TIMELINE ASSIGNMENT

How Did I Get Here?

Understanding the experiences, relationships, coping strategies, and choices that shaped the life I am living today

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FOUNDATIONS

A huge part of understanding addiction and recovery is learning to recognize how we got to where we are today and how we want life moving forward to be the same and/or different. Addiction is the reason you are here, but it is not all of what makes you who you are.

This assignment asks you to identify key events, relationships, experiences, strengths, struggles, and turning points that you believe helped make you who you are. You do not need to answer every question in order. Use the prompts to decide what belongs on your timeline and what deserves more attention in treatment.

The goal is not to reduce your life to addiction.

The goal is to understand the larger story: what shaped you, what you learned to do to cope, what changed over time, and what you want to do differently now.

Start With the Beginning

Home and family

What was life like growing up? Who did you live with? What is your first memory? Who were you close to, and why? Who did you wish you were closer to?

Love, discipline, and messages

What did discipline look like in your home? What did love look like? What were you told about yourself by the adults in your life?

Strengths and interests

What did you like to do? What were you good at? When did you feel most like yourself?

What I learned early

What did you learn about trust, conflict, asking for help, vulnerability, success, failure, or belonging?

Place the early experiences you believe matter most onto the timeline.

AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	

LIFE STAGE 2

Relationships, Emotions, and Identity

Looking at the people who mattered and how you learned to understand, express, or manage emotion

Significant relationships can shape the way we see ourselves, what we expect from other people, and how we cope when we feel connected, rejected, loved, angry, afraid, or alone.

Significant relationships

What relationships mattered most in childhood and the teen years? This can include family, friends, mentors, romantic relationships, or sexual relationships. Who helped you feel known, safe, valued, or understood? Who did not?

Emotions and coping

How did you handle happiness, sadness, fear, guilt, shame, love, jealousy, excitement, anger, or loneliness through different periods of your life? Who, if anyone, helped you learn how to cope with those feelings?

Intimacy and sexuality

If relevant to your treatment, what was your first sexual encounter like? How has your relationship with sex, intimacy, closeness, validation, or boundaries developed over time?

Add the relationships and emotional experiences that changed the direction of your story.

AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	

LIFE STAGE 3

When Relief Entered the Picture

Alcohol, drugs, process addictions, and the discovery that something could change how I felt

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Substances and other behaviors usually enter a life for a reason. Before they create consequences, they may provide relief, confidence, excitement, belonging, escape, numbness, stimulation, or a sense of control.

First experiences with alcohol or drugs

Who introduced you to alcohol or drugs? What was the experience like? What did you notice about how you felt before, during, and afterward?

Other ways of changing how I felt

Have gambling, sex, food, shopping, technology, video games, pornography, work, exercise, or other repetitive behaviors ever functioned like an escape, relief, or compulsion? If so, when did they show up and what did they do for you?

Before I ask what it eventually cost me, what did it initially give me?

Track when different forms of relief first appeared and when they became more important.

AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	

LIFE STAGE 4

When the Solution Started Becoming the Problem

Consequences, mental health, and the point where coping began creating problems of its own

MORE DISTRESS — MORE RELIEF-SEEKING — MORE CONSEQUENCES

Substance-related consequences

What consequences have you experienced because of substance use? Consider health, withdrawal, legal problems, work, money, relationships, trust, parenting, education, safety, values, or things you stopped doing?

Mental health

What role has mental health played in your life? Have you experienced mental health challenges? Has someone close to you struggled with mental health, and if so, how did that affect you?

When did you first know something was becoming a problem, even if you were not ready to change it?

CONSEQUENCES

Add consequences, mental health changes, and periods when life became harder to manage.

AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	

LIFE STAGE 5

Adult Life: Work, Relationships, and Responsibility

Looking at the parts of life that continued developing alongside addiction and recovery

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Work and responsibility

What was your first job? How did it end? What other jobs have you had? Which jobs mattered to you? How have work, money, responsibility, or substance use affected one another?

Adult relationships

What have your relationships been like in adulthood? Consider family, friendships, romantic or sexual relationships, parenting, separation, marriage, conflict, connection, and the people you have depended on.

Where I functioned well

What periods of adult life felt more stable or meaningful? What was present during those times?

Where things began breaking down

What was changing in your relationships, work, routines, responsibilities, or priorities?

ADULT LIFE

Place major jobs, relationships, moves, losses, achievements, and adult responsibilities onto the timeline.

AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	
AGE / PERIOD	

LIFE STAGE 6

Attempts to Change and Treatment

Looking at what I tried, what helped, and what was still missing

Treatment is only one kind of attempt to change. Include periods when you cut down, stopped, changed substances, changed friends, moved, exercised, prayed, attended meetings, went to therapy, took medication, entered treatment, or tried to solve the problem in some other way.

WHAT I TRIED	WHAT MOTIVATED ME	WHAT HELPED	WHAT EVENTUALLY PULLED ME BACK

Treatment experiences

What have your treatment experiences been like? What did you learn? What helped? What did not help? What happened after discharge or after the structure ended?

What kept failing because I was trying to change the behavior without changing enough of the life around it?

LIFE STAGE 7

Turning Points

Identifying the moments that changed the direction of the story

Not every turning point is a dramatic “rock bottom.” A turning point is any moment, relationship, consequence, realization, loss, achievement, boundary, treatment experience, or decision that changed the direction of your life.

1 **What happened?** _____

What did I think it meant then? _____

What do I understand now? _____

2 **What happened?** _____

What did I think it meant then? _____

What do I understand now? _____

3 **What happened?** _____

What did I think it meant then? _____

What do I understand now? _____

4 **What happened?** _____

What did I think it meant then? _____

What do I understand now? _____

5 **What happened?** _____

What did I think it meant then? _____

What do I understand now? _____

TURNING POINTS

Which moment do I understand differently now than I did when it happened?

LIFE STAGE 8

What the Timeline Tells Me Now

Looking for patterns, strengths, unfinished work, and the life I want to build from here

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Once the timeline is complete, the most important work is not simply reviewing what happened. It is asking what the history teaches you about the patterns you repeat, what has helped, what you need to take seriously, and what you want the next part of the timeline to look like.

Patterns I keep seeing

What themes repeat across different periods of my life?

What has made me healthier

Which people, environments, routines, values, or supports have helped me function better?

Emotions I have struggled to tolerate

What feelings most often lead me toward escape, control, reassurance, numbness, or relief?

Strengths I can build on

What qualities, abilities, or parts of myself have helped me survive, change, connect, or rebuild?

Warning signs

What tends to happen before my life begins moving in an unhealthy direction?

What I still need to address

What parts of my history or current life need more attention during treatment?

My Life Moving Forward

What are my goals in life? What steps have I already taken toward them? What needs to be the same, and what needs to be different, if the next part of my timeline is going to look different?

I need to stop underestimating:

I need to keep building:

The part of my story I want to write differently from here is:

FORWARD

Once you complete this assignment, review it with your counselor. The goal is to identify patterns in your life and areas to focus on during treatment.