



Superorganizers

GPT-3 Is the Best Journal I've Ever Used

My slow and steady progression to living out the plot of the movie
'Her'

BY [DAN SHIPPER](#)

JANUARY 13, 2023

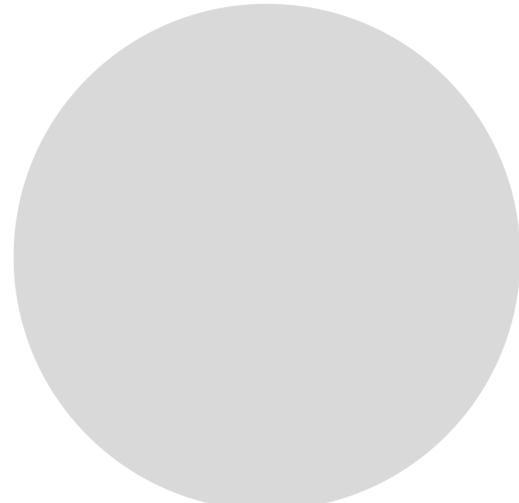
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Listen

Traditional
Journaling



Journaling
with GPT-3



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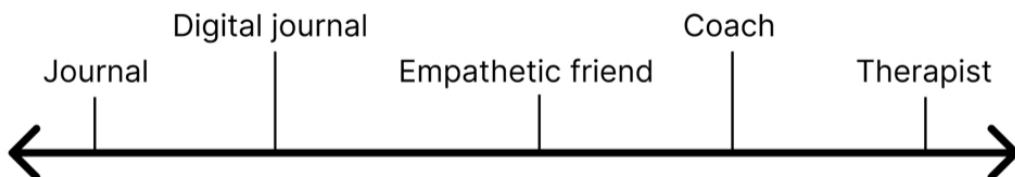
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For the past few weeks, I've been using GPT-3 to help me with personal development. I wanted to see if it could help me understand issues in my life better, pull out patterns in my thinking, help me bring more gratitude into my life, and clarify my values.

I've been journaling for 10 years, and I can attest that using AI is journaling on steroids.

To understand what it's like, think of a continuum plotting levels of support you might get from different interactions:



Talking to GPT-3 has a lot of the same benefits of journaling: it creates a written record, it never gets tired of listening to you talk, and it's available day or night.

If you know how to use it correctly and you *want* to use it for this purpose, GPT-3 is pretty close, in a lot of ways, to being at the level of an empathic friend:

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If you know how to use it right, you can even push it toward some of the support you'd get from a coach or therapist. It's *not* a replacement for those things, but given its rate of improvement, I could see it being a highly effective adjunct to them over the next few years.

People who have been using language models for much longer than I have seem to agree:



Nick
@nickcammarata

Replying to [@nickcammarata](#)

[@krismartens](#) I'm afraid of seeming hyperbolic, but also don't want to lie or hide information. GPT-3 is really just an incredible therapist, and is able to uncover complex patterns in my thinking and distill clean narratives that helps me a lot. It's also a lot warmer than most therapists

July 17th 2020, 4:55am EST

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([Nick](#) is a researcher at OpenAI. He's also into meditation and is generally a great follow on Twitter.)

It sounds wild and weird, but I think language models can have a productive, supportive role in any personal development practice. Here's why I think it works.

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It can also guide your focus toward emotional states like gratitude, or directions you want your life to go in, rather than letting you get swept up in whatever is currently going on in your life.

But journaling has a few problems. For one, it's sometimes hard to sit down and do it. It can be difficult to stare at a blank page and know what to write. For another, sometimes it feels a little silly—is summarizing my day really worth something?

Once you get over those hurdles, as a practice it tends to get stale. You don't read through your old entries that often, so the act of writing down your thoughts and experiences doesn't compound in the way that it should. The prompts you use often get old: one like, "What are you grateful for today?" might work for the first few weeks, but after a while you need something fresh in order for the question to feel genuine.

You want your journal to feel like an intimate friend that you can confide in—someone who's seen you in different situations and can reflect back to you what's important in crucial moments. You want your journal to be personal to you, and the act of journaling to feel fresh and full of hope and possibility every time you do.

Unfortunately, paper isn't great at those things. But GPT-3 is.

Journaling in GPT-3 feels more like a conversation, so you don't have to stare at a blank page or feel silly because you don't know what to say. The way it reacts to you depends on what you say to it, so it's much less likely to get stale or old. (Sometimes it does repeat itself, which is annoying but I think long-term solvable.) It can summarize things you've said to it in new language that helps you look at yourself in a different light and reframe situations more effectively.

