



National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
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Trauma Informed Biographical Timelines for Human Trafficking Victims

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Trauma Informed Biographical Timelines

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Human Trafficking Around the World: Hidden in Plain Sight
Conversation With My Daughter About Human Trafficking
Women's Roles and Statuses the World Over

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Background

The human trafficking¹ experience is complex and fraught with criminal offenses, vulnerability, and abuse. Victims often experience emotional and physical abuse. This includes sexual assault, regardless if the trafficking is for sex or labor. The abuse results in wounds during the trafficking experience but also lingering physical and emotional aftershocks, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), sterility from STDs or physical trauma, memory loss, Stockholm Syndrome, and suicidal thought. Victims have been shot, thrown from boats, drugged with amphetamines so that they wouldn't get tired, starved, forced to live in dog crates, forced to sleep in dilapidated buildings with contaminated water, and chopped into tiny pieces in mixing machines because they were too idle. No matter the type, human trafficking is a horrid scenario.

Traffickers hone in on people's vulnerabilities to recruit, coerce, and exploit them, though what makes a specific person susceptible to human trafficking often depends on cultural, economic, environmental, and geopolitical factors. Additionally, a person's vulnerability can relate to his/her Adverse Childhood Experiences² (ACEs), such as physical and emotional abuse he experienced as a child. In fact, the higher a person's ACEs score, the more vulnerable he is to sex trafficking. Researcher Rachel Naramore and her colleagues³ found that minors arrested for prostitution-related offenses had higher rates for each ACE as well as number of ACEs than minors arrested for other crimes. Particularly noteworthy is that sex trafficked minors had much higher ratings for sexual abuse and physical neglect than their counterparts. The correlation between ACEs and forced labor hasn't been thoroughly examined, though, in 2009, the [World Health Organization](#) temporarily included child labor under the neglect ACE in a list of proposed expanded ACEs categories. People that are members of a marginalized race, ethnicity, religious group, gender, sexual orientation, or sexual identity are more vulnerable to labor and sex trafficking. Disability, not knowing the local language and/or laws, not having alternative livelihood options or depending on an employer for a guestworker visa, particularly one that is under-monitored—a significant problem in the United States—also create vulnerability. These nuanced layers, experiences, abuses, and vulnerabilities

¹ While human trafficking is often conflated with sex exploitation, labor exploitation, and smuggling, they are not one-in-the-same. Instead, human trafficking under the United States Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) has three essential elements: The trafficking act, the means, and the exploitation. The trafficking act under the TVPA is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person”. Movement—meaning, moving a victim from point A to point B—is not required. The trafficking means includes force, fraud, or coercion as an element for both sex and labor trafficking, though a dissimilarity between the two is that anyone under 18 induced to perform a commercial sex act is automatically considered a trafficking victim. The third element is the exploitation, which is a commercial sex act for sex trafficking and involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery for labor trafficking.

² [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) include abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), neglect (physical or emotional), witnessing domestic violence, or growing up with alcohol or other substance abuse, mental illness, parental discord, loss of a parent or crime in the home.

³ Naramore R., Bright M. A., Epps N., et al. Youth Arrested for Trading Sex Have the Highest Rates of Childhood Adversity: A Statewide Study of Juvenile Offenders. *Sex Abuse* 2015. Available at: <http://sax.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/03/1079063215603064.abstract>. Accessed May, 2016.

make it essential that clinicians working with human trafficking victims look at the totality of the individual victim and his/her experiences. This means understanding a victim's story—before, during, and after the trafficking experience.

Mary U. Vicario, LPCC-S Certified Trauma Specialist and founder of Finding Hope Consulting, LLC, says putting together a laundry list of what's wrong with a victim doesn't work with trafficking victims. It's much more useful, she says, to focus on what happened to the person, when it happened, with whom, and for how long. Vicario and colleagues turn to a specific method of collecting chronological data on a victim—a Trauma Informed Biographical Timeline, which looks at a human trafficking victim's life from prenatal to present experience. "The timeline gives us a greater understanding of the entire person such as his/her strengths, life stressors, and trauma experiences," says Vicario. "Facts are laid out in a linear fashion, she says, which helps highlight events that may seem insignificant but are not when placed in context of the timeline."

