Could Journaling for Depression be Right for You?

by ERIC PATTERSON

Benefits of Journaling for Depression

For years, people have been telling you about journaling. Your friends, your family and even your therapist have commented on the power of expressing your thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a concrete way. After all, your depression has been a difficult beast to tame. The best therapy, medications and positive, social supports never seem to be enough to resolve your symptoms of depression.

Journaling never seemed like a good fit for you, though. You know because you have tried it multiple times. Usually, you would sit down, stare at a blank page and search fruitlessly for something to write. Maybe you did write, but the process only seemed to make your depression worse, since it brought up many negative feelings that you were hoping to forget. Or, maybe journaling did help, but you could never find the time or motivation to keep at it.

No matter what scenario fits you most accurately, it might be a good time to reconsider journaling. By understanding the benefits of journaling, finding new ways to journal and placing increased focus on consistency, you can finally achieve the journaling success you have heard so much about. This time will be different. This time you can ensure that the trip to the store to buy the journal is not the majority of your journaling time.

Benefits of Journaling

Hopefully, the people that have been try to convince you to journal have been making an argument better than saying, “Journaling is good for you.” Although that is true, the benefits are far-reaching and more tangible than that overly simplistic statement. Here are some of the things journaling can do for you:

- **Allows you to express yourself.** Have you ever felt like you have so many thoughts and feelings spinning through your mind that your head was going to explode? If yes, journaling can help. Journaling gives you the opportunity to blow off steam in a safe, productive way. This ability to “get it all out” will free up room so that you can accept new information and feelings without being entirely overwhelmed.

Next page: additional benefits and different types of journaling.

Benefits of Journaling

- **Allows you to process.** When you begin to write down information, you begin to think about the thoughts and feelings you have. Thinking about thoughts and thinking about feelings gives you the ability to separate yourself from them and to begin seeing them more objectively. This process serves to diminish the negative impact that these feelings and thoughts can have on your mood and overall well-being.
- **Allows you to know yourself.** Knowing yourself is one the best ways to combat depression, and it will make your therapist very happy. When you journal, you begin to connect the dots of your life. You find

patterns and trends with your thought, feelings and behaviors in ways that you never have previously. As you write, connections will be made to prior entries that you can then go back to refer to regarding the current situation. Knowing yourself allows you to prevent problems before they develop.

- **Allows you to solve problems.** You will never prevent all problems, but since journaling allows you to be objective to yourself and the world around you, it gives you the power to solve problems better than ever before. You can look at yourself with increased accuracy, and you can understand the people around you with more empathy. Empathy is the act of putting yourself in someone else's shoes to know what it is like to be them. Empathy is essential for conflict resolution.

Types of Journaling

Give up on the notion that journaling is only writing about that day's events on a blank page. Journaling has more range than that, and chances are good, there is a type of journaling tailored to your needs. Check out these journal types:

- **Standard** – It would be foolish to start anywhere other than the standard journal. Countless people find this beneficial enough to do it daily. With this process, you write about the day's or week's events. You can focus on the events themselves, or you can write about the impact that these events had on your thoughts, feelings and behaviors. For an added level of difficulty, write about how your thoughts, feelings and behaviors impacted the events. This will illustrate the level of power you have in the world around you.

- **Gratitude** – A gratitude journal is a very interesting fit for someone with depression. If you feel that your previous journaling attempts have been thwarted because journaling made you feel worse, try a gratitude journal. In this, you only concentrate on the positive aspects of the day. This forces you to change your perspective and search for the good that happened that day. This process breeds optimism and hope for the future. These are sure depression busters.
- **Stream of consciousness** – Some people don't like journaling because it is too hard to know what to write. This is likely due to being overly filtered and feeling that they need to write the "right" thing. If this sounds like you, try the stream of consciousness. This type may take some practice as the goal is to write whatever is on your mind without stopping to think about it. It may not make sense but that doesn't matter. The only goal is to get the thoughts and feelings out. For best results, type this on the computer with the screen off or dimmed significantly. This prevents your need to edit or censor yourself. A few days later, read over what was written to process the content.

Next page: making it a habit.

Types of Journaling

- **Art** – Some of the best expressions are not in word or text form. If the blank page is overwhelming, take out some colored pencils, charcoal, crayons or markers and create. You can draw people, places, things, feelings and thoughts. You can draw something very tangible or incredibly abstract visions. Afterwards, take some time to think about what these images mean to you and what they represent.
- **Goal** – What are your goals? Where are you going? What do you want to accomplish? If depression has you feeling stuck and hopeless, this might be a good journal type for you. Without direction, you are a rudderless boat moving wherever the current decides. Writing down your goals makes them more concrete and forces you to think about them more often. Each day, you can ask, "What did I do to achieve my goals?" Work harder the next day if you are not satisfied with the answer.
- **Freestyle** – This list is not all inclusive. Experiment with combinations of the above or your own entirely different type of journal or a combination of the types above. Since there is no "right" way to journal, you have freedom to be as unique as possible. Find what works for you.

Keeping at It

Starting a new habit is hard. You should expect to struggle no matter the level of your interest and commitment. Want to make journaling last? Here's how:

- **Experiment with the when and where.** Maybe you have seen others on TV or in movies journal in their beds at night. Maybe this will work for you or maybe it won't. Open yourself up to experimenting with times and places to journal. Maybe a computer keyboard is the best entry system, or maybe you like the simplicity of pen on paper. Try varying systems for a few weeks to find what feels the most comfortable.

- **Involve others.** If something is important to you, help ensure success by letting others know. Telling friends that you want to begin journaling is a great start and asking them for reminders and motivation will push you closer to victory. They will be willing to assist since they will gain some indirect benefit from your improving symptoms.
- **Build it into routine.** Do you take your medicine at night? Do you always watch the same show after lunch? Find preexisting routines and try to piggyback journaling on the routine. This will avoid the need to establish a completely new behavior pattern.
- **Remind yourself of benefits.** Like exercise or relaxation techniques, you may not feel the benefits of journaling instantly. Remaining positive and motivated will encourage the results in the future, though. It may be uncomfortable or challenging now, but when it works, you will be happy you stayed the course.

Conclusion

It's time to pay more attention to journaling. The benefits are undeniable with consistency, and with the range of options, you can certainly find a style that works for you. You may find that writing will make things right.