

Psychodramatic Resiliency Timeline

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This article explains how to use a Psychodramatic Resiliency Timeline to identify, concretize, and build on inter-, intra-, and transpersonal strengths. Trauma informed practices understand the necessity of creating safety from a strength-based perspective. By working with a person's innate drive to tell stories and share their experiences, we can use the psychodramatic concepts of surplus reality, time, and space to mark "difficult times" in a client's life and highlight and foster buried resources. By creating a living graph that incrementally marks their times of crisis and resiliency along an invisible line, resources procured from the past can now be materialized and externalized to help with a client's current situation and meet their treatment plan goals. These resources can be revisited at any time and lay the groundwork for the deep, valuable, and transformative work that psychodrama allows us to co-create with clients.

KEYWORDS: Resiliency; psychodrama; timeline; strengths; resources; living graph; resource mining; intervention; ACE.

A timeline is a measurement of a story along a sequential and chronological line to easily see history, trends, patterns, and themes marked and delineated incrementally by whatever measurement of time being used.

A psychodramatic timeline is a living graph and marking of incremental measurements of life and experience to facilitate understanding and concretization of important trends, relationships, and tendencies. Through psychodrama, we can give tangible dimension to a personal life story. A psychodramatic timeline can be used to measure and evaluate different criteria along a person's life span and give them an opportunity to share their story with another. These concretized memories, important moments, and relationships that are developed through experiential action can be returned to and accessed in future sessions as needed.

PSYCHODRAMA RESILIENCY TIMELINE

One therapeutic intervention that I use in both individual and group settings is a Resiliency Timeline. This is a timeline activity that has the goals of identifying,

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concretizing, and building on internal and external resources. It illustrates a transformative tale with a focus on the client's journey from woe to hope. This is a productive and creative way to recognize, and gather wealth from, their strengths and fortitudes that have been internalized, along with people who have changed and positively impacted their life. This form of validating psychodramatic storytelling also gives respect to our limits and fragile places, as this sort of disclosure can be exposing and vulnerable. As a witness coming from a strength-based perspective, without judgment, I try to remember that the client's defenses once worked to serve the purpose of keeping them safe. This type of joint resource building is trauma informed, since having a solid resource for psychodramatic work is paramount before working on trauma. It is recommended that identifying some resource—whether accessed or not—be part of every psychodrama, just in case of dissociation, regression, or some other part of the self appears that is not expected.

Operationalizing a Resiliency Timeline

1. **EXPLAIN THE EXERCISE TO CLIENT:** To begin, when I ask clients to create a Resiliency Timeline, I describe the beginning of the Hero's Journey, comparing their current situation to a human story that has existed through the ages. When a crisis arises, the Hero must gather their resources in the form of soldiers, ammunition, food, and supplies before going into battle. The Resiliency Timeline is the gathering of resources that will be needed to do the hard work of battling the demons that stand in the way of their transformation. I explain that we will be trying to identify who or what has helped them get through "difficult times." These will be the resources that we will gather to reach the client's treatment-plan goals.

I describe that I will ask them to choose a scarf for each of the difficult times throughout their life and set them along an invisible timeline along the floor from birth back to today. I have a large wheeled box filled with scarves (1–1.5 yards of different colorful fabrics). These are meant to be used as a physical marker, and they evoke metaphor with the use of color, texture, and design that facilitate concretization of inter-, intra-, and transpersonal roles. By utilizing scarves as a psychodramatic prop, I can accent these markers in action to complement the process.

I clarify that we are looking for the events, circumstances, or stages of life that stand out as huge obstacles or times of strife and despair. I don't label them as trauma unless the client does.

2. **MARK "CLIENT TODAY" ROLE:** The client is instructed to choose a scarf for themselves today to represent and mark their present self, referred to as the "client today." This is important because at the end I will want to have the identified resources address the client as protagonist, and this space is delineated for easy identification and marking to return to later. I explain that this is to show where they are today.