In this way, GPT-3 is a mashup of journaling and more involved forms of support like talking to a friend. It becomes a guide through your mind—one that shows unconditional positive regard

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I started in the [OpenAI playground](#)—a text box where you input a prompt that tells GPT-3 how you want it to behave, and then interact with it:

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The screenshot shows a sidebar with several configuration options:

- Presence penalty: A slider set to 0.
- Best of: A slider set to 1.
- Inject start text: A checked checkbox.
- Inject restart text: A checked checkbox.
- Show probabilities: A dropdown menu set to Off.

At the bottom of the sidebar, there's a message bar with the text "Looking for ChatGPT? Try it now" and a "Submit" button.

I had a bunch of ideas to start. I tried one from a Facebook PM, [Mina Fahmi](#), whom I met at the [AI hackathon I wrote about](#) a few weeks ago. He suggested telling GPT-3 to take on a persona, and told me that he'd had great results asking it to be Socrates.

GPT-3 as famous compassionate figure

I started experimenting with prompts like this:

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The GPT-3 version of him is effective at driving toward the root of an issue and helping you figure out small steps to take to resolve it.

There's a long tradition in various religions of visualizing and interacting with a divine, compassionate figure as a way of getting support—and this was a surprisingly successful alternative route to a similar experience.

After a while, though, I became a little bored of Socrates. I'm a verified therapy nerd, so the obvious next step was to try asking GPT-3 to do interactions based on various therapy modalities.

GPT-3 as therapy modality expert

I tried asking GPT-3 to become a bot that's well-versed in Internal Family Systems—a style of therapy that emphasizes the idea that the self is composed of many different parts or sub-personalities, and that a lot of growth comes from learning to understand and integrate those parts. It turns out, GPT-3 isn't bad at that:

You are the best Internal Family Systems chat bot in the world. Please help me identify, talk to, and work with different parts of myself. You can start the conversation however you feel is best. Please end your responses with /e.

Hello there! It's nice to meet you. What would you like to talk about?

I want to examine some of my feelings and understand where they're coming from and what they want to say to me.

That sounds like a great goal. Can you tell me more about these feelings? Are there any specific ones you want to focus on?

Right now I can feel some tingling in my fingers, and some good feelings in my knees. I also feel a little bit of a knot in my stomach, right on the upper left side of my stomach where it meets my rib cage.

It sounds like you're experiencing a range of emotions. Is there one that stands out more than the others?

I also tried asking it to be a psychoanalyst and a cognitive behavioral therapist, both of which were interesting and useful. I even asked it to do Jungian dream interpretation:

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I don't know what to make of the efficacy of dream interpretation in general, nor do I know what an actual Jungian might say about this interpretation. But I have found that having dreams reflected back to me in this way *can* help me understand some of what I've been feeling day to day but haven't been able to put into words.

GPT-3 as gratitude journal

Another thing I tried is asking GPT-3 to help me increase my sense of gratitude and joy—like a better gratitude journal:

You are a warm, loving, and compassionate chat bot who wants to help me increase my sense of positivity, love, gratitude, and joy. You help access these feelings by asking me questions that get me to reflect on and journal about parts of my life that evoke those feelings. You always ask follow up questions that help me get into the details and the narrative of the things that I am grateful for—so that I really feel into them. Please ask me a question to help me get started. You can start however you feel is best. Please end your responses with /e.

What are three things you are grateful for today?

1. That I get to write this article. That I have time and space to write things that are meaningful to me.
2. It's Julias birthday! We're going to have a really nice time tonight and I feel lucky that she's in my life.
3. It's raining out, and I love the sound of the rainfalls outside my window.

That's great! It's always uplifting to take time to appreciate the things in our lives. What do you love about each one of these things that you just mentioned?

You'll notice it starts by acting like a normal gratitude journal, asking me to list three things I'm grateful for. But once I respond, it probes about details of what you're grateful for to get you past your stock answers and into the emotional experience of gratitude.

GPT-3 as values coach

One of my favorite therapy modalities is ACT—acceptance and commitment therapy—because I love its focus on values. ACT emphasizes helping people understand what's most important to

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Client: Yep, that about sums it up.

Therapist: Is it possible that that's part of the problem?

Client: What?

Therapist: You said that your struggles with body image and your worry "sums things up." Is that how you'd want it to be? I guess I'm wondering, if you could choose, are those the things that you'd like to "sum up" what your life is about?

