



SB Activity 7 - Overcoming Setbacks – Timeline Analysis

A timeline analysis is simple yet effective tool when it comes to overcoming setbacks. You don't need a whole lot of insight or motivation to do a decent timeline analysis. In the computer world a timeline analysis involves forensic problem solving. In the world of substance use issues and overcoming setbacks, a timeline analysis is the similar as it essentially is a forensic problem solving technique focused on determining exactly where in the process things started to change for the worse, leading to setback or relapse.

To better understand how to do a timeline analysis, consider the following example which will then be referenced throughout this activity:

Bill:

Bill has been a real trooper when it comes to not giving up on the change process. Bill has consistently been able to put together anywhere from 30 to 120 days in a row completely clean multiple times. Bill will flat out tell you that he wants to get clean and change his life for the better but for some reason, Bill keeps falling victim to setbacks in pretty much the same situation: Bill gets into arguments with his wife, (usually about something like money) he then gets angry and finds himself getting high again either that night or the next day right after work.

Bill made the connection that his arguments with his wife are a huge stressor and setback factor for him. Bill agreed to work on his anger issues with his counselor and he also attended some therapy sessions with his wife and after a while he learned some more helpful skills for managing anger. Soon Bill was able to face arguments with his wife without losing his temper as he realized that these stressful arguments with his wife contributed a lot to his desire to get high again.

Several months later, Bill still found himself using again after disagreements with his wife even though he was better able to control his temper and discuss things without yelling. Bill was completely confused by this so his counselor suggested a timeline analysis.

After completing a timeline analysis with his counselor, Bill learned that his arguments with his wife were just a smokescreen for a much deeper issue. First, Bill learned from his timeline analysis that it is not just the arguments with his wife that were a major setback factor but rather the guilt he felt afterward that really set off cravings to use. Bill also learned through the timeline analysis that he was actually finding reasons to start arguments with his wife because in actuality he was stressed and dissatisfied with his work. Bill noticed through the timeline analysis with his counselor, that the days when he most often fought with his wife were consistently preceded by either a tough work day or feelings of dissatisfaction with his work including feeling underpaid and unappreciated by his boss.

Bill then knew from his timeline analysis that in order to sustain progress in his change process and prevent future setbacks he needed to focus his efforts on this newly discovered area: his job dissatisfaction. As is the case with most people, simply getting a new job and a career isn't that easy and for many, and it is not an immediate option as in Bill's case. Therefore, Bill, his counselor focused on a two-part long term plan for this:

- 1) Bill and his counselor worked on assertiveness skills to help Bill stand up for himself with his boss and in the meantime
- 2) Bill devised a schedule for searching for alternate, potentially more satisfying employment opportunities on his day off.

By the time Bill ended up finding a new job after 6 months, he happily was able to stay clean and avoid setbacks based on this new focus, which was all started by doing a good timeline analysis.



Performing Your Own Timeline Analysis:

As stated at the outset, a timeline analysis is easy yet effective. The following questions will help guide you through a timeline analysis:

Part 1.

Describe, as best you can, either your most recent setback scenario, or if you are experiencing recurring setbacks, try to best describe a common situation that precedes setback. Similar to a newspaper reporter, for this to be effective you should be as detailed as possible by including answers to questions such as Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How:

Who – Who, if anyone, are you most likely to be around in the time period before the setback occurs?

What – What is usually going on in your life just before the setback occurs?

When – Is there a specific time of the day, time of the week, time of the month/year, etc. when your setbacks seem to occur most frequently?

Where – Is there a specific place where the setback process seems to start most often?

Why – This is the hardest question. Do your best to think of the best answers to these questions because they mean a lot:

Feelings – What feelings do you usually feel prior to a setback?

Thoughts – Are there any specific thoughts going through your head prior to relapse? Consider things that you may not be consciously aware of at the time but that you can recognize now:

Attitude – What is your attitude usually like prior to a setback? (For example angry/resentful, regretful? Care-free/impulsive? Indifferent? Mischievous?)

