

How Important Is Journaling?

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Trauma and stress have numerous side effects, one being a weakened capacity to express yourself. In order for therapy to gain ground, you must address your inability to be honest with *you*. You may desire to be truthful with your thoughts and emotions, but simply lack the know-how to express your feelings. Such ability takes work, and a willingness to open up, as thoughts and emotions come to the surface of the mind. The best way to develop this skill is to pay closer attention to your troublesome thoughts as they occur. Moments of clarity, emotions, and questions will certainly arise, and it's crucial you capture and preserve these instants. For many, the best way to accomplish this is through writing. In this chapter, you'll learn how to

use the art of writing to improve your ability to express yourself in counseling sessions, and also during personal times of contemplation.

Why Should I Journal?

Like all homework, journaling should be used in conjunction with counseling. Out of the 168 hours in a week, however, it's likely you'll only sit across from your counselor for fifty minutes. In such a short time, it's impossible to say everything you need to say, especially if you're one of the countless

people who are reluctant to speak openly about feelings in front of another person or group.

Trauma and stressors are capable of shattering your life. Your goal, with the help of your counselor, is to pick up the scattered pieces of your broken life. A mistake many clients make is being too narrow-minded. They focus too strongly on the tiny shards of shattered happiness, lacking the ability to step outside of pain and behold the big picture. Journaling is a way to collect the pieces and bind them back together. For most, it can be difficult conceptualizing thoughts and emotions purely in your mind. A

document is needed, containing all your epiphanies and questions, to fully see where you're weakest and strongest.

How Can Journaling Affect My Health?

We have already discussed the negative, long-lasting affects of stress on your body, especially the immune system. Studies have shown that writing about trauma and stress can improve the body's resilience. People who write about their deepest, most traumatic thoughts and feelings experience heightened immune function compared to those who merely write about superficial topics (Pennebaker, 1997).

Other studies linked writing to decreased blood pressure by helping to moderate the expression of destructive emotions, like intense anger or fright. Journaling can reduce anger levels, thus lowering blood pressure in people prone to anger. In addition, regular journaling has a sustainable benefit, as it can lighten your load, help you keep a positive outlook, cultivate your social relationships, and steer you clear of self-induced conflicts (Lepore & Smyth, 2002).

Many people find it difficult expressing themselves with words, so they hold it in. Such tension can lead to long-term health risks. Sometimes your

feelings may be too strong to spontaneously articulate to another person like a therapist. Or, the weight of your thoughts may be too heavy to get off your chest. Think of the act of writing as taking the weight of the world and putting it onto paper.

Any Tips On How to Journal?

Journals are a dime a dozen these days. They were once limited to bound paper. The nicer ones included a lock and key to keep parents and siblings out. Today, it's more common for someone to login to an online journal or blog site. The lock and key has been replaced by a username and password. Paper has been replaced by storage space somewhere on a distant server. The medium you choose to write your feelings, however, is not important. It's strictly personal preference.

The goal is to capture any thought, any emotion, at any time. It's recommended that you carry a small notepad, a text app on your phone or PDA to jot down ideas as they come to you throughout the day. Later, when you sit down with your journal, use your notes to spark your memory. Without this, many realizations may be lost to poor memory. Taking notes encourages spontaneity—an important healing quality lacked by many due to

anxiety or depression. Without a commitment to logging spontaneous moments of clarity, you will likely repress or forget what you've learned, stifling forward momentum.

A journal doesn't have to be written well. The point is simply to get your thoughts out in the open. Think of every entry as a rough draft. Keep writing and don't stop until you're done. The point isn't to use proper grammar and punctuation. Correct spelling pales in comparison to simply emptying yourself. In fact, trying to write well, revisiting your writing with the purpose of editing, or revising can be detrimental to the integrity of what you were feeling when you originally wrote it. You may water down your passion, or over embellish. Keep it simple and true.

