

JOURNALING

Journaling is a simple and convenient **tool to express your emotions and to strengthen your psychological health**. Applying this method **does not require** any special conditions (you only need to find a quiet place and instruments for writing) and/or interaction with other people. At the same time this instrument **has several shortcomings** and should be used with caution.

Numerous studies demonstrate that journaling can help to overcome stress when we are experiencing a difficult situation. In particular as a part of research [conducted in 2006 by the University of Western Michigan](#) 100 adults kept a journal or made drawings related to stressful experiences or wrote down their plans for the day for 15 minutes twice a week. Those participants who kept a journal have noticed the strongest decrease of such symptoms as anxiety, depression or hostility especially if they were under stress in the beginning of the experiment.



1. Who is J. Pennebaker and why his research on journaling is important?



James Pennebaker is a psychology professor at the University of Texas, Austin (USA). As a social psychologist he studies how individuals, groups and communities overcome psychological shocks. In 1986 he made an experiment with his students, where he found out that describing experiences related to a traumatic event for 15 minutes during three consecutive days strengthened bodily and mental health of the participants.

2. Five reasons why writing about your experienced in a journal is worth it according to Prof. Pennebaker:

1

Keeping secrets is hard physical work.

When we keep something in secret, we waste a huge amount of energy to hold back our thoughts and feelings as well as to adjust our behavior;

2

Secrets cause short-term biological changes in our bodies and affect our health in the long run.

In the short-term perspective holding back our emotions leads to such consequences as increased heart rate and sweating. In the long-term perspective it increases the probability of physiological and mental problems caused by prolonged stress;

3

Secrets impede our thinking.

Repression of certain feelings and focusing on them too much disturbs our thinking processes and can have a negative impact on our memory. We have less resources left to think about other things;

4

Disclosing a secret reduces its negative impact on the psyche.

After the secret is disclosed, the biological impact of a stressful situation described in point 2 above reduces immediately;

5

Disclosing a secret allows to rethink the events.

When we talk about a traumatizing event or write about it, we transform abstract thoughts into words. That enables us to perceive our experience as well as to analyze it logically and leave it behind.

3. How should we write about our experiences?

Find a time when no one will disturb you and settle in a quiet place. Write for 20-30 minutes focusing on the deepest inner emotions and thoughts, related to the traumatizing event. Let yourself go and do not worry about style, spelling or grammar.

Please note that some people may feel sad after they have finished writing, but it normally passes in a few hours. If writing about a certain topic makes you extremely upset, stop writing or change topics.

Expressive writing sessions normally last for four consecutive days, but this is not a strict requirement. It is acceptable to keep a journal for a few days in a row, two days a week or even once a week. You can change topics or focus on a single topic instead.

When you think about a certain matter it is also important to ask yourself the right questions. According to the research made by Tasha Eurich, in order for the reflection to be efficient, it is better to ask ourselves “What?” instead of “Why?”. The scientific reason for this is that “Why?” questions do not allow us to shift perspective and provoke unproductive negative thoughts, they also make us feel stuck in the past. As Tasha Eurich explains, “What” questions help us stay objective, future-focused, and empowered to act on our new insights.



4. When journaling is not productive?

1

Writing about feelings should not be a substitute for action.

Keeping a journal is effective in situations which are outside our control. In potentially manageable situations expressive writing can be counterproductive;

2

Expressive writing is reflection but not an intellectual exercise.

If your writings look more like a work of literature and do not concern you personally, then this activity will not be useful in dealing with stress;

3

Your journal should not become a platform for uncensored complaining.

Describing the source of your feelings without proper reflection does not decrease but rather increases our stress level. If you concentrate on another person more than you do on yourself, switch back to yourself and try to understand and write what exactly makes you think and feel this way;

4

Keeping a journal does not replace communication with your friends.

Your friends can support you and provide valuable advice while a journal does not have that resource. Even if you cannot discuss a specific topic with your friends at the moment, their friendship and participation can help you significantly. If you cannot involve your friends, please refer to a psychologist or other people in the helping professions.

If you are subject to a significant stress and feel that you cannot overcome the traumatizing experience by yourself, please, seek psychological aid in time! In critical situations journaling will not help as you lose your ability to think objectively.

Sources:

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3. How Journaling Can Help You in Hard Times / Kira M. Newman, 2020, access link: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_journaling_can_help_you_in_hard_times
4. What Self-awareness really is (and how to cultivate it) / Tasha Eurich, 2018, access link: <https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>