

A Brief History of Journal Therapy

© 2001-2006 Kathleen Adams. All rights reserved.
Reproduction prohibited without [permission](#).

Introduction

Journal Therapy is the act of writing down thoughts and feelings to sort through problems and come to deeper understandings of oneself or the issues in one's life. Unlike traditional diary writing, where daily events and happenings are recorded from an exterior point of view, journal therapy focuses on the writer's internal experiences, reactions, and perceptions. Through this act of literally reading his or her own mind, the writer is able to perceive experiences more clearly and thus feels a relief of tension. This has been shown to have mental and physical health benefits.

The Development of Journal Writing for Well-Being

Although people have written diaries and journals for centuries, the therapeutic potential of reflective writing didn't come into public awareness until the 1960s, when Dr. Ira Progoff, a psychologist in New York City, began offering workshops and classes in the use of what he called the Intensive Journal method. Dr. Progoff had been using a "psychological notebook" with his therapy clients for several years. His Intensive Journal is a three-ring notebook with many color-coded sections for different aspects of the writer's life exploration and psychological healing. The Progoff method of journal keeping quickly became popular, and today the method has been taught to more than 250,000 people through a network of "journal consultants" trained by Dr. Progoff and his staff.

In 1978, journal writing for personal growth and emotional wellness was introduced to a wider audience through the publication of three books. Dr. Progoff's *At a Journal Workshop* detailed his Intensive Journal process and gave instructions on how to set up an Intensive Journal for those who could not attend a journal workshop in person. In 1977 a young writer and teacher from Minneapolis named Christina Baldwin published her first book, *One to One: Self-Understanding Through Journal Writing*, based on the adult education journal classes she had been teaching. And in Los Angeles, Tristine Rainer published *The New Diary* (1978), a comprehensive guidebook that for many years was the most complete and accessible source of information on how to use a journal for self-discovery and self-exploration.

The Philosophy of Journal Therapy

In the 1980s many public school systems began formally using journals in English classes and across the curricula as well. These journals, often called "dialogue" or "response" journals, offered a way for students to develop independent thinking skills and gave teachers a method for responding directly to students with individual feedback. Although the intention for classroom journals was educational rather than therapeutic, teachers noticed that a simple assignment to reflect on an academic question or problem often revealed important information about the student's emotional life. Students often reported feeling a relief of pressure and tension when they could write down troubling events or confusing thoughts or feelings.

Probably one of the most common reports from people who write journals is that the act of putting thought and feelings on paper helps give useful emotional and mental clarity. However, there is scientific evidence that the relief that comes from writing things down is more than just psychological. Dr. James Pennebaker, a researcher in Texas, has conducted studies that show that when people write about emotionally difficult events or feelings for just 20 minutes at a time over three or four days, their immune system functioning increases. Dr. Pennebaker's studies indicate that the release offered by writing has a direct impact on the body's capacity to withstand stress and fight off infection and disease.

After the publication of the Pennebaker studies, the medical and therapeutic communities began taking a closer look at journal writing as a holistic nonmedicinal method for wellness. In 1985, Kathleen Adams, a psychotherapist in Colorado and the founder/director of The Center for Journal Therapy, began teaching journal workshops designed to give the general public tools that could be used for self-discovery, creative expression and life enhancement. Her "journal toolbox" of writing techniques offered a way to match a specific life issue with a specific writing device to address it. Her first book, *Journal to the Self: 22 Paths to Personal Growth* was published in 1990. Through a network of Certified Instructors, the Journal to the Self workshop is available throughout the United States, Canada and several foreign countries.

Journal Therapy in Practice

Although there are many psychotherapists who incorporate journal therapy into their sessions by assigning written "homework," there are relatively few who specialize in journal therapy. Therapists who utilize journal writing in a session often begin by asking the client to write a short "check-in" paragraph or two on "what's going on" -- how the client is feeling, what s/he wants to work on in the session, and what's happening in her/his life that impacts the therapeutic work at hand. This writing is usually shared with the therapist, and an "agenda" for the session is set. The therapist then guides the client through a writing exercise designed to address the therapeutic issues or tasks that the client has brought forward in the check-in or warm-up write. This writing usually takes about 10 minutes, and the remainder of the session is spent with the client and therapist exploring the information revealed in the longer write. The session generally concludes with the therapist offering several suggestions for journal "homework" to be completed between sessions.

Journal therapy is also very effective in groups, and it is common for group members to establish a sense of deep community as writings representing authentic expressions of self are shared.

Those who wish to become journal therapists generally first obtain an advanced degree in psychology, counseling, social work, or a related field. They may then enter a credentialing program such as that offered by the [National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy](#), which can include journal therapy as part of its curriculum. Journal therapy can also be studied through an independent study program such as that offered through Kathleen Adams' Center for Journal Therapy or through Dr. Progoff's Dialogue House.

Benefits of Journal Therapy

It is believed that by recording and describing the salient issues in one's life, one can better understand these issues and eventually diagnose problems that stem from them. Journal therapy has been used effectively for grief and loss; coping with life-threatening or chronic illness; recovery from addictions, eating disorders and trauma; repairing troubled marriages and family relationships; increasing communication skills; developing healthier self-esteem; getting a better perspective on life; and clarifying life goals.

(This article first appeared in *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mind-Body Medicine*, 1999, The Rosen Group.)