3. **IDENTIFY AND MARK FIRST RESOURCE BEING USED PRESENTLY:** Before the client chooses their first difficult time, I model what to expect with this activity and I ask them to think of something they did today to try to

get out of their current predicament. This begins to generate ideas on what resiliency and resources might look like. Often the answer is “Coming to see you,” “I’m here aren’t I?,” and this is an opportunity to reframe this as a behavior that is a strength. Through doubling or motivational interviewing you might reframe it in a variety of ways. I might double: “So I was aware of my discontent”; “I asked for help”; “I reached out”; “I have a desire for things to be better”; “I am open to try something different.” If they accept the double, you know you are on target. If they change it, follow the protagonist. I try to reframe information into a strength-based perspective, meanwhile identifying the negative self-talk and cognitive appraisals that show up. If the client is not warmed up and rejects my doubles, I move on, continuing to increase safety through interest, nonjudgment, and unconditional positive regard.

Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strength. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength. (Arnold Schwarzenegger, n.d.)

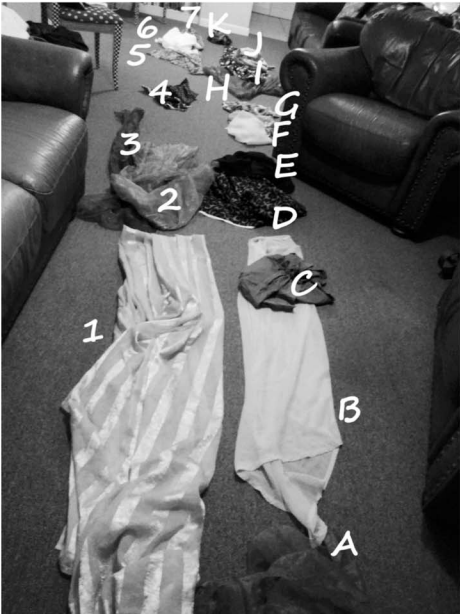
4. MARK DIFFICULT TIMES STARTING FROM YOUNGEST TO CURRENT LIFE: “Can you tell me some of the more difficult times that you experienced when you were young?” This question can jump-start the storytelling. Scarf by scarf, the client will talk about a stressful, difficult, and often traumatic time in their life that may be one moment or an entire span of time: “seeing my dad drive away for the last time,” “my adolescence,” “time in boarding school.” Freedom to use whatever measurement of time or definition of difficult time they want to use is paramount, as this is their story.

To be more resilient, focus on what helped you overcome challenges in the past and find ways to use these strategies every day as you address challenges and stress. (Amit Sood, MD, Mayo Clinic, 2018, Twitter)

5. BEGIN RESOURCE MINING: Whether I decide to complete the entire difficult-times side of the timeline and then go back to complete the parallel resiliency side or I alternate between difficult times and identifying and marking each resource on the resiliency side, I am looking to hone in and focus on the positive nuggets that sometimes shine brightly and other times show up raw and dirty. Psychodramatically, I am resource mining and looking for ways to reframe negatives into strengths. I am also looking for people who have helped the client along the way by physically rescuing them from danger, offering them food or shelter, or in less overt ways such as “always believing in me,” “I knew that I mattered to them,” “they never judged me, and liked me for who I was.” Often art, music, pets, stuffed animals, and other nonhuman resources can be our allies in supporting our clients during current and future difficult times. A Higher Power and communities that offer belonging (scouting, cheerleading, band, a group of neighborhood kids who grew up together, Bible study) are also typical resources found on the resiliency side of the timeline. See Table 1 for an

Table 1. Resource mining.

