

The Benefits of Journaling for Stress Management

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What Is Journaling?

Journaling is a term coined for the practice of keeping a diary or journal that *explores thoughts and feelings surrounding the events of one's life*. Journaling, as a stress management and self-exploration tool, is *not the same as simply recording the happenings in one's life*, like keeping a log. To be most helpful, one must write in detail about feelings *and cognitions* [not only feelings] related to stressful events, as one would discuss topics in therapy.

What Are The Benefits of Journaling?

Journaling allows people to clarify their thoughts and feelings, thereby gaining valuable self-knowledge. It's also a good problem-solving tool; oftentimes, one can hash out a problem and come up with solutions more easily on paper. Journaling about traumatic events helps one process them by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved, and by engaging both hemispheres of the brain in the process, allowing the experience to become fully integrated in one's mind.

As for the health benefits of journaling, they've been scientifically proven. Research shows that journaling decreases the symptoms of asthma, arthritis, and other health conditions, improves cognitive functioning, can strengthen immune system response, and can counteract many of the negative effects of stress. [Journaling has also been used successfully to treat chronic pain (by spinal surgeon David Hanscom: <https://www.swedish.org/services/pain-services/pain-management-guide/writing-journaling>) and in the treatment of trauma. "Writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events has been found to result in improvements in both physical and psychological health, in non-clinical and clinical populations." (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986, <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.11.5.338>.) When used for the treatment of trauma, the reported benefits of journaling included: "improved immune system functioning, reduced blood pressure, improved lung function, improved liver function, fewer days in hospital, improved mood/affect, feeling of greater psychological well-being, fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms, and improved working memory".]

What Are The Drawbacks to Journaling?

Perfectionists may be so concerned with the readability of their work, their penmanship, or other peripheral factors that they can't focus on the thoughts and emotions they're trying to access. Others may get tired hands, or be reluctant to relive negative experiences. And, *journaling only about your negative feelings without incorporating thoughts or plans may actually cause more stress*. [It can become written rumination.] A simple way to counteract this is to be sure you end your journaling sessions with a few words about potential solutions to your problems, things you appreciate in your life, or things that give you hope in life. [This could be a brief note of a few things you are grateful for, or a gratitude journal.]

How Does Journaling Compare to Other Stress Management Practices?:

Unlike more physical stress management techniques such as yoga or exercise, journaling is a viable option for the disabled. And, although some prefer to use a computer, journaling requires only a pen and paper, so it's less expensive than techniques that require the aid of a class, book, teacher or therapist, like techniques such as biofeedback or yoga. Journaling doesn't release tension from your body like progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery and other physical and meditative techniques, however. But it's a great practice for overall stress reduction as well as self-knowledge and emotional healing.

Here are a few tips to help you get started.

Time Required: 10-20 Minutes a Day

Here's How:

Buy a Journal This seems like the obvious first step. However, what *kind* of a journal you purchase is important. You can choose from the most beautiful blank books you can find, to a more functional notebook, to your computer. If you go with the blank book option, you can decide between lined or blank pages, with a variety of pens. Use your book to reflect your creativity, or go with functionality first. It's all up to you and your tastes.

Set Aside Time One of the most difficult aspects of journaling is not the journaling itself, but finding *time* to write. It's important to block off about twenty minutes each day to write. Many people prefer to write in the morning as a way to start their day, or before bed, as a way to reflect upon and process the day's events. However, if your lunch break or some other time is the only window you have, take the time whenever you can get it!

Begin Writing Don't think about what to say; just begin writing, and the words should come. If you really need some help getting started, here are some topics to begin the process:

- Your dreams
- Your possible purpose in life
- Your childhood memories and surrounding feelings
- Where you'd like to be in two years
- The best and worst days of your life
- If you could have three wishes...
- What was important to you five years ago, and what's important to you now
- What are you grateful for?
- [for psychotherapy patients/clients, Michael Yapko suggests: "Journal as you go through treatment: what am I learning about myself? what does this mean about what I will do, who I will be friends with? etc."]

Write About Thoughts and Feelings As you write, don't just vent negative emotions or catalog events; write about your feelings, *but also your thoughts* surrounding emotional events. (Research shows much greater benefits from journaling when participants write about emotional issues from a mental and emotional framework.) Relive events emotionally, and try to construct solutions and 'find the lesson'. Using both aspects of yourself helps you process the event and find solutions to problems.

[“Rendering personal experiences as a *narrative* seems particularly beneficial, according to the authors of *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being*. ‘We had people write in an explicitly narrative way, in which they tried to make sense of things, and we compared them to people who made only bulleted statements about their experiences... The writing was not helpful at all to the latter group.’ In fact, *simply venting strong emotion, with no reflection or processing, appears to make people feel worse*. ‘Progress results when the writer moves from an unstructured format in which the elements are disjointed, to a narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end—a traditional story-telling structure... I think a vital component is narrative coherence.’

http://www.dana.org/BrainWork/2013/When_Labeling_an_Emotion_Quiets_It/ (This is also what occurs in therapy: as you tell your story and describe experiences and feelings, you are processing them and “making sense” of them.)]

Keep Your Journal Private If you're worried that someone else may read your journal, you're much more likely to self-censor, and you won't achieve the same benefits from writing. To prevent the worry and maximize journaling effectiveness, you can either get a book that locks or keep your book in a locked or very hidden place. If using a computer, you can password-protect your journal so you'll feel safe when you write.

Tips:

- Try to write each day.
- Writing for at least 20 minutes is ideal, but if you only have 5 minutes, write for 5.
- If you skip a day or 3, just keep writing when you can.
- Don't worry about neatness or even grammar. Just getting your thoughts and feelings on paper is more important than perfection. [But bear in mind the above advice that it is better to write a story, not just dot points – just don't worry about perfect expression or grammar at this stage (you could always come back to it later and improve or correct what you wrote, if are a perfectionist.)]
- Try not to self-censor; let go of 'shoulds', and just write what comes.
- [If you find you are writing almost exclusively negative feelings and thoughts, try drawing a line down the middle of the page; write all the negative stuff on the left hand side, then write some positives on the right hand side (positives can be reflections on the negative things you have just written – finding 'silver linings' in the clouds – or on completely unrelated matters; they could include items from a gratitude journal (see below) or any positive aspects of life or your experience you can recall – all that counts is that you bring in some light.)]

What You Need:

- A journal and pen or a computer
- A few minutes of quiet privacy each day
- That's it

Gratitude Journal: Some people keep a daily gratitude journal where they list three or more aspects of each day for which they are grateful. This is a highly effective strategy for relieving stress because it helps you to focus on the resources you have in your life already and create a more positive mood at the moment, both of which have been shown to build long-term resilience. A bonus benefit is that you are left with a record of the many nice things that have happened throughout your days, so if you're feeling down in the future, you can cheer yourself up with a few pages of reminders for the things you have to appreciate in life.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-benefits-of-journaling-for-stress-management-3144611> [ed. & additions NB]