

Write That Down!

Integrating Journaling Practices for Promoting Well-Being

By Maggie Kapitan, LMFT

Our day-to-day lives require so much of our attention and mental energy. For many of us, the end of the day is met with physical, mental, and sometimes emotional exhaustion. It is hard to reflect on our thoughts and feelings once we reach this point. Unfortunately, not granting ourselves the space for self-reflection can leave us feeling like we are on the backburner in our own lives. Over time, it becomes harder to be in touch with our needs and emotions and to track possible changes occurring within ourselves. We may also feel hesitant to engage in self-reflection due to the fine line between reflection and rumination, with the former being informative and the latter being stress provoking. One way to start to give yourself back helpful self-reflection is through establishing a structured journaling routine.

Benefits of Journaling

Meta-analysis research indicates that journaling shows promise as an adjunct intervention to manage common mental health symptoms, with the greatest impact in those who experienced anxiety.[1] Due to the numerous modalities, it is a variable form of self-reflection that can look however the user prefers and will actually incorporate into their life. It is also either free or incredibly low cost: whether you prefer analog or digital journaling formats, there are vast options making it financially accessible.



Types of Journaling

When journaling is suggested as a well-being tool, people often wonder when they will find the time, what they would write about, and where they would start. To incorporate a sustainable journaling routine, start first with identifying the type of journaling you feel would most benefit you and you would be most likely to stick with. The conception of journaling as diary entries, or writing in a 'storied' format, often turns people off the practice if that is not something that resonates well with them. Consider the following approaches for journaling, and which is the best fit for you.

Stream of Consciousness/Expressive Writing:

The expressive writing, or stream of consciousness journaling practice is likely what comes to mind first when someone suggests writing in a journal. This approach is the process of letting whatever comes up for you fill out the page. It is helpful to add guardrails to this style, however, as you do not want it to morph into a written encouragement of ruminating thoughts. To add structure, allow the expression to have both emotional and cognitive reflections, which research has shown to be a more effective modality to foster greater awareness and evaluation of stressful events.[2] Emotional reflection would include your insight into your emotional experiences and reactions, while cognitive reflections would include recognition of your thoughts and possible thinking patterns. You may also consider structuring this journaling style further by giving yourself a 10–15-minute timer and planning what you will do after writing: this may help keep the practice reflective and create safeguards against ruminating.

Bullet Journaling:

Bullet journaling is a highly efficient form of self-reflection and is a dream for data lovers. This approach is completely flexible: pick the areas of your life that you would like to track and then create your own information tables (or search for 'bullet journal' on your app store and enjoy a massive variety of choices) to compile the data daily. For example, you may use a color-coded chart to track your daily mood or check boxes for tracking habits. The purpose of this method is to ensure that you are carving out time to reflect on yourself in a time-efficient manner, as well as gathering data that can inform you of emerging patterns.

Gratitude Journaling:

One study found that those who practiced gratitude journaling for 12 weeks had significantly better mental health outcomes compared to the control group, and that gratitude journaling specifically was more positively impactful than those who did only expressive writing.[3] Another study found that gratitude journaling correlated to a significant reduction in depression symptoms to those experiencing depression.[4] To incorporate gratitude journaling, simply reflect on what you are thankful for. Allow for a mixture of small and big items: gratitude for the fact that wool socks exist alongside how thankful you are to your family for supporting you.

The Unsent Letter:



The benefit of using the unsent letter journaling prompt is that it allows you to reflect on your relationships and process challenging thoughts and feelings independently. As the name implies, this journaling practice is not intended for sending your feelings to another. Rather, it is about understanding your own experiences and expressing yourself in an emotionally safe environment, without risking damage to relationships. This letter may be to a colleague after a contentious disagreement, an in-law you feel misunderstands you, a relative you have lost, etc.

Self-Compassionate Reflection:

This exercise, coined by Dr. Kristin Neff, is a journaling exercise that encourages you to reflect on how you are evaluating yourself and how to harness more compassion in that self-evaluation. To do this, imagine a friend that cares for you deeply, accepts you completely (flaws and all), and sees the best in you. Then, write a letter to yourself from the perspective of this imagined friend. Neff encourages coming back to the letter after writing it, to further reflect on how you can channel that level of compassion into your self-talk.[5]

Allow yourself the freedom to experiment with journaling until you find your preferred modality. Once you have found how you would like to journal, think about when you would like to journal. Establishing a routine will help you become more consistent in your self-reflection, encouraging more awareness of your emotions, thoughts, and needs. Allow journaling to work for you by keeping it easily accessible. Carve out just 10 minutes of your day for journaling reflection to support your well-being.

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For more information about promoting resilience and well-being related strategies, please reach out to the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 for a consultation and/or tailored referrals.



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