



Journaling Heals the Issues in Our Tissues

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Writing is a transformative act. The simple ritual of putting pen to paper and expressing your true thoughts and emotions in a journal has the power to change your life. It can reduce your stress and anxiety — and improve physical, psychological and spiritual health.

But how? And why? What is it about expressive writing that can improve the symptoms of chronic illness or reduce your chances of catching a common cold? What is it that relieves the burden of distressing experiences?

Therapeutic journaling is not a new concept. Psychologists and doctors have studied its positive effects over the course of several decades, but yet most people still do not do it.

Imagine if we all turned to our journals in times of stress, instead of to unhealthy habits or prescription drugs or mindless distractions. Think of the money, time and heartache we could save ourselves if we only learned to write for our own health and well-being.

What is therapeutic journaling?

There are many different kinds of journaling. You might keep a journal to collect assorted memories

and observations, or to document important periods of your life, such as a long trip, a pregnancy or a cross-country move. You may keep a food journal, a dream journal or a music journal.

Every type of journaling is valuable and can bring joy and meaning to your everyday life. However, these examples are not necessarily therapeutic journaling. The therapeutic element arises when you write about profound — and often painful — thoughts, emotions and experiences. You give yourself a private, safe space to release deep fears, scars and traumas that you might never share with anyone else.

Therapeutic journaling can be intense and challenging. You have to be prepared to face difficult memories and feelings and write candidly about them. But if you stick with it and keep writing — you will come out on the other side stronger.

What research supports therapeutic journaling?

The pioneer in this field is James Pennebaker, PhD, a psychologist, whose work on expressive writing spans more than 30 years.¹ Pennebaker and his associates studied how people were affected by writing about traumatic or stressful events — finding that their physical and psychological outcomes were significantly better than those who wrote about neutral topics.



In Pennebaker's first study, a group of college students wrote for 15 minutes on four consecutive days about "the most traumatic or upsetting experiences" of their lives.³ A control group wrote about superficial topics, such as their shoes or their room.

The participants who wrote about traumatic events reported noteworthy benefits four months later, including less frequent visits to the health center and fewer days of absence due to illness. The authors of the study concluded that, "writing about earlier traumatic experience was associated with both short-term increases in physiological arousal and long-term decreases in health problems."

Many follow-up studies on expressive writing have yielded similar results. Several studies have found that expressive writing enhances the performance of the immune system.⁴

Therapeutic writing has been shown to help people suffering from many chronic illnesses, including asthma patients who had improved lung function and rheumatoid arthritis patients who had better joint mobility.² Writing has also helped HIV and cancer patients, as well as people suffering with Lupus, liver disease and chronic pelvic pain.

While the immediate effects of expressive writing can be negative — a short-term increase in distress, negative mood and physical symptoms — longer term results show powerful benefits, including:

- Improved immune system, lung function and liver function
- Fewer stress-related doctor visits
- Experiencing more inner peace
- Reduced missed time from work
- Quicker re-employment after job loss
- Improved working memory
- Improved athletic performance
- Faster healing of emotional wounds
- Learning from — rather than living in the past

How can therapeutic journaling help you?

You can benefit from therapeutic journaling, no matter what is going on in your life. Use it to cope with a loss, such as losing a job or a loved one. Try it to get to know yourself better and to get more in touch with your core values and goals.

It is easy to get started. All you need is a quiet space where you will not be interrupted, a notebook and a pen. For five days in a row, set a timer for 15 minutes. Write your deepest thoughts and feelings about a stressful or upsetting experience in your life, or an important emotional issue that has affected you deeply. Push yourself to explore what impact it has had on you over time, how it has influenced your relationships and decisions. The only rule is that you keep writing continuously until the timer goes off.

At the end of the five days, write about your experiences with therapeutic journaling. What was it like? How does it make you feel? What do you hope for as you move forward?

Continue to set aside a few minutes every day to write in your journal. It does not always have to be about traumas or deep emotions. Write about gratitude. Write about joy. Write about the person you want to be.

If you do not know what to write about, use a stream-of-consciousness technique and simply jot down any thought that enters your mind. The important thing is to make journaling an essential part of your daily life. Keep checking in and over time, you will heal, grow and transform in surprising ways. €



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