

Write a Better You

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If you think journal writing only records daily activities, think again. Journal writing improves the immune system when a writer explores negative or traumatic events. Journal writing casts a personal story on blogs or in best-selling books. Journal writing transforms entire communities by sharing stories and common concerns. And journal writing rates as a favorite tool of management gurus.

In the past 25 years, journal writing has become mainstream, a tool for problem solving and healthful living, helped by technology and a heightened desire for personal well being. As a journal facilitator, I guide journal writing in intentional ways and have witnessed extraordinary results for journalers of every background. Journaling is affordable, always accessible, and, like a good friend, always non-judging. Its benefits include decreasing stress, resolving issues, healing relationships, gaining insight, discovering patterns, and tapping into the power of the unconscious mind.

To benefit from journal writing, forget the rules about “correct” writing. No one is evaluating your writing. You benefit equally whether you write at your keyboard or in your journal. There are no rules about when or how often you should write, and no single, correct way to fill your journal—although dating your entries and writing regularly maximize the benefits.

Journaling is not confined to open-ended writing. If you journal to improve emotional or physical well being, consider three factors: how much time you have, how much control you need, and whether you need to write from a thinking or feeling mode. Kathleen Adams, Director of the Center for Journal Therapy and a leading world authority on journal writing, pioneered research that led to journaling strategies that range from the short and concrete to the longer and more abstract.

Short, structured journal writing is ideal when you are feeling overwhelmed. You may be short on time or overcome by too many sensations. You may be reluctant to really let go. A short writing (less than ten minutes) helps contain difficult emotions while releasing them in a time-limited way. Writing a list allows you to structure in a left-brained fashion. You might write a list of best choices, biggest obstacles or priorities, joys, driving questions. In your journal, keep several sentence stems ready to respond to whenever you are short on time and want to lasso your thoughts easily. For example, your stems might include, “My next right action is to...” or “I feel...” “I am most concerned about...” Try writing without stopping for five minutes, responding to the question, “What is going on with me?” Stop after five minutes, and, to help you process the writing, reread your words and write your reaction to the words, for example, “It surprised me that...” or, “I am curious about.”

Longer, more open-ended journaling works well when you want to use the right-brained, intuitive approach. When you have the time and want to address larger life questions—be it personal or spiritual meaning, relationships, dreams, or emotional truths—you can choose more abstract, flowing strategies that allow you to push boundaries, writing anything that comes to mind without it having to make rational sense. You can write your future story, what you imagine you have accomplished a year from now, or you can write from the perspective of a loved one about he or she sees you and your relationship. You can write a metaphor about your life right now, as roller coaster ride, a journey, a beautiful quilt, or a jigsaw puzzle. At this more abstract, imaginative and feeling level, you are willing to “let go” and write with energy. Such journaling helps you access unconscious parts of yourself that often show up in dreams, and over a period of time, these writings can reveal new truths and direction.

Of course, in between these two levels lie many other techniques that combine the concrete and abstract, the feeling and the thinking parts of you. Writing about a peak moment in your life or creating an unsent letter to someone with whom you have unexpressed, unresolved business are just two examples. If you want help in navigating life and work transitions, write often about what is changing, what you need to let go of, what you need to let in, and how you feel about all of this. If you are trying to determine your strengths or what you really want to do with your life, write about seven deeply satisfying accomplishments in your life, how you achieved them and what you learned. Then scour your stories for repeated patterns, skills, passion, and values!

Journaling is enhanced when you reread your entries and make notations or circle key phrases. You may, for example, put in the journal’s margin, “I am surprised that this came up,” or note how your journal entries keep identifying the stress of carrying too much responsibility or what hasn’t been expressed. Pay attention to these signals of your inner world to help you make changes.

If you have never written a journal or if you are you haven’t journaled in a long time, try some of these journaling techniques and explore journaling as a tool for increasing health and well being. It is a tool for all reasons and all seasons.

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