



Journaling for the Health of It

by Barbara Stahura

The impulse to “hear” ourselves by putting words on a page is very human. People journal for any number of reasons: to explore dreams, develop intuition and creativity, find their voice, survive grief, heal relationships, clarify spirituality, envision the future, imagine possibilities, empower themselves, or to create a resource for publishable writing projects. Other reasons undoubtedly exist. That’s the beauty of journaling—it is infinitely supple and adaptable.

The presence of numerous journaling workshops and so many blank journals on bookstore shelves testify to the current popularity of this practice. Journaling itself is not new, but much of its popularity today is due to research that has demonstrated how “expressive writing,” such as that used in journaling, is beneficial to health and well-being.

The term “expressive writing” was coined in the mid-1980s by research psychologist James W. Pennebaker,

Ph.D., to describe writing that explores one’s thoughts and feelings. After discovering that people who had endured great trauma (such as natural disasters, the Holocaust, or sexual abuse), experienced better health and well-being if they talked about their trauma rather than keeping it bottled up, Dr. Pennebaker wondered what would happen if people described their traumas in writing instead.

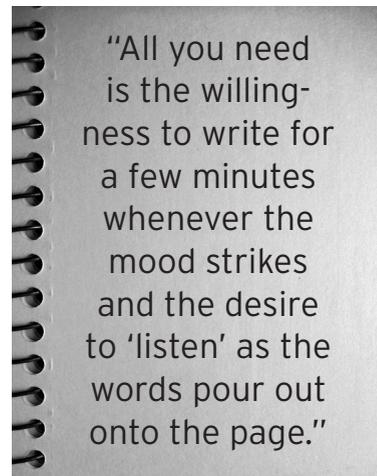
To test this question, he designed a study in which college volunteers wrote about either their feelings surrounding a traumatic experience or about a neutral topic. To his surprise, many who wrote about trauma needed less medical attention over the next several months after the study than they had required in the months prior to the study. Many also reported that the writing changed their lives. Notably, the students had written for only fifteen minutes a day over four consecutive days—a total of an hour.

Since then, numerous other

studies have reported similar results. A now-famous study of expressive writing conducted with people suffering from asthma and rheumatoid arthritis – as reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in April 1999 – showed that 50% of the participants who wrote for only an hour total about the most stressful event of their lives showed “clinically significant” improvement in their condition, while only a quarter of the control group did. An editorial in that same issue stated, “Were the authors to have provided similar outcome evidence about a new drug, it likely would be in widespread use within a short time.”

The benefits of this kind of writing are wide-ranging. In his book *Writing to Heal*, Pennebaker explains that, for many people, expressive writing enhances physical health and strengthens the immune system. It produces long-term, positive changes in moods, enhances working memory (which can improve performance at school or work), and can improve one’s social and work life. These are impressive outcomes for just a little bit of writing.

Journaling as a way of reflecting on one’s life has also become a respected modality in therapeutic counseling. One pioneer of journal therapy is Kathleen Adams, MA, LPC, author of *Journal to the Self* and *The Way of the Journal*, and founder and director of The Center For Journal Therapy. She defines journal therapy as “the purposeful and intentional use of reflective writing to further mental,



physical, emotional, and spiritual health and wellness.”

Yet, using a journal to reflect on one’s life does not require being in therapy. (In fact, a journal can become a therapist of sorts—requiring no appointment and no fee!) Journaling can be done by “anyone who desires self-directed change,” says Adams. All that’s required is “a willingness to explore moments of ecstasy and moments of despair, critical illness and crucial life choice, psychological healing, and spiritual discovery.”

As Adams explains, in times of emotional upheaval a journal becomes a container into which we can pour our thoughts and feelings to make them more manageable and easier to sort out and clarify. However, research has shown that, over time, writing only about the darker side of life does more harm than good. It’s important to maintain a balance and include happier, positive elements as well. Even including a few positive words or phrases in a darker journal entry can help.

Journaling requires no special skills. You don’t have to be a “real writer.” You can use a pen and paper or a computer—whatever works for you. All you need is the willingness to write for a few minutes whenever the mood strikes and the desire to “listen” as the words pour out onto the page. You’ll be well-rewarded for your efforts.

Barbara Stahura is co-author of After Brain Injury: Telling Your Story, the first journaling book for survivors of brain injury. She is an award-winning freelance writer, long-time journal keeper, and certified instructor of Journal to the Self®, a method of reflective writing featuring powerful, easy-to-learn tools for healing, self-empowerment, and self-directed change. Enrolled in the Certified Journal Facilitator program of The Center for Journal Therapy, she facilitates various journaling workshops, including those she designed for people with brain injury and their family caregivers. She also presents journaling workshops to the National Guard in Arizona and elsewhere. See more at barbarastahura.com.