Resiliency side of Timeline	"Difficult Times" side of Timeline
1 Grandmother "I meant everything to her"	A: Birth
	B: Physical Abuse re: Dad "helpless; disposable"
	C: Death of Grandmother; "I had nothing"
2. No one is ever going to beat me again!	D: Bullying at School; "I didn't feel safe anywhere"
3. Music, joined band; learned guitar; got friends	E: Depression; hating myself; ugly, thin & weak
4. I had everything; "I was on top of the world"	F: Break up with Cathy; "I lost my one chance"
5. Determination not to move back home	G: Tammy cheated on me but I cheated on her too
	H: Paula destroyed my life; I gave her my heart
6. Job, stay out of bars; paycheck; out of trouble	I: DUI, lost home, downward spiral
	J: Everyone left me, all alone, no one cares
7. Reached out for help; "I believe it can be better"	K: Present day



example of resource mining that shows the process of getting from the difficult-times timeline H/I to a resilience mark of 5 and 6, corresponding to the following dialogue.

Client She cheated on me and I was devastated. I felt so betrayed and unlovable. I thought my life was over and I started drinking and using drugs. I lost my job and my family wouldn't talk to me. I lost everything because of her.

Therapist So who or what helped you get through this?

Client I'm not "through" it; it still haunts me every day. She ruined my life. I have no way of getting out of this. It was 6 years ago and I'm still suffering.

Therapist So how have you gotten through these last 6 years? Somehow, you are here. I hear that you are not happy and things are not going the way you hoped, yet somehow you are making it through. What has helped you?

Client Well thank God I got that job! I've had it for 2 years now. I don't know what would have happened if I had to move back home.

Therapist OK, so your job has helped you. What about the job helped you?

Client I don't feel so worthless. I get a paycheck, it keeps me busy, and it keeps me out of the bars.

Therapist And how did you get that job?

Client I looked everywhere. I was not going to move back home. No matter how bad it got, I wasn't going to move back in with them! I borrowed a suit and almost missed the interview but I made it and Thomas liked me right away.

Therapist So maybe you can pick a scarf for that determination that you will not go back home and another one for your job, specifically, that feeling that you were worthwhile again?

From this exchange you can see the cognitive appraisals that the client carries about his relationship with his ex and that this past relationship remains emotionally charged and could benefit from future psychodramatic work.

Creatively, there are endless options and possible ways to work with resources—there is no one way to do this. What resources I mine depend on where I want to focus and what other information I already have. For instance, notice that the client shares a vow to not go home again (5) and this spurs his determination and triggers his desire to feel worthwhile. Based on his vow I

could ask him, “Do you remember when you first made this vow to yourself that you would leave home and never to go back?” I would have him mark this vow along with his determination from that earlier age. Then, I would have him mark where this determination is currently in relation to his CLIENT TODAY role. That way, we have a rich vein of exploration for the future related to his family-of-origin experiences and the original formulation and impact of this vow. Additionally we now have a chance to examine any blocks that may lie between him gaining access to that inner strength that previously served him.

Other alternative resources could be asking for help to borrow the suit (the strength of reaching out and taking a risk to ask for help) or people and relationships like Thomas, who immediately liked him, or the friend who lent him the suit. These may be positive dimensions to denote and revisit.

6. GIVE EACH RESOURCE A LINE OR MESSAGE, OR FOCUS ON ONE RESOURCE THAT THE CLIENT IDENTIFIES WILL HELP THEM THE MOST TODAY: Once a client has identified their difficult times and their resources, I begin to have them formulate a line from each of the resiliency roles. Identify what message each of the resiliency roles would like the client to remember or carry out into the world. The client will stand on each place of resilience and face the “client today” scarf, first marked to denote the client in the current self role. I address each role and ask them: “Tell them one thing you want the client to remember as they move forward after today.” I start from the farthest-back or youngest resource identified to the most recent so the client can leave session receiving from the role of the “client today”: “I’m glad you asked for help” or “I’m the part of you that asks for help and I will keep asking if I need to.” Again, use doubling and motivational interviewing skills to help the client frame it as a positive that still resonates with their truth.

7. HAVE THE CLIENT RECEIVE THE MESSAGES: The timeline will end with the client standing on the “client today” marker and receiving those messages. Sometimes repeating the messages is not necessary, but sometimes the therapist may summarize by standing at each place of resilience and repeating the statement. If I take one of these roles I remain aware and conscious of possible transference. To avoid transference, I ask from the director role, “Did you hear what they said?” and the client generally responds yes. To understand what they took from the exchange I ask, “What did you hear them say?” and ask them to respond.