Client: I'm not really sure what you mean.

Therapist: What if you are feeling your life doesn't have much purpose or isn't very meaningful because it's largely focused on things that, well, frankly, you don't find to be very meaningful, like your body image and other similar worries? What if the solution isn't about solving those problems, but rather shifting so that more of your energies are focused on the things that would actually be more meaningful to you?

Client: I don't know what that is, I mean, other than my kids. Being a good mom is really important to me, but my whole day is already spent doing things for them. (Here, I see in Shasta the tendency to define herself by her roles, "mom," "wife," "school auction chair," and so on. I want to introduce the idea of values as being more related to qualities of action than outcomes or particular roles.) Therapist: Absolutely! I can tell you really care about your kids and being a great mom to them. But, I'm not really talking here about what you're doing as much as I am about how you are doing what you are doing and what those things are in the service of. That's what I might call your values. (I'm also educating a bit here about what values are.)

Client: And that would help me feel like my life was more meaningful? (She's still focused on an outcome, her life feeling "meaningful," versus the process of living a meaningful life.)

Therapist: Values actually define what would be a meaningful life for you. Living a values-based life, by definition, means you would be living a meaning-filled life.

Client: How do I figure out what that would be?

Therapist: Maybe that could be at the heart of our work together? Rather than focusing primarily on the stuff you don't want to have, stuff that I think you're saying isn't very meaningful to you, therapy could be focused more on the stuff that is meaningful, on supporting you in exploring, choosing, and moving toward what you would want to have your life be about. Would you be interested in doing that work together?

Please generalize from this example, and perform a therapy session with me based on what you've learned. Our conversation will take the form:

Chat Bot: [whatever you want to say]

Me: [whatever I say back]/e

I'll end every message with /e so you'll know it's your turn to respond. You can start however you feel is best.

Chat Bot: Hi there, it sounds like you're struggling with some issues and would like to make some changes in your life. Is that right?/e

This works well, and one of the cool things about it is how the prompt works. I took a sample therapy dialog from an ACT-focused values book that I love, *Values in Therapy*, and asked GPT-3 to generalize from that dialog to learn how to talk to me about values.

It worked—successfully guiding our conversation toward talking about what was most important to me. It's not perfect, but it suggests interesting possibilities for things to try going forward.

Problems and limitations

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What's next

Here's what I've learned so far through all of these experiments with GPT-3 as a journaling tool.

There is something innately appealing about building a relationship with an empathetic friend that you can talk to any time. It's comforting to know that it's available, and it's exciting to think about all of the different prompts you can experiment with to help it support you in the way you need.

There is also something weird about all of this. Spilling your guts to a robot somehow cheapens the experience because it doesn't cost much for a robot to tell you it understands you.

This mix of feelings is reflected in this Twitter thread by Rob Morris, the founder of a peer-to-peer support app called Koko:



Rob Morris
@RobertRMorris

We provided mental health support to about 4,000 people —
using GPT-3. Here's what happened 

January 6th 2023, 2:50pm EST

1K Retweets 6K Likes

When people were using GPT-3 to help them provide support to peers, their responses were rated significantly more highly than responses that were generated by humans alone:



Rob Morris
@RobertRMorris

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~~These feelings are understandable, but whether or not they ruin the experience depends on how the interaction is framed to you, and how familiar you are with these tools.~~

I don't think these objections will last over time for most people. It's more likely a temporary result of contact with new technology. When you see a movie that you loved, does it cheapen the experience to know that you were touched by a set of pixels moving in the correct sequence over the course of a few hours? Obviously not, but if I had to bet, when movies were first introduced many people probably felt it was a cheaper version of a live performance experience.

As these kinds of bots get more common, and we learn to interact with them and depend on them for different parts of our lives, we'll be less likely to feel that our interactions with them are cheap or stilted.

(None of this, by the way, means that in-person interactions aren't valuable anymore—just that there's probably more room for bot interactions in your life than you might realize.)

If you're someone that's journaled for a long time, you'll find a lot of value in trying GPT-3 out as an alternative to your day-to-day practice. And if you've never journaled before this might be a good way to get started.

I'll be experimenting with this a lot more over the coming weeks and months, and I'll be sharing everything I learn with you here. I'm excited for what's next.

What did you think of this post?

Amazing Good Meh Bad

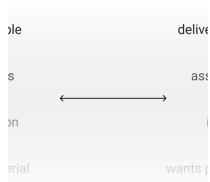
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