The timeline also illustrates to law enforcement and service providers that what may seem like a choice is likely much less so than it appears. Carol Hudgins-Mitchell, Certified Trauma Specialist, M.Ed., LSW, NBCCCH, says that if a person believes a victim is intentionally behaving in an adverse way, he/she will be angry about it. "That's why it's essential that we put behavior in context," says Hudgins-Mitchell. It can be incredibly challenging to understand a survivor's behavior. Sometimes he will return to his trafficker, get agitated—going from what seems to be 0 to 10—without clear cause, refuse to identify his trafficker, and make decisions that appear to be the exact opposite of what he should do. This can trigger people working with the victim to get frustrated, become dismissive, and even create a wall between themselves and the victim. Those in direct contact with the victim may think or even say, "He could change if he wanted to." This is problematic for numerous reasons, not least of which is that it's not victim-centered or trauma informed. It can also lead to victim blaming and the belief that the victim could have left the trafficking situation but instead chose to stay.

Why a victim may become suddenly angered can be simple—perhaps the service provider used a tone that reminded the victim of his perpetrator or an abusive parent. Understanding the victim in context through a Trauma Informed Biographical Timeline, says Hudgins-Mitchell, helps those working with the victim to develop a holistic view of the victim and thereby become more empathetic toward the victim. This allows the team working with the victim to get on the same page and come up with a person-centered plan to help the victim. Biographical timeline pioneer Beth I. Barol, PhD says in [*Learning From a Person's Biography: An Introduction to the Biographical Timeline Process*](#) that the objective is not to get a perfect biographical timeline, but instead to **"...search for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of a human being who is struggling and with whom we need to transform our relationship."**

The Team

The victim's team includes a variety of players such as service providers, legal advocates, teachers, caseworkers, and law enforcement. The timeline facilitator is often the victim's therapist, legal advocate, or case manager. He/she must be able to aptly explain ACEs, psychological development, and why certain experiences could adversely affect the brain's architecture. The facilitator's job is also to organize the process, move the timeline forward in an efficient manner, and draw the timeline out for the team to see. A separate person, the designated timeline recorder, takes notes on the computer during the process. "This can be anyone on the team who has strong typing skills," says Vicario.

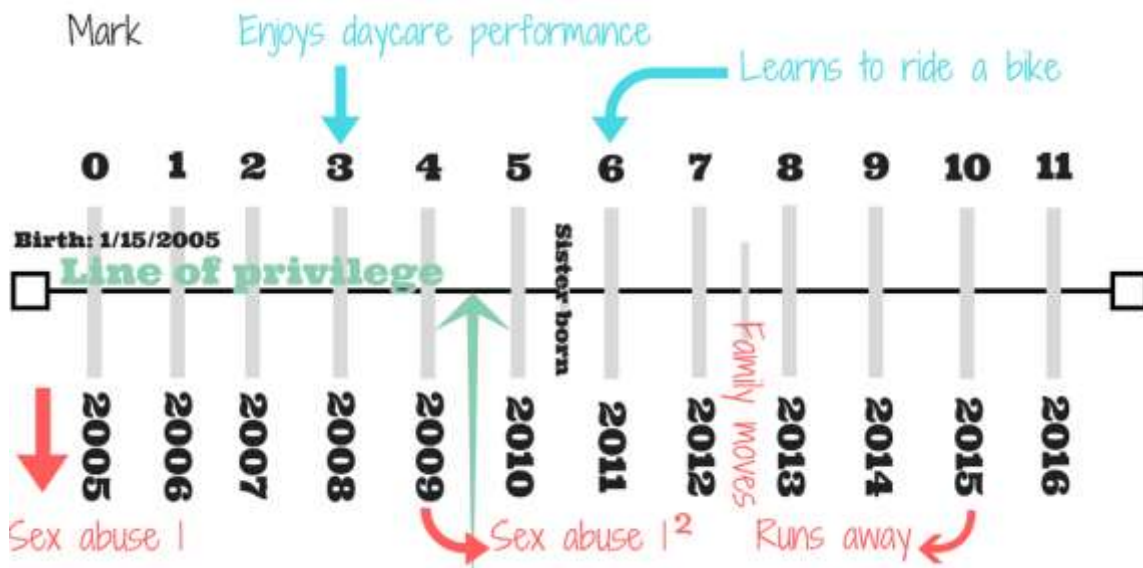
The team can also include supportive friends and family, but the facilitator should never assume that it's appropriate to include family members, as they may have been part of the victim's trafficking experience and/or childhood trauma. Another person who is not typically present for the timeline meeting is the victim. The reason, says Vicario, is that it's simply too much traumatizing information all at once, in front of a group of people. "It's like doing surgery on multiple organs before an audience and without anesthetic." If the victim does attend the timeline session, the team must ensure that the victim feels comfortable and safe. This typically warrants a smaller self-selected team though sometimes the victim prefers to be more inclusive, which may result in a much larger team. "I have worked with some groups as large as 40 people," says Vicario. The victim's involvement is dependent on his/her functioning ability. For example, a newly identified and rescued victim who exhibits self-harm and intense fear would not be a candidate to participate. On the other hand, a victim who has made significant strides in building resiliency may be. In fact, a Resilience Timeline can be instrumental in highlighting traumas for which the victim has not yet built resiliency or recognized. This indicates to the therapist what gaps exist and what the victim hasn't been ready to process. The goal in a Resilience Timeline, says Vicario, is for the therapist to honor the steps and actions the victim took to survive so that the victim can begin to release the trauma and build resilience for that particular experience.

