

Tips on Keeping a Journal

Journaling can be a useful way to learn about yourself, work through problems, vent frustrations, and reflect on the past. Journaling is often more effective than simply thinking about something because the act of writing down our thoughts can nudge our thinking forward beyond our usual, familiar first few thoughts. Further, when we express our thoughts in writing and have a chance to review what we've written, we sometimes come to new insights we might otherwise miss. In fact, there is an impressive range of research supporting the benefits of keeping a journal-- if you're curious about the research evidence, do a search on the internet for "health benefits of expressive writing." ...Here are some tips on keeping a journal.

- Think about **how frequently** you want to journal. Some people benefit from daily or almost daily journaling, while others journal two or three times a week or less. You might set an initial goal for yourself that seems doable, and then adjust the frequency based on how useful you find your journaling.
- Pick a **regular time** to journal. Some people find it helpful to journal towards the end of the day as part of their bedtime ritual, while others journal during their lunch break or on weekend mornings. It doesn't really matter when you journal, so long as you decide on a regular time for journaling.
- Decide **how much time** you want to devote to journaling. Five or ten minutes works well for many people, while others choose to journal 20 or 30 minutes or more. If you are new to this, you might start with a few minutes, and then see whether you find yourself wanting to devote a bit more time to it.
- Choose whatever **writing style** feels comfortable for you. Some people find it best to write in brief, fragmented "bullet points," others enjoy the challenge of crafting long sentences with just the right words. There is no right or wrong way to express yourself in your journal, and at different times your approach may vary.
- Do you tend to be analytical and unemotional in your daily life? As you journal, make it a point to identify and **note your feelings**-- consider whether you feel joyful, sad, disgusted, accepting, fearful, angry, surprised, vigilant, or some other emotion or combination of emotions.
- Do you tend to be reactive and emotional in your daily life? As you journal, make it a point to **be thoughtful and perceptive**-- work to draw conclusions, identify patterns, and arrive at lessons for the future.
- Although journaling often focuses on current or recent events and concerns, you might consider addressing **past events and concerns** as well, including past trauma and loss. Writing about distressing events from the past can be challenging and upsetting in the short run, but in time can lead to an improved sense of resolve about those events.
- Journaling need not focus on difficulties. You may find it helpful to journal about **people and events you are grateful for**, and to record the positive happenings in your life.
- Sometimes it can be helpful to frame journaling as if you are **writing a "letter."** For example, it can be helpful for journaling to take the form of a letter addressed to a loved one who has died, or to the person you remember being 15 years ago, or to the person you hope to be in 10 years.
- Journaling can also focus on sorting through the pros and cons of **an important decision**, and can contribute to a carefully considered decision-making process.
- Whatever form your journaling takes, it usually makes sense to keep journal entries for future reference-- every now and then you may want to **read through what you've written in the past**, so that you can reflect on how things are different or the same and on what you have and haven't learned.

Further Reading

Opening up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain (3rd Ed), by J.W. Pennebaker & J.M. Smyth, 2016, The Guilford Press.