8. ASK THE CLIENT ONE THING THAT THEY LEARNED THAT THEY CAN BRING FORWARD WITH THEM TO COPE WITH THEIR CURRENT SITUATION: Before concluding, I ask, “What do you want to remember and take out of here?” Once they respond, I invite them to take the opportunity to have the last word addressing any of the roles on the timeline that they need to have some closure with for today. The action finishes once the client agrees that it feels complete for now.

Often, I try to write down the messages from the places of resiliency for future reference and future dramas, but at a minimum I write down what the client says they want to remember and take out of here. If there is more time, I

might spend time with the client labeling and reviewing what was placed where to continue to facilitate the storytelling, meaning-making part of the activity.

9. TAKE PHOTOS OR JOT DOWN SUMMARY FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION: Before the client “strikes the set” and picks up their timeline, I suggest that they first check in to see if they would like to jot down some notes to remember until the next session. I offer the option for them to take a cell phone or psychodramatic photo of the timeline for themselves and future reference.

Helpful Hints for Resiliency Timeline

- Each timeline is different, just as each client is different. The director must remain spontaneous and present. I suggest trying to complete the Resiliency Timeline in one session. Although this can be challenging, and the work could be done across multiple sessions, the spontaneity decreases, and in my experience writing it down and bringing it back has not had the same effectiveness as completing the timeline in one sitting.
- Qualitative versus quantitative: More is less. It is better to fully embody and explore a few strong roles rather than rush to fit it all in. If time constraints persist, alter instructions to focus on the top three or five most difficult times.
- Another option to increase distance and safety in this exercise is to create the Observing Ego role referred to in the Therapeutic Spiral Model. In this role, the client is able to step back and view the Resiliency Timeline as an objective observer and report what they see with some detachment and neutrality, “without shame and blame” (Hudgins, 2002, p. 73). The Observing Ego role is the “part of self that can neutrally observe and self reflect what is happening” (p. 43). Surplus reality allows the client to become an animal that they believe is compassionate, neutral, or observant. It could be the role of a fly on the wall or a piece of furniture in the room. From this objective witness role, they might make comments like “I see a lot of chaos”; “It’s amazing that anyone got out of that alive”; “I see someone who is trying really hard to make things better for his family and himself.”
- Whether using the Resiliency Timeline in individual or group settings, I do not let the client role reverse with any part or role of the difficult side of the timeline. If more comes up during the timeline activity, it is certainly something that can be further explored, but the goal and our contract is to identify and further develop the attributes of resilience. It is probable that some piece of trauma may come up. Avoid role reversing clients with a trauma marker for this exercise. In group sessions I do, however, have the client choose an auxiliary for each of the resiliency roles. If I am limited with only a few auxiliaries, I instruct the client to choose auxiliaries available to play the resiliency roles they have energy or interest in right now. The scarves can be sufficient to hold the role even in a group setting.
- It is important to allow the client time to role reverse with some of the positive resiliency roles, as sharing only the difficult-times side of the timeline leaves them open and raw. Always end with the client in the “client today” role.

FOCUSES OF RESOURCE MINING

People, People, People!

Moreno preached the importance of relationship, and data like the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study continue to prove him right. I am always looking for positive relationships that hold power to how the client feels about themselves and the world around them.

ACE Score

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's ACE Study discovered a link between childhood trauma and the chronic diseases people develop as adults, as well as social and emotional problems. These include heart disease, lung cancer, diabetes, and many autoimmune diseases, as well as depression, violence, being a victim of violence, and suicide. The first research results were published in 1998, followed by 57 other publications through 2011; all 10 questions focus on relationship trauma. In 2006, a scoring system modeled after the ACE Study questions was created to measure resiliency by the Southern Kennebec Healthy Start and two psychologists in the group, Mark Rains and Kate McClinn. Twelve of these questions involve relationships with others, one is about feeling independent, and one is about believing "life is what we make it" (Stevens, 2017).