In particularly challenging cases, it may be difficult for the facilitator to find all the puzzle pieces that fit into the trafficking victim's biographical timeline, which may require him/her to review files ahead of time and summarize key events. The preparation efforts, says Hudgins-Mitchell, are well worth it. If files are particularly cumbersome, she recommends team members divide the responsibility in timeline chunks. For example, one member can take prenatal to 5, another can focus on ages 5 to 16, and a third team member can focus on ages 17 to 21 and so on. One way to increase data collection efficiency, says Hudgins-Mitchell, is for team members to do victim intakes in a timeline format, particular those members who are often facilitators.

Timeline Mock-up

The Trauma Informed Biographical Timeline starts at the very beginning, the victim's prenatal experience. The facilitator, using multiple flip boards or a 6-8 foot roll of paper, draws a black horizontal line across the full length of the paper. This is called the line of privilege. He/she will leave several inches before zero (birth) for prenatal experience. The team will then discuss whether there are any known ACEs—such as domestic violence, substance abuse, or birth trauma—in the victim's prenatal and/or neonatal experience. In chronological order, the facilitator will enter ages and years along the timeline, which allow the team to see challenges and resilience experiences within a developmental stage context.

Life events that give the trafficking victim a leg up/privilege are added above the line in the same color. This includes positive people and experiences. Vicario suggests using the victim's favorite color. "It works best if a team member can ask the victim his/her favorite color before the timeline meeting," says Vicario. Otherwise, the facilitator will ask the team what they think is the victim's favorite color. "It's interesting to watch the team struggle with this question," says Vicario. "I will hear members say, 'I have never heard her mention a favorite color, but she always brightens up when I wear blue' or 'when we offer him choices, he often picks the item that is green'." It may seem trivial, but Vicario points out that just the act of musing the victim's favorite color primes the team to focus on the victim as a person, not just a victim. It brings the timeline to life and highlights to the team the importance of identifying and supporting the victim, even in his/her simplest personal preferences. This, says Vicario, is a crucial part of the victim's healing.



