

Kathleen Adams, *The Center for Journal Therapy*

Journal-Keeping

It's no wonder that most
great people in history
have kept journals



The exercise of writing down reflections about events experienced each day is an invaluable way to evaluate your performance...set higher standards of excellence...and find new ways to solve difficult problems.

WHAT A JOURNAL CAN DO

Many people resist keeping a journal because they think they aren't good enough writers...that someone will read their innermost thoughts...or that they have much more important things to do.

But unless you are able to evaluate your feelings and abilities and accept self-criticism, you probably won't bother to improve your weaknesses or build on your strengths.

Instead of thinking of a journal as a diary—a book in which you merely relate the day's events—think of it as a container for self-reflection, self-expression and self-exploration. Retelling the day's events is less relevant than the act of expressing your thoughts.

Just thinking about your emotions will enable you to shape them. *Powerful benefits of keeping a journal...*

• **Self-expression.** In a journal, you are able to express what you feel in ways that may be too difficult or even impossible at work or at home.

• **Stress reduction.** Expressing your anger in writing releases the emotional pressure that builds up when you hold feelings inside. Many people say they feel calmer and spiritually at ease after a journal-writing session.

• **Stronger relationships.** Writing about people you know will help you understand them better and put you in touch with your own feelings about them. When you're furious with

someone close to you, discharging raw emotion in the privacy of the page enables you to work out solutions in advance rather than face to face in an irrational outburst.

• **Better organizational skills.** By structuring yourself to write regularly, you automatically develop stronger organization skills, such as list-making and time management. Needs and goals are also easier to clarify and prioritize once they are written down on paper.

RULES OF JOURNALING

Keeping a journal is first and foremost an exercise in creative freedom.

Some people are inspired by an elegant bound notebook with fine paper, while others feel more comfortable letting the words flow onto loose-leaf sheets that can be clipped into a binder. Others prefer to record their thoughts on a computer.

You can schedule 30 minutes with your journal at the same time each evening...or just pick up a pen when the mood strikes you. *Easy ways to get started...*

• **Put yourself in the mood.** Close your eyes, and take five deep breaths. This focuses your vision inward, clears a space in your mind, eases the transition from workday reality to contemplation. Ask yourself, *What am I feeling at this moment?*

• **Jot down a few lines to summarize the high or low points of your day.** This exercise is equivalent to

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stretching before working out or playing scales before playing the piano.

WHAT TO PUT IN YOUR JOURNAL

Even seasoned journal writers encounter writing blocks. To keep from being discouraged, remember that there is a wealth of approaches to expressing yourself in writing. *A few of my favorite techniques...*

● **Use a springboard to focus your attention.** Choose a topic, statement, question or quotation, and start writing about it.

Examples: "Why am I feeling so angry?" "What I want most in life is..." "What's the most important thing that I need to do tomorrow?"

The springboard approach is just one way to break your writer's block. Once your writing and thinking become fluid, concentrate on expressing how you feel about people or experiences.

● **Write an unsent letter.** Make believe you're writing a letter to someone outlining what you like—or dislike—about him/her. The safety of your journal makes it possible to write things that you could never say in person.

This process provides a catharsis—you can release hostile feelings that are too painful to bottle up but that could wreck a relationship if they were expressed aloud.

The undelivered letter clarifies your feelings, particularly if your thoughts are very complex. It offers an opportunity to resolve unfinished business, allowing you to tell the truth to someone without actually stating it in person.

● **Create dialogues.** Another way to express deep feelings is to write about your feelings—and then write in the imagined voice of the other person.

Dialoguing promotes two precious faculties—empathy and creativity. Most people make surprising or exciting discoveries when they let their imaginations roam this way.

● **Freeze-frame happy moments.** Write a description of an experience that was truly intense and memorable. Immerse yourself in recollection, filling the page with physical and emotional detail.

Doing this re-creates your body's physiological response to a lovely event. It promotes the healing effects of being happy. Most people report

they feel refreshed and energized after writing out their favorite moments.

● **Explore the roads not taken in your life.** Imagine that you had actually married your high school sweetheart...or taken an overseas job...or gone to art school. Write from that perspective. What would your life be like right now? This technique is an extremely powerful tool for developing decision-making skills about your future.

● **Imagine yourself one month from now—and one year from now.** Where are you now? Where do you want to be? What are some of the things you can do to get there? Write it all down, as a confession to yourself. The words will awaken your intuitive and creative wisdom, which, in turn, will help you make better decisions.

● **Create a list of topics of the day.** On a sheet of paper, list the numbers one to 31. Next to each number, place a topic of personal or professional interest, such as *health, old friends, frustrations, successes, accounts receivable, new relationships* and *goals*.

Each day of the month, use the corresponding topic as a springboard for writing down your thoughts. This process will remind you to monitor regularly the important areas of your life.

Your journal will make you aware of how life and dreams change...how some remain the same...and, best of all, it teaches you how to think clearly about everything you do. ■