Journaling is a personal act. There is no right or wrong way to record your thoughts. You don't

have to be consistent with a technique to expect consistent results. The simple act of writing will help slow your mind, change your perspective, and teach you new things about yourself. Journaling's ability to put thoughts and feelings into words is a powerful therapy tool. Recording memories,

fears, concerns, and problems will help to relieve stress, promote health, and lead to personal growth.

There's a good chance you might sit down with your new journal and find yourself staring cluelessly at blank pages with no idea how to write the first sentence, much less your whole story. Or, perhaps you lack the time and privacy to properly empty yourself on paper. If this happens don't be discouraged. There are several ways to develop active, productive writing.

What Are Ways to Get the Most Out of Writing?

It is not necessary to begin with your most painful or terrifying experiences. Rather, begin with your current dilemma or emotion. Write about the anxiety you felt today, or something that made you uncomfortable. If your thoughts continually return to a particular event or experience—maybe a hurtful statement made by a loved one earlier in the day—make this your first topic to write about. Perhaps you want to confront someone, or confess a secret, but you just can't bring yourself to say it aloud, much less to the intended person. Use your journal to practice expressing heavy words. Your confession on paper can be fine-tuned to develop a mental script.

Once your first few sentences are written, your creativity will likely emerge. Your thoughts will pour from the pen and keyboard as originality or empowerment. As you begin to flow, be mindful to relive the experience you're writing about. What happened? How did you feel in that instance? How do you feel about it now? Why do you feel that way?

You may occasionally feel like you need time off from writing, and this is perfectly fine. Writing about painful instances everyday can be overwhelming and draining, and should never be a substitute for

action or to avoid responsibility. You shouldn't assume that only negative experiences are to be fleshed out while journaling. Be sure to devote time to writing about positive experiences, both past and present. Write out your most meaningful life experiences and opinions. Also, don't feel pressured to write only about things that evoke emotion. Try writing out your goals and priorities, and develop potential methods to dedicate more time to them, or to see them fulfilled (Lepore & Smyth, 2002).

Where you choose to write may or may not be influential. You may be the type of person who can write in a busy room with screaming kids, or this may be impossible. You won't know until you try. It's recommended,

however, to find a secluded spot where you won't be bothered by unwanted sounds, sights, or smells.

Are There Different Journaling Styles?

There sure are. Let's discuss a few:

Free Writing Journal. This technique is simple. Just write continuously. Don't stop to think about what you're expressing. Jot down whatever comes to mind without judging your thoughts or how well you're writing. With this style it's common to set a time limit, usually five-fifteen minutes. It may be a good idea to set a kitchen timer, and write as fast and hard as you can until you hear the bell. Ignore any regard for spelling, grammar, etc., and makes no corrections. If you reach a point where you can think of nothing to write, simply write sentences about how you are drawing blank until another line of thought comes to mind—and it will.

There are two approaches. First, don't dwell on a particular topic. Let your thoughts roam where they may. Second, try revolving all your thoughts around a particular topic. Allowing your thoughts to explore the chosen topic may develop more abstract opinions and new perspectives.

Free writing is a fantastic tool to help clear your mind and release anxious energy. The

resulting tranquility can then be used to connect to your emotions and needs. Free writing helps to clear the clutter in your mind, as the stream of thoughts and emotions begin to flow out of you.

Fig 7.1 offers an example of a free thought journal entry.

Diary. This is the traditional style typically associated with a journal. It is an ongoing, time-stamped document. A diary is unique from a journal in that it should be written daily, whereas journaling can be less frequent. Its purpose is to record the events of your life, and its circulation is usually limited only to you, or a limited few whom you entrust with such private information. This record is beneficial to therapy by offering daily perspective of pain and troubling thoughts.

Fig. 7.2 offers some examples of diary entries.

Art Journal. A picture is worth a thousand words, right? If you find your words aren't doing justice to your intense emotions, try drawing or painting what you feel. Just as in free writing exercises, draw whatever comes to

mind no matter how bizarre or inartistic. Pictures, doodles, and even stick figures will eventually open up the flow of words and thoughts. As you draw, a strong word may come to the surface of your mind. When this happens, scribble it down before you forget it and continue your art. Soon you may find more words appearing and forming into sentences and ideas. Before you know it, you're expressing yourself in ways you never dreamed possible.

