

## Journaling Your Way to Better Health

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Many of us start each New Year with one or more of the familiar resolutions – to stop smoking; lose weight; start exercising, etc. Few people resolve to keep a journal. That's too bad, because "journaling" brings key physical and psychological benefits.

### **How Journaling Helps:**

Holding back thoughts and feelings is really very hard work. Over time, exerting effort NOT to think about a worrisome topic – or feel an unpleasant emotion – becomes a major source of psychological stress. Constant stress can lead to severe illness. In studies of individuals who had experienced divorce or another emotional trauma, those who kept their emotions bottled up were more likely to develop high blood pressure and other stress-related ailments. In other studies, people who bared pent-up feelings showed lasting declines in blood pressure and heart rate.

### **What the Research Says:**

Research confirms that writing about your emotions can:

- **Prevent illness.** In a recent study, one group of college students wrote about their feelings regarding a personal trauma. Another group wrote about an emotionally neutral topic. Over the next four months, those in the "trauma" group made HALF as many visits to the student health center as they made during the four months preceding the experience... and half as many as the control group. In a follow up study, students who had written about an emotional trauma exhibited heightened immune functions as measured by levels of T-Helper cells in their blood.
- **Dissipate anger.** In a study of 63 unemployed engineers, one-third was asked to write about how they felt about being laid off. Another one-third was asked to write about how they had been spending their time since being laid off. The rest did not write at all. All of the engineers were bitter. But, far more of those in the "feelings" group were subsequently successful in landing new work. Having expressed their anger on paper, they didn't express it during job interviews.
- **Ease depression.** Most people report feelings of happiness and/or relief soon after putting their thoughts on paper. Beware, however! Some people find that writing about their feelings only intensifies their sadness. Fortunately, these intensified feelings usually subside within a few hours. Don't let this dissuade you from returning to your journal.
- **Facilitate problem solving.** Writing about an experience that is emotional helps you organize jumbled feelings into a coherent story. Complex ideas get reduced to specific problems. That makes them easier to tackle!

### **Getting started:**

- **Set aside 20 minutes on four consecutive days.** If you wish to write more than 20 minutes at a time – or beyond the four days – it's okay to do so. If not, simply put your journal aside. Feel free to return to it whenever you feel troubled. If you're in the throes of divorce, serious illness or another emotional crisis, you may want to keep a long-running journal. Doing so will buffer the impact of each new event and improve the ability to cope with it.

- **Chose a private place.** Find a spot where you won't be distracted by sounds, sights, or smells. Using a pen and paper – or a typewriter, computer, or even, a tape recorder – start expressing your thoughts continuously. Writing without pausing makes it easier to avoid self censorship – which can keep you from addressing key issues. Put down whatever pops into your mind. Don't worry about grammar, spelling or writing style.
- **Write what you feel!** Some people use a journal simply to record their day-to-day experiences – where they went; what so-and-so said, etc. But the only kind of writing associated with enhanced health is that in which one's deepest thoughts and feelings are freely explored.
- **Write only for yourself.** Writing with the idea that you'll show what you've written to someone else makes it hard to be frank.
- **Pick topics that worry or frighten you.** It might be an experience your frequently think – or even dream – about, but have not been able to discuss openly. It might be something from long ago... or something that happened recently. You'll want to consider how the event unfolded... who was involved... and how you reacted.
  - Why did the event happen?
  - In what ways did the event affect others parts of your life?
  - How did your reaction to the event reflect on who you were in the past... and, who you would like to become?
  - What was the event's impact on key relationships in your life?
- **Revisit stories if you want to.** Retelling a story helps put it in perspective... and takes some of the sting out of the emotions that go along with it.
- **Reflect on your values.** Think about how your core convictions and beliefs color your interpretation of the event under consideration. For example, what are your beliefs about right and wrong? Love? Hate? Friendship? God?

Example: If you feel betrayed by a friend, ask yourself “why?” Try to understand your reaction to your friend's behavior.

**Caution! Writing about your feelings is a great prelude to taking action, but don't use writing as a substitute for appropriate action. If a difficult problem can be corrected or a broken relationship mended... put down your pen and do it!**