Life stressors and traumatic experiences that are not ACEs are entered below the line in black, while neutral events are added on the line. Adverse Childhood Experiences and all moves are written in red below the line and numbered. For example, if the victim's prenatal experience involved domestic abuse then it would be the first listed ACE. If the victim experienced domestic violence again at age three, it would be the same number (#1) with an exponent to the 2nd power. ACEs that occur repeatedly and cannot be

counted individually—like living for years in a home with domestic violence—receive an exponent of x. Listing out ACEs and their frequency, says Vicario, is critical to identifying behavioral and health risks the victim faces without resilience intervention. Adverse Childhood Experiences take an incredible toll on the body and life expectancy, says Vicario, and put a person at risk for drug use. “A person with four ACEs has a 1,350% increased risk of becoming an intravenous drug user; this risk goes up to 4,600% if the person has six ACEs,” says Vicario. “Adverse Childhood Experiences are highlighted in red because it’s important they stand out in the context of the victim’s development and connection to the perpetrator.” For instance, a victim may have experienced a childhood with safety reversal—meaning, she was more familiar with unsafe than safe experiences with her primary caregivers. As a result, safe experiences felt unusual and unsafe. This confusion, says Vicario, increases a person’s vulnerability to abuse and human trafficking. “Understanding this brain-based reversal helps the team not take it personally when the victim illustrates anger toward them,” says Vicario. “It also helps the team know how best to design interventions to assist the victim in becoming aware of Felt Safety that is connected to actual safety.”

Respectful Guesses

If the victim is not present at the timeline meeting, the team does not (and cannot) know the victim’s subjective experience. Instead, the facilitator will ask the team to make respectful guesses. For example, if the victim lived with parents who were substance abusers, the team may guess that the victim experienced neglect. If there was substance abuse, says Hudgins-Mitchell, then likely there was no one protecting the child and people were coming in and out of the home. “In our experience this results in ‘possible unrecognized sexual abuse’,” says Hudgins-Mitchell. The facilitator will ask the team throughout the timeline meeting to stop and reflect on the events. He/she will prompt team members to imagine that they are in the victim’s shoes:

- *What does this experience feel like?*
- *How does he/she see the world?*
- *What pain is he/she trying to draw attention to?*

These queries allow the team to imagine the victim’s world and to link important events—both positive and negative—to the victim’s corresponding age and development. Dates alone cannot give clinicians an accurate sense of how the event impacted the victim. For instance, if the victim was trafficked and arrested for prostitution in 1987 but the age isn’t included, the team may have just missed a critical informational component. If, let’s say, the victim was ten-years-old when she was arrested, this means local child protective services didn’t get involved and a child was made culpable for her victimization. At age ten, children still function in concrete operational thought, says Vicario, which means she will put the event’s causation, and blame, on herself, “If it happened to me, I caused it.”

I Am

Once the timeline is complete, the facilitator will ask team members to express one feeling they have when they look at the timeline. The recorder writes the list in a single column and labels it ***I Am***. This is important, says Vicario, because if a team member has a particular feeling then the trafficking victim probably does too. Also, it's important that team members get their feelings out in the open. "If we don't express them, they come out in other ways and may be directed at other team members or at the trafficking victim," says Vicario. "Anger is a natural reaction, but anger at a system is quite different than anger at each other." Expressing it, she says, allows anger to bring people together as opposed to pull them apart. "People who can't name their feelings tend to blame the victim, while those who can identify what they feel are more apt to participate in effective intervention."

In the same column, the team will list the victim's strengths and what skills he used to survive and challenge his/her life experiences. Next, the team generates and lists summary words to describe the focus person, using 6 to 10 descriptions.

➤ *Who is this person?*



Once the list is completed, the team will group similar responses together, such as angry and vengeful, and proud and strong. The team then creates responses to the grouped summary words. When brainstorming responses, says Vicario, it's essential that team members focus on qualities, characteristics and/or experiences the person needs, not specific services or programs. The team should stay away from clinical or treatment

jargon and prioritize needs from most urgent to least. A second team session—the Interventions Development meeting—generally takes place one-to-four weeks after the Biographical Timeline meeting. This second meeting will focus on interventions and resilience factors for each grouping—with one exception; in the timeline session the team will address the most pressing need with intervention. In the above example, the most urgent issue for the team to address is that the victim is and feels safe. “We need to intervene if a person is about to lose his/her housing,” says Vicario. “Also, if a trafficking victim is frequently hospitalized due to self-injury then the hospital is likely his/her safe space. This person’s primary need is actual safety and Felt Safety.”

