses

We aren’t going to go into detail about the events you have experienced today. For each symbol, I will ask:

1. what it is (just a few words e.g. ‘car accident’ or ‘arrested for protesting’)
2. when it happened
3. where it happened
4. what title/name you would like to give it.

That’s all. I will write down those 4 things on a piece of paper and lay it next to the stone/flower/stick/candle.

The aim of this session today is to get a bird’s eye view of your life, a road map, no details. We will have time to talk in more detail another time. So, today, if I think we are going into too much detail, I might interrupt you if that’s ok? That way we can be sure to cover everything.’

**It is important for the client to choose their own flowers and stones and lay them themselves, if at all possible.**

**Doing the lifeline**

‘Ok, first we will start with your birth. What symbol would you like to put down for your birth…and where and when were you born? And what shall we call this flower/stone?’

Write down the heading on a post-it note with those brief contextual details and stick it next to the flower/stone. Do this for each flower/stone/stick/candle as you go.

* Some clients might want to put down a stone for their birth - that is fine. Don’t assume you have to push them into putting down a flower
* Obviously, they won’t remember their birth
* Sometimes people want to put down symbols for things that happened before their birth – that is also OK, but the symbol should be placed at the point in time in the client’s life that they learned about this event

‘And what significant event would you like to put down next? And what shall we call this?’

For each one, write the title, what happened, when and where.

Continue through the line to the present day.

Sticks are there to represent *aggressive* acts by one person towards another. If someone puts a stick down for something which is not an aggressive act (e.g. “I killed my mother by being born” or failure to act to protect another who was harmed) gently suggest, “I think it’s not a deliberate act by you to harm another, so a stone is more appropriate.”

Check the client thinks they have placed all of the important events, now they can see the whole thing – add in any ones they think they have missed, in the correct place on the line.

Take a picture of the lifeline. You may have to take 2-3 pictures to get the whole line. Number your post-it notes starting at 1 for birth. Invite the client to take pictures if they would like to.

Spend a little time at the end, looking at the completed lifeline and say,

‘Thank you for sharing that with me…..how was it for you going through that today…how does it feel for you to see it all there?’ Hopefully, this will be a corrective experience for them, wherein they have coped with thinking about some of these events. This will mark the therapy as something different from their other experiences of feeling unable to think about the past.

Ask the client how they would like to pack up the lifeline and follow their instructions.

Remind your client that some people may see an increase in symptoms after the lifeline - this is to be expected. Just check they have some good plan for how to manage this.

**Tips**

If the client gives too much detail (which happens a lot, as they may find it hard to control the memory once they have it in mind) you need to gently close it down. Keep saying, ‘Our task today, is just to get an overview, a road map of your life, so I don’t need the details…..we will try to come back another time and give this event the time and attention it deserves but, just for now, I want to give it its place on your lifeline and move on’.

You may have to repeat this close-down several times. It will not be helpful for clients to have lots of small, uncontained exposures to traumatic events, so you need to work hard to help them to just tell you what, where, when and a title. In practice, most clients will tell you a little about the event at least - which is fine. Remember, you are trying to keep them in the cold memory place, so if they tell you more, ask them cold, contextual questions.

Sometimes clients become very distressed or begin to dissociate and are unable to give you the what, where, when and title; they may just give you a general title like ‘the dark time’ or may not be able to say anything. If necessary, just select a stone with the client and lay this down, marking it with an asterisk to return to at a later point in your sessions and move on to the next life event on the lifeline.

Big stones - people often put down one huge stone to represent 3 years of abuse/10 years of war/5 years in prison. When they do, ask if there are any events that particularly stand out in that time and invite them to lay a smaller stone by the side of the big stone for each of these. Give these a title and contextual details as above. (When you come to it in therapy, you can do a handwritten mini timeline of the events within that stone to work out where to focus your narration sessions).

If something e.g. a relationship starts out as a flower and then later becomes a stone, mark it with the flower when it started and a stone at the time it became a stone (which may be years later).

If someone has left out a big event that you already know about, bring it up and ask if they would like to place something on the line to symbolize it.

It is very important to get to the end of the lifeline all in one session. Leave enough time, pace it carefully and be clear with clients about the reasons for needing to move them on at times.

**After the session**

Put the pictures together into an electronic document and label each stone/flower/stick/candle with the notes you have written on your post-it notes.

In your next session you can look at the lifeline and decide how you will divide up your sessions. If there are too many stones for the number of sessions available to you there are various options. You can choose to:

* Focus on stones/sticks/candles only in sessions
* Focus on stones/sticks/candles to which the client has intrusions
* Focus on the first, worst, typical and last for traumas repeated many times e.g. daily torture
* Deal with the traumas the client thinks are most upsetting/have the biggest impact
* Focus on different types/contexts of trauma e.g. deal with one episode of torture, one of rape, one bombing etc.

Whatever you do, talk through traumas in chronological order.

Woodfield Trauma Service 2021