You may be good with words but bad at expressing yourself. If so, don't limit your approach to art journaling to only drawing or painting. Try picking a topic that inspires you and write a free-form poem. Don't let the word "poem" discourage you. It doesn't have to rhyme, or have a certain style. The focus is simply expressing your feelings artistically. Another approach is to write a fictional short story about a character who shares your struggle. Helping this character deal with his or her problems may prove to be very beneficial to your own circumstances.

Fig. 7.3 provides an example of simple, but effective art journaling.

Letter Journal. Letter journaling is a powerful technique that has contributed to the healing of many. The method is simple: you write letters to family, friends, enemies—both living and dead—or imaginary characters that represent the strong emotions you feel. A letter journal creates the opportunity to tell someone your feelings and thoughts without the conflict of a face-to-face encounter. The usual intent of these letters is not to give them to the people they are made out to. They are for you to resolve the conflict or loss within yourself.

Fig 7.4 is an example of a letter journal entry:

Reflecting on Your Journal

Reflecting may be easy for some, but scary for others. If you cringe at the idea of opening your journal, much less reading your work aloud, it would be good practice to bring your journal to your sessions for your counselor to read, but only if you feel comfortable doing so. If you write in an online diary, you may allow your counselor to pull it up on his or her computer. This is a priceless tool for any mental health professional—to view the inner workings of your mind expressed in true honesty.

Fear of expressing yourself may simply come from a lack of knowing how. To gain experience, allow your counselor to view your work and walk you through ways to reflect more comfortably. Just hearing someone read back what you wrote may be extremely liberating, leading to more confidence for expressing yourself in the real world.

When Should I Stop Journaling?

As you grow healthier, it's normal if your journaling habits begin to slow, although you may see the benefit of journaling every day for the rest of your life. For most, however, journal entries will become far and few between as time passes. As you empty yourself and the pieces of your life are reassembled, there may be less to express on paper. For many, this is a sign that growth is occurring.

You may wonder what to do with the countless pages when your final entry is concluded. Some people will throw them on a bookshelf to be revisited at a later date, as a trophy of success. Others experience a powerful sense of closure by tearing up or burning the documents once a breakthrough is experienced. Whether stored away in your attic, on a shelf, or smoldering to ashes, your journal serves one final purpose: a tangible

statement of how far you've come, and the freedom you worked so hard to accomplish.

The Counselor Column for Chapter 7: "How Important Is Journaling?" by

Mark Carpenter, LPC

Personally, I've never liked journaling. I've always struggled putting my words to paper. In fact, even writing *this* brings some discomfort! But, I've learned to accept writing as a source of clarity, direction, and peace to process jumbled thoughts and emotions. Often times, it's hard to push through initial feelings, but I've found if I relax and keep trying, the benefits are substantial.

Just because I don't like journaling, doesn't mean I don't believe in its power. In fact, I recommend it to clients all the time. Let's say, for example, I am working with you on relaxation during a session. I may ask you to journal each day about your experience with the act and process of relaxing. Simply by writing about your experience, I would have high expectations about you returning next week with a deeper understanding.

The Client Column for Chapter 7: “How Important Is Journaling?” by Tyler**Orr, NCC**

I didn't start journaling until a couple years after the conclusion of my counseling experience, but once I did, I took to it. In fact, keeping a diary led to my interest in writing. I've found that writing down thoughts is the best way for me to flesh out the ideas in my head. Other than mindfulness, writing is perhaps the most therapeutic exercise I've found to date.

I come from a professional background in music. Though I wasn't technically journaling during the time I was in counseling, I was writing songs about my feelings of loss. Little did I know, I was pouring out my thoughts and grievances by means of the artistic medium: music. Self-expression is important to healing. My instrument was a guitar. Yours, however, may be a pen, a computer keyboard, a lump of clay, a paintbrush, or a voice recorder. You just need to find what works for you.