

Journaling

What is journaling?

Journaling is the practice of keeping a diary or journal that explores your thoughts and feelings about things that happen to you in your life. Journaling, as a stress management and self-exploration tool, is not the same as just writing down what happens every day in your life. To be most helpful, you need to write in detail about your thoughts and feelings about things that happen, especially things that cause stress, just as you might talk with your therapist or a friend about them.

How does journaling help?

Journaling allows you to gain clarity on your thoughts and feelings, which can not only relieve stress, but help you understand yourself better. It's also a good problem-solving tool. Often, you can work out a problem and come up with solutions more easily on paper. Journaling about traumatic events can help you process them by fully exploring and releasing the emotions involved. Interestingly, by writing, you use both sides of the brain in the process, which helps the experience to become fully integrated in your mind.

As for the health benefits of journaling, they've been scientifically proven. Research shows the following:

- Journaling decreases the symptoms of [asthma](#)¹, arthritis, and other health conditions.
- It improves cognitive functioning.
- It strengthens the immune system, preventing a variety of illnesses.
- It counteracts many of the negative effects of stress.

Here are 3 other powerful benefits of journaling:

- **Solve tricky problems.** Some problems are very difficult to solve when you're stuck in an associative, first-person viewpoint. Only when you record the situation and then re-examine it from a third-person perspective does the solution become clear. Sometimes the solution is so obvious that you're shocked you didn't see it sooner.
- **Gain clarity.** A great time to turn to your journal is when you're just not clear about what to do. Should you quit your job to start your own business? Should you marry your current romantic partner? Are you on the right track financially? It's amazing how much clearer things become when you explore them in writing.
- **Verify your progress.** It's wonderful to go back and re-read journal entries from years ago and see how much real progress has been made. When you're frustrated that your life doesn't seem to be working out as you'd like, go back and read something you wrote five years ago — it will totally change your perspective. This helps you in the present moment too by reminding you that you are in fact growing and changing, even when it feels like you're standing still.

What are the drawbacks to journaling?

Those with learning disabilities may find it difficult to deal with the act of writing itself. Perfectionists may be so concerned with the readability of their work, their penmanship, or other unimportant 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, or including positive feelings too, may actually cause more stress. Finally, you may be concerned about privacy. Having someone find your journal and read it is often very upsetting.

How do I start journaling?

There is no right or wrong way to journal. You don't have to do it every day, though you'll get more out of it if you write frequently. You don't have to write a lot, or in complete sentences. Don't worry about neatness or grammar. Just do it! There are many options for creating your journal. Think about what's important to you, and what will make you most comfortable.

Here are some tips to help you begin.

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 20 minutes each day to write. But if you only have 10, go with 10! 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?

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.

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.

One example of an electronic journal is the MyDiary app from Apple for iPhones or iPods: <http://sites.google.com/site/idiary4iphone/>

Check out the sources below. You'll find more information on journaling, as well as books you can download with more information.

Sources:

<http://stress.about.com/od/generaltechniques/p/profilejournal.htm>

<http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2007/07/journaling/>

<http://www.journalingtools.com/>

<http://www.journalforyou.com/>

Created February 5, 2011 by James J. Crist, Ph.D.