

# The Health Benefits of Journaling

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I'll bet you write (or word process) daily. If you are like most people, you record only what you must. In an effort to change your mind and your habits, I'll let you in on a well-kept secret: A pen coupled with paper can serve as a powerful life tool.

Journaling (or keeping letters or diaries) is an ancient tradition, one that dates back to at least 10th century Japan. Successful people throughout history have kept journals. Presidents have maintained them for posterity; other famous figures for their own purposes. Oscar Wilde, 19th century playwright, said: "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train."

## Health Benefits

Contrary to popular belief, our forefathers (and mothers) did know a thing or two. There is increasing evidence to support the notion that journaling has a positive impact on physical well-being. University of Texas at Austin psychologist and researcher James Pennebaker contends that regular journaling strengthens immune cells, called T-lymphocytes. Other research indicates that journaling decreases the symptoms of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis. Pennebaker believes that writing about stressful events helps you come to terms with them, thus reducing the impact of these stressors on your physical health.

I know what you're thinking: "So writing a few sentences a day may keep me healthier longer, but so will eating lima beans! Why should I bother journaling when I've already got too much on my plate?" The following facts may convince you.

Scientific evidence supports that journaling provides other unexpected benefits. The act of writing accesses your left brain, which is analytical and rational. While your left brain is occupied, your right brain is free to create, intuit and feel. In sum, writing removes mental blocks and allows you to use all of your brainpower to better understand yourself, others and the world around you. Begin journaling and begin experiencing these benefits:

- Clarify your thoughts and feelings. Do you ever seem all jumbled up inside, unsure of what you want or feel? Taking a few minutes to jot down your thoughts and emotions (no editing!) will quickly get you in touch with your internal world.
- Know yourself better. By writing routinely you will get to know what makes you feel happy and confident. You will also become clear about situations and people who are toxic for you — important information for your emotional well-being.
- Reduce stress. Writing about anger, sadness and other painful emotions helps to release the intensity of these feelings. By doing so you will feel calmer and better able to stay in

the present.

- Solve problems more effectively. Typically we problem solve from a left-brained, analytical perspective. But sometimes the answer can only be found by engaging right-brained creativity and intuition. Writing unlocks these other capabilities, and affords the opportunity for unexpected solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems.
- Resolve disagreements with others. Writing about misunderstandings rather than stewing over them will help you to understand another's point of view. And you just may come up with a sensible resolution to the conflict.

In addition to all of these wonderful benefits, keeping a journal allows you to track patterns, trends and improvement and growth over time. When current circumstances appear insurmountable, you will be able to look back on previous dilemmas that you have since resolved.

### How To Begin

Your journaling will be most effective if you do it daily for about 20 minutes. Begin anywhere, and forget spelling and punctuation. Privacy is key if you are to write without censor. Write quickly, as this frees your brain from "shoulds" and other blocks to successful journaling. If it helps, pick a theme for the day, week or month (for example, peace of mind, confusion, change or anger). The most important rule of all is that there are no rules.

Through your writing you'll discover that your journal is an all-accepting, nonjudgmental friend. And she may provide the cheapest therapy you will ever get. Best of luck on your journaling journey!

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