Strengths

Reframing and labeling inter-, intra-, and transpersonal strengths are key when digging for resiliency gold. The VIA Institute on Character ("Know and Celebrate the Real You") has a useful survey of 24 character strengths. VIA research shows that using the character strengths that come most naturally to a person can help "buffer against, manage and overcome problems; improve your relationships; and enhance health and overall well being."

In addition, helping a client rename a deficit as a strength can be productive. By relabeling their internal critique of themselves as "naïve or ignorant" into "young, trusting, and innocent," a client can begin to consider that there may be more than one way to view the situation and give themselves permission to shift their narrative and internal dialogue.

Feelings

Search for feeling words to assist with increasing awareness and labeling of emotions.

Naming an emotion begins the process of regulating and reflecting on it. . . . What we name we can tame; when we can give meaning to something we can tolerate it and even change its impact. (Sue Johnson, 2013, p. 70)

Cognitive Appraisals, Belief Systems, and Internalized Messages

These metaphors and phrases, which can come from the self or others, are important. Use the client's own words and phrases: "They treated the dog better than me"; "my grandmother thought I was the best thing since sliced bread"; "it was like I was invisible"; "she strangled all the joy out of me." Reflecting back a client's own metaphors, phrases, and images is helpful in deepening the experience. Look for them. They will be key in returning the client to an affect or feeling state during future opportunities to work with parts of their timeline.

Vows

Look for moments of vows and decisions that are made at various times in the client's life. These are junctures in life when values get set, moments like "I decided right then that no one was ever going to beat me again"; "I was never going to depend on anyone again, I can only trust me"; "I knew right then and there that I never wanted to be a mother." Although some of the choices seem drastic, we can remember that any quality in excess can be a negative and that moderation of a quality is the healthiest. So whereas often the commitment to the self was a necessary defense to get clients through their trauma or difficult times, they can now learn that this Keeper of Defenses (Hudgins, 2002) can relax and be less vigilant as they mature and have more control over their lives. Look for vows, pledges, or commitments to the self which once served as a defense or strategy to cope with their past. We can explore whether those defenses continue to serve the client as they once did or are no longer needed in the same way.

Ultimately, through this process of metaphorically labeling, marking, categorizing, and explaining the relevant events of their life on a timeline, a client shows their ideologies and belief systems along with their worldview and view of self. With a psychodramatic timeline, a form of values clarification has been simplified and a client's personal cultural conserves become unveiled without much effort. Together, the client and therapist attain clarity and insight.

A psychodramatic timeline can be used for assessment, goal setting, and reviewing or evaluating treatment progress, and as an intervention. As an intervention, the psychodramatic timeline has endless possibilities. It is versatile and can be tailored to whatever goal you want. Tian Dayton (2015) uses the Trauma Timeline (2015), and addiction timelines (Giacomucci, 2017) and eating-disorder timelines that show a diet history (Carnabucci & Ciotola, 2013) are frequently used.

Written or Oral?

Moreno understood the importance of a witness, an audience. There is an interaction between a storyteller and the listener that helps transmit images, emotions, ideas, and meaning making that is difficult to record on paper. Traditionally, generations have transmitted stories orally. I have seen a

difference between written and psychodramatic timelines: Having a client do a timeline in writing has not been as effective. Over time, I have moved completely away from written timelines unless a client wants to chart it out after our exercise in order to further explore, elaborate, or record its content.

All in all, a psychodramatic Resiliency Timeline is an effective tool that utilizes a human being's innate love of storytelling and the power of witnessing to reveal a client's narrative of the conflicts in their life. Together, we identify and explore internal and external resources and strengths needed to cope with the client's current dilemmas and crisis in a systematic and meaning-making way. Through the spontaneity and creativity of plotting life's rises and falls along an imaginary timeline using metaphor, textures, and colors, the therapist, as a safe and curious witness, can join the client on their journey of transformation and healing by building on their intra-, inter-, and transpersonal resources.

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