I Need

Adverse Life Experiences (ALEs) have a detrimental impact on a trafficking victim’s ability to feel safe, attach, and regulate. Even if the victim is safe, says Vicario, he may not feel that way and that snowballs into the victim feeling afraid and having difficulty forming attachments. The latter is the building block for all human relational functions—behavior, relationships, self-care, and regulation (emotional and physical). As a result, before the victim can move forward, he must be safe *and* feel safe. In order to help the team understand Felt Safety, the facilitator will take the team through an exercise during the timeline meeting where he/she asks them to share what calms them down and to think back to their earliest memory of it. “A parent—or another safe adult or older youth—likely taught it to you and was generally present when you learned it,” Vicario said. “For example, when my mom, siblings, or I hold a baby we sway from side-to-side. When my aunt and her children hold a baby, they bounce. We each do what we remember soothing us.” Fishing may calm a person because her favorite early memory is fishing with a favorite uncle, or she likes the sound of lapping waves because beach trips were the only time her family had fun together. This exercise will help the team have a better understanding on what is Felt Safety and why it impacts the interview process and all victim recovery areas.

- ***“If the person is _____, what do they need?”*** To get the most beneficial ‘I Need’ statements, it is important to place the grouped ‘I Am’ statements into this phrasing. “If I am disappointed, sad, feel like crying, scared, overwhelmed, tired and heartbroken, what do I need?”

I Am:

Disappointed, sad, feel like crying,
scared, overwhelmed, tired,
heartbroken

Angry, irritated, vengeful, pissed

Resilient, compassionate, love to
learn

Proud, adaptive, joyful, hopeful,
strong

I Need:

To feel and be safe (permanent home),
consistent and safe support, healthcare,
encouragement, goals, physical exercise

Communication, safe outlets, to be heard
and seen, advocates

To learn, a learning plan, a sense of the
future, a plan with alternatives, help others

To celebrate and recognize my strengths

During the team Trauma Informed Biographical Timelines meeting, one member is selected to administer the “Build Your Life Raft,” a Felt Safety activity, with the victim. The exercise is conducted before the Interventions Development meeting, so that in the second meeting the team can brainstorm the best Felt Safety interventions for the victim. In the Life Raft exercise, the team member explores with the victim what activities soothe her. The more senses the victim uses to describe the activity, says Hudgins-Mitchell, the better she can connect with the memory. The administrator can explore smells, sights, and sounds connected with the activities but should refrain from prompting the victim to discuss touch and taste as these two senses can trigger negative memories. Instead, says Hudgins-Mitchell, the administrator can ask the victim to share anything else she wants. If she volunteers positive touch and taste memories associated with her soothing activity then that can be used as a resilience piece to counter negative memories connected with those senses later on. The administrator also asks what activities the victim enjoys and prompts her to describe them, “How does it look, smell, sound?” They also discuss music the victim finds soothing and music that lifts her up, is joyful, and what she finds playful. The second Life Raft component focuses on people who support the victim and how they do so—this includes family, friends, co-workers, social supports, and professional networks.

Increase Felt Safety with Reflect, Honor, and Connect

The post-trafficking experiences comes with numerous interviews where a team member tries to obtain information from the victim and is met with resistance, particularly if the interviewer/team member is law enforcement. Trafficking victims are often scared of law enforcement because they fear officials will charge them for offenses they committed

during their trafficking experience, such as immigration violations or prostitution. Traffickers instill and feed this fear by, for example, threatening foreign victims with deportation or threatening to call police. Unfortunately, victims continue to face arrests and even state prosecution for offenses related to their trafficking experience, which is in direct conflict with the TVPA's objective. States are beginning to adopt Safe Harbor laws in order to become compliant with federal law, but protection varies and isn't yet consistent. As a result, victims are generally wary of speaking with law enforcement, making it essential that law enforcement personnel go above and beyond to put victims at ease.

