

Alcohol Timeline Followback Recall Aids

The Alcohol **Timeline Followback (TLFB) method** includes a calendar to help people provide retrospective estimates of their daily alcohol, cigarette, and drug use. Several memory aids were developed to help people recall their alcohol, cigarette, and drug use when completing the TLFB.

DAILY CALENDAR: The daily calendar provides a temporal framework for recalling events and patterns related to a person's use of alcohol. Some people have found it useful to consult their personal appointment or date books as aids in completing the calendar. Use of aids is encouraged. Calendar aids have also been used to help people recall relapse episodes.

KEY DATES: Use of holidays, birthdays, newsworthy events and other personal events that are meaningful to people can assist recall of alcohol. In this regard, the TLFB calendar and computerized program displays standard holidays on the calendar and, as part of the instructions, asks people to identify their own personal holidays and significant events. These latter events may be generic (e.g., major sporting event, major news events) or idiosyncratic (e.g., person's own or others' birthdays, dates of important personal events such as changing jobs, buying a house).

BLACK AND WHITE DAYS: People are asked to recall lengthy periods of time when they completely abstained or used alcohol in a very patterned manner (e.g., 5 drinks every day; one to two drinks every Wednesday; eight beers routinely on Fridays and Saturdays), or drank heavily regularly for an extended period of time.

DISCRETE EVENTS AND ANCHOR POINTS: Like holidays, use of specific events such as arrests, hospitalizations, illnesses, employment, and treatment participation can be used to help people identify periods of extended alcohol use or abstinence. Anchor points can be used to identify use that occurs during, before and after events (e.g., job loss, marital breakup) or notable drinking episodes (e.g., started using after the death of a close relative). We have found that people remember what they were doing around these anchor dates and can reconstruct their use for substantial periods based on these dates.

ALCOHOL USE BOUNDARIES: A boundary procedure establishes upper and lower amounts of use for the time period under consideration. When starting the interview, the interviewer can ask about the greatest and the least amounts consumed on any day in the reporting period. Reporting the greatest amount gives the person permission to admit to high levels of use.

EXAGGERATION TECHNIQUE: To avoid vague or nondescript alcohol use descriptions (e.g., "I drank a lot", "I didn't drink very much") people can be presented with an exaggerated minimum or maximum value to help define the amount. This technique is designed to target approximate levels of consumption in difficult cases. For example, if a person reports having drunk "a lot" of beers on a day, but claims an inability to specify what "a lot" means, the interviewer can ask the person "Does 'a lot' mean two beers or 30 beers?" A typical response to this question might take the form of "certainly not 30 beers, more like 12 to 14 beers."

STANDARD DRINK CONVERSION: Alcoholic beverages vary in their alcohol concentration and drink size. Also, many drinkers report combined beverages use (e.g., two beers and one glass of wine). Thus, it is important when collecting drinking data to agree on what constitutes a "drink." This problem is dealt with by asking people to report their drinking using a standard drink conversion. Cards showing standard drink equivalents can be used.