It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. If so then capturing your life on paper with a timeline exercise may be worth millions.

A timeline or lifeline exercise is a grid that allows you to have a bird's eye view of your life, and to see the positive and negative shifts along the way on a single trajectory.

Even more, it can be a tool to **make conscious self-directed changes** that, literally, rewire your brain to heal itself. Known as plasticity, your brain has an innate capacity to make changes in positive, healing directions. Like other tools, you need to know it's there to access, and how to use it.

Everyone has a unique timeline. It consists of a series of events, trends and turns that culminate in producing cycles of positive and negative shifts, highs and lows in the course of a lifetime from birth.

What are the benefits?

Putting your timeline on paper is an opportunity to record vital information about your life and past. There are several benefits to completing this exercise. It helps you:

- See the themes that connect and cut across seemingly different events.
- Recognize key achievements, growth opportunities, lessons, persons, new wisdom, and so on.
- Realize the value of negative shifts as opportunities toward positive shifts.
- Increase a sense of purpose by connecting life events in new ways.
- Find new meanings between your life at present in relation to your past and future.
- Understand how your experiences better prepared you to face future challenges.
- Note how *your responses* to events have shaped your life and character (and not events themselves).

It's an excellent exercise to complete together with your partner in life or a group of friends, extended family members or even business associates. Potentially all of the above hint at an even more important benefit. Your timeline can be a way to uncover and potentially 'rework' your life's story.

Re-working your life's story?

Your story tells you who you are, what you believe, and how to best fulfill your emotional needs to matter and meaningfully connect with others and life around you. Everyone has a story, or stories, because humans are story tellers by nature. A 'story' does not mean it's not true, by the way, it just means that if it has a limiting focus, it will likely produce de-energizing or disempowering emotional states inside.

Your story is powerful because your sense of self-worth lives in your storyline. Your thoughts and beliefs are powerful energies that can, and do, shape your emotional responses to past events in your life, and thus have fashioned your story. Based on your conclusions about your self and others around you, the interpretations of your past that you continue to hold in mind, wittingly or unwittingly, operate as perception filters that continue to powerfully impact your life today.

When left to the part of the mind that operates processes you do not have to think about – the subconscious mind – toxic thinking and limiting beliefs can unnecessarily activate your defense strategies, or **early survival-love scripts** , which can jam or have a paralyzing effect on the otherwise amazing abilities of your brain for reflective thought.

Many have a great story in certain areas of their lives in which they enjoy some measure of success and happiness, for example, but not in others. The bottom line is that, unless you learn to let go, for example, of your need for others' approval to feel worthwhile, you will have difficulties in effectively processing emotions of fear and anger in ways that allow your brain to engage certain natural integrative processes that your brain is willing and able to accomplish.

When you let of giving others power to define you, you create internal shifts, that allow you to take ownership of your story, and embrace new possibilities, i.e., to experience greater acceptance of your intrinsic value and worth. This shift in your experience of yourself activates dynamic processes of neural integration in your brain and body, such as growth of new neurons and changes or expansion of existing connections between neurons.

Phase 1: Five preparatory steps before getting started:

Ready to start? The first phase consists for five preparatory steps to complete before putting your timeline down on paper.

1. Purchase or have ready the following materials: markers, pen or pencil, notepad and *legal* size paper.

2. Make time, perhaps one or more 15 to 30 minutes, to thoughtfully reflect on the course of your life, its high and low points, as well as stable times.

3. During this time of reflection, list life events on a notepad, keeping the below guidelines in mind:

- Include experiences that influenced your life and later successes, both positive and negative.
- More or less, there should be a significant life event at least every other year or so. Thus, if you are 40 years old, you'll have between 15

to 20 life shaping shifts.
- Be sure to include negative events or turns, keeping in mind that they can be as essential, if not more so, than positive ones. A good story is multidimensional, and conflicts are key to telling a great story.

4. Put the events in chronological order of your (approximate) age at the time.

5. Place a "+" sign in front of events that are overall positive, and a "-" sign in front of ones that were overall negative – and then rate the positive or negative intensity of each event on a scale of 1 to 10, low to high.

Phase 2: Putting your timeline on paper.

Now that you've completed the preparatory steps, you're ready to record your timeline on paper. To complete this phase, take the following steps:

1. Take a legal size sheet of paper, and fold it in half along the horizontal axis. (If you use standard size paper, turn it to 'landscape'.)

2. Draw a horizontal line along the horizontal axis.

3. Place a "+" sign on the *top-right* corner above the horizontal axis, to signify the positive events that you associate with pleasure.

4. Place a "-" sign on the *bottom-right* corner below the horizontal axis, to represent the events on your timeline associated with displeasure or stress.

5. Decide whether to put each of the events on your chronological list either above or below the horizontal axis of your timeline by marking each with a "+" or "-." sign.

6. Draw a dot on the horizontal axis of your timeline for each of the key events – allowing ample space between events so that they are spread across the axis from from its left to right end points.

7. From each dot, draw a line for each event (either above or below the horizontal line), accordingly, and make the line as tall or short as its intensity based on its assigned numeric value. For legal or standard size paper, this equals about one-third inch for each interval on the scale, i.e., the length of a line assigned an intensity of 5 would equal about one and two-thirds inches.

8. Allow ample space as recording one event can trigger a memory of another.

9. Connect up the points that you have marked.

10. Remain open to adding events as you complete the timeline; it's natural for one event to trigger a memory of another.

Believe it or not, your life story is rich with meaning, and a useful way to capture those meanings, similar to having a snapshot of your entire life, is developing your personal timeline with a timeline exercise.

Seeking meaningful connections in life is an innate emotional drive, a uniquely human characteristic. It is connected to another ability that is unique to human beings – language – the capacity to express, to interpret and to manipulate symbols in complex ways. In many ways, life is a lifelong process of telling your story, filling in the details as you go along, interpreting and reinterpreting the meanings.

In addition to capturing these meanings, this exercise is an opportunity to examine and accordingly **shift the focus of how you relate** , i.e., to your self, your life, your past, as well as your thoughts, emotions, needs, passions, wants, and so on. It takes courage, however, to liberate your mind from old stories, and to stand instead in the truth of your highest aspirations of who you yearn to be.

In **Part 2** , we look at a third phase, the option of probing more deeply to make new sense of your self and life by extracting mind-liberating meanings.

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