How – How does the setback end up going down when it's all said and done?



Part 2 - At this point, truthful answers to these types of questions in the past should have produced the ability to overcome setbacks effectively. However for some reason, perhaps you are still experiencing setbacks despite a working knowledge of all of these contributing factors. At this point a timeline analysis involves going back a little further along the timeline with these factors. Take time to go back a little further and look a little deeper into your mind to gain further insight into what may be driving your repeated setbacks. As always, if available use input from helpers and others who know you however in this case some of the best insight most often comes from within. Perhaps your helpers can assist you in going into your own memory and draw some of this insight-building information out of you:

Who – Go back to your original answer under the “Who” heading above. Looking past your answer under that heading, can you now think of some people who you may come across even earlier in the process of the setback that you failed to mention above?

(Consider the case of Bill – Initially under “Who” he put his wife, but after more thought deeper back along the timeline he realized that quite often on the day of or just before his setback he usually had some kind of confrontation with his boss).

Does anyone new come to mind for you? (List below)

What – Just like you did with your “Who” answer above by looking deeper. Try to do the same thing with your former “What” answer from part 1. Below, try to write down what is going on in your life even earlier than you considered in part 1. Perhaps you have to think back a few days.

(Our example Bill’s initial answer was “I usually am fighting with my wife” but he was able to dig deeper and come up with “Even before I fight with my wife I usually had a bad day at work”)

Write down below what you come up with in your case:

When – Look back at your original answer for this section, by reviewing what you said at first under the heading when. Can you try to be more specific with regard to defining “when”? In all of the other sections, the second part of the timeline analysis involved looking backward in the timeline for more detail. In this section, try to focus in a little closer on that exact moment when the tide turned and you reached the point of no return where there is no turning back from the setback and the desire to use or give in.

(For example, in Bill’s case he initially identified the time when he feels like using as directly tied to the event of arguing with his wife. Later though timeline analysis, Bill was able to focus clearer as to when he really started feeling strong urges to use and that was actually after the argument when the feelings of guilt and shame from arguing with his wife set in. He knew at that point the urges to bury these feelings by getting high were very strong)

Now based on your initial answer under the heading “When”, can you focus a little more on really defining what is going on with you when you hit that point when urges to use feel their strongest?

Write your best answer below:



Where - Look more specifically at your first answer for the “where” section. Through timeline analysis can you recognize any patterns with regard to where you are a step before that?

(In Bill’s example he was able to identify that most often shortly before an argument with his wife, where he was most often prior to the argument was at work, having a bad day)

Write your best answer below:

Why – Hopefully by this point, just by going into more details in the other sections, the “why” is becoming increasingly clearer. When it really comes down to it, and you take the time to look into your mind and your heart a little deeper, can you come up with some additional, more insightful reasons “why” you keep experiencing setbacks?

(In Bill’s case, through timeline analysis he was able to figure out that at the heart of the issue “why” was his dissatisfaction with his job and how his boss treated him)

Write your best answer below:

How - In review of everything and utilizing all that you have learned through your timeline analysis up to this point, use this section to best summarize all that you have learned with regard to how your setbacks come about:



Part 3-

Conclusion – Use this information, (as Bill in our example did) to come up with some short term and long terms strategies and skills you may need to work on.

Write your thoughts below and consult with others:

Based on your findings in the Timeline Analysis what are some short term goals and changes you can start to work on?

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Are there any specific skills that you may need to work on right now based on what you have learned in your timeline analysis? (For example, assertiveness, skills for coping with anxiety, stress management, building self-control, etc.)

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Are there any longer term life changes that you can start to strive for or at least gather information about that could help you overcome setbacks based on the findings of your Timeline Analysis? (For example, in Bills case, he started taking the time to look for a more satisfying job. Maybe in your case, there are some changes you need to make with regard to the direction that your life is heading)