There are certain easy-to-do steps that can help victims feel safe during team member interviews, says Vicario, such as minimize ambient noise and incorporate, if possible, the victim's Felt Safety preferences. It may be as simple as the victim prefers to speak with a same-sex interviewer, says Vicario, or exactly the opposite. For example, a male police officer was interviewing a trafficking victim and noticed she was particularly anxious. He correctly reflected that it may be because he is a man. He responded to what he saw by saying, "Maybe you would like to speak to a female officer." The victim answered with a slight nod. The male officer said, "Thank you for letting me know that." When the female officer entered the room, she made sure to sit at or below eye level, which, says Vicario, allows the brain to release calming chemicals. Standing or sitting above the victim's eye level can trigger a fear response—flight, fight, or freeze. The female officer asked the victim to start wherever she wanted and told her she would listen. "It's just you and me in here," said the officer. The officer then asked the victim to come up with a signal to illustrate when she felt overwhelmed. The victim responded by smacking the desk and frightened herself. "When the fear center is activated, the person experiencing it doesn't know where it is in time and space," said Vicario. The officer gently lowered her hand on the desk with her palm down in a calm manner so that the victim could mirror it.

Beverages and salty or chocolate snacks also help victims feel safe. Sex and labor traffickers control victims' most basic bodily function by deciding when a victim can sleep, drink/eat, and use the bathroom. The traffickers are the only ones to provide it, says Vicario, which creates an incredibly strong bond (and dependence) between victim and trafficker. Traffickers may use food as reward or deprive it as punishment. For instance, a trafficker may use a bag of salty chips as a reward for hitting a certain quota. When law enforcement personnel offer victims food and drink, stop when the victim wants, and offer breaks, they help the victim regain autonomy—this allows the victim to know he is safe.

One technique for the interviewer to increase the victim's Felt Safety is by **reflecting**, **honoring**, and **connecting** with the victim. When the interviewer reflects, he/she is summarizing back to the victim what he/she heard the victim say. This helps victims feel heard—an essential step in Felt Safety and necessary for victims to be open to working with authorities. The honor statement is also crucial as it honors what the person did to survive or, at the very least, the victim's courage for sharing it with the interviewer. This helps the victim release the shame he feels, which also helps him to feel safe. The connecting statement helps the victim to not feel so alone. In this step the interviewer

identifies who will be helping the victim through the process and, if at all possible, the next step. Below is an example:

Victim scenario:

A labor trafficking victim tells the interviewer that she had to pay exorbitant fees in order to secure a job in the U.S. In order to cover recruitment fees, she had to sell land and family heirlooms, borrow money from family members, and take out a loan with an astronomical interest rate. She tells the interviewer, “I am so ashamed and would rather die than return home with nothing.”

Reflect statement:

“The trafficker tricked you into paying recruitment fees so high that you had to borrow from family and even sell family heirlooms to cover the cost.”

Honor statement:

“Despite all of that and the conditions you were in, you kept yourself alive. You did not give up, and you got yourself here. That took more courage and effort than many people have.”

Connecting statement:

“We will be with you as we figure this out and walk the road ahead. Here’s how you can contact us if you need a reminder of that or additional support.”

If the victim is in detention, says Vicario, the interviewer should identify, if at all possible, a person in that setting that could be his safe person. If he has found a safe person among other detainees or someone he was trafficked with, the interviewer may reference that person in the connect statement. “You and Marcus kept each other going in the labor camp and now you can keep each other going as we get through what comes next.”

Concluding the Timeline Meeting

At the end of the Trauma Informed Biographical Timelines, the facilitator prompts each team member to state a hope he/she has for the trafficking victim such as, “I hope all her strengths are developed to the fullest” or “I hope he lives the life he wants”. The idea is that the meeting ends with a sharper image of who the victim is, and also that the team members’ wishes set the tone for positive steps and interventions. The purpose of the timeline, says Vicario, is, in part, for team members to recognize that they are part of a team and not alone in helping the victim. “The timeline helps each team member to see his/her role and how it connects with the roles of other team members,” says Vicario. “Most of all, we want team members to leave the meeting understanding and feeling that they can and *are* making a positive difference in the victim’s life.” Even when they can’t

change parents or systems, says Vicario, team members can help the person change and survive his/her adversity and system dysfunction so that the victim has what he/she needs to develop the life he/she wants and not just recreate what has become familiar.