



***7 tips for  
successful  
therapeutic  
journaling***

by

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## Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that therapeutic journaling can significantly help our health and wellbeing. The information here will cover some basic tips to help you make the most of your journaling experience.

The brain stores all the emotional memories we have experienced in our lives and when these are difficult emotions that haven't been acknowledged they contribute to the inner turmoil that can result in the very real symptoms we now recognise to be stress induced. Often these are due to hidden stresses we aren't consciously aware of, but journaling can be like stripping layers off an onion and as we journal about how we are feeling or felt at a certain time, other memories and emotions also surface that we can then also deal with.

Where difficult memories and emotions are likely to surface it might be worth breaking bigger issues down into smaller, manageable pieces in order to be able to offload without feeling completely out of control. Also follow the advice in the last tip if you continue to feel emotional after journaling.

The aim of therapeutic journaling is to help you acknowledge any stored up emotions that might be causing you problems. By acknowledging and integrating these it can help you gain perspective in order to be able to let go of the hold they have had on you in order to move on with your life more freely.

I hope these tips help you move on with your journey to recovery from symptoms of stress illness. However if you are someone who doesn't find it easy to write about how you feel, there are further tips in my e-book '**Journaling for health**' which also goes into more depth about how to use therapeutic journaling effectively.

## **1) Planning:**

Before you start journaling for the first time, it's worth planning out the main events in your life that have caused you stress, both from the past and presently. On a piece of paper draw up a timeline and noting down rough dates, write down things that you recognise did, or is currently, causing you pressure. Consider issues from: Childhood, Teenage years, any past and current life pressures and responsibilities.

While completing this think about anything or anyone you might feel resentful of, whom you might have hurt in the past and what you have been or are fearful of or angry about. Stress is often based on relationships with other people, so look at any relationships through your life and jot down anything you feel might be worth addressing. e.g. Parents, siblings, peers, boss, friends, colleagues etc

For most people this can become a very long list, but the aim where possible is to absolve yourself and others through this writing in order to be able to move on with your life. Anger, fear, guilt, bitterness, envy, resentment and jealousy etc are all very destructive emotions and it is only yourself you are hurting through holding onto them. It's not a matter of condoning any bad behaviour from anyone, just recognising that by letting go of the hold they have on you, it allows you to move on with your life freely.

This list will form the basis of being able to gradually journal about things in your life in order to let go of anything that has been holding you back from living a happy, healthy and fulfilling life. Pick them out one at a time and gradually go through the list. Some you might find are highly emotional to you, others you might not react to as much, in which case they might not need as much attention, so move on. You might even feel you want to start with something less emotive if there are things that you know will be very difficult to deal with.

## **2) Picking the right time and place:**

Whenever possible, sit down to journal when you are feeling relaxed, maybe at the end of the day after you have unwound. If you have time during the day when you're on your own, then that might be a good time for you.

When you choose the right time and place you usually feel more able to offload onto the paper and acknowledge how you feel. Make sure you are comfy and that you won't be disturbed. Offloading while in pain will be just as effective, although it might be hard settling into a comfortable position. In this case see tip 3 and try to focus on how you feel where possible, not the pain. The aim is to offload, wherever and however you do it, and generally people find this most effective if they are on their own.

Another time to choose could be when you are actually feeling a particular emotion because it can be easier to access how you feel 'in the moment' rather than waiting until later. If this is at work for example after being criticised by your boss, it might involve taking yourself off somewhere quiet for a few minutes. Even if the toilet/bathroom is the only place then this can at least be a place to spend a quick 2 minutes ranting onto paper to offload (or even scribbling with your finger onto your leg or a wall if you have no paper!). Finish with a few slow deep belly breaths to relax, calm down and let go before moving on.

## **3) Establish a mind-body connection**

Just before you start to write it can be helpful to sit quietly with your eyes closed and take some slow deep breaths, allowing your thoughts to consider the issue you are going to write about. Acknowledge to yourself what you are going to be writing about and recognise that it is all part of addressing the root cause of your symptoms and therefore it will help in your recovery. As the emotional memories begin to surface, start writing.

If you don't feel any emotion, then begin writing and explore what happened and how you felt without censor because this often helps any hidden emotions begin to surface or for you to gain some insights.

#### **4) Free writing**

Free writing can be part of any writing exercise and allows you to let the words flow uncensored and unchecked onto paper. Just pour everything out onto the page, even saying things you would never dream of actually saying to anyone. No-one else is going to see it, so you can be as vindictive or rude as you want! Either write on top of your writing or delete it from the computer so you know nobody else will see it. Alternatively ripping up the paper, or burning it can be quite cathartic!

Some people find journaling about how they feel difficult, especially if they feel it is not in their nature to be rude or angry. It is important to recognise though that whether you like it or not, deep down everyone is angry and has 'improper' thoughts at some point. Anger is just as valid an emotion as joy and needs to be acknowledged, not bottled up.

Interestingly, if you actually allow yourself to actually feel any emotion in a safe environment, then although it will at first increase, it then resolves. When emotions like this are repressed though, it results in the build-up of internal pressure which causes stress symptoms. If for whatever reason you feel guilty after offloading, then do make sure you move on and deal with this too.

N.B. This is not about blame, it is about allowing your younger self to have a voice, which she/he might not have had at the time. It is about allowing these unresolved emotions to surface and be acknowledged which reduces the 'fuel' for the pain and is the first step in allowing yourself to let go and move on.

## 5) **Unsent letters**

Where another person is specifically involved in your issue, a great way to really connect with them and be able to offload, is to write an **unsent letter**. This provides a direct way to focus the outpouring of your deepest emotions without having to deal with a response and it doesn't matter whether that person is alive or not.

People have described this to me as like, “lancing a boil”, “taking the lid off a fizzy bottle of pop” and “dropping a heavy cloak from their shoulders”. For many this simple technique can be life changing in itself. You can write a few letters focussing on different issues, or you can write a general letter encompassing all that you want to say.

It really can feel like you have actually spoken to the person in question and can therefore help you move on.

## 6) **Gaining Perspective**

There are two parts to therapeutic journaling. The first part is the acknowledgement of the underlying emotion and then gaining perspective which allows you to let go and move on with your life. Free writing or writing an unsent letter are good ways to explore an issue and acknowledge any underlying emotions. Gaining perspective can also be accomplished using free writing exercises, or by using a dialogue technique.

**Dialoguing** is just one way of being able to gain perspective about something that has happened in the past, which is so important in allowing you to be able to let go and move on from the hold it has had on you. This is done as if you were writing a play where you would write down a statement or question aimed at the other person but you then allow your intuition to answer as the other person, as if you are having a conversation.

Whether you use dialoguing, or just free writing, journaling to gain perspective has been shown to be an important part of journaling for health. We are the ones who suffer when we hold on to all these powerfully difficult emotions, so it's

no wonder patients have told me they feel enlightened when they have offloaded and put things into perspective.

It encourages you to look at things from all angles and from the other person's perspective and it can be very enlightening. Even if the subject involves severe trauma like child abuse it can help you to move on, maybe by helping the victim accept that maybe it wasn't their fault. It sometimes also helps people put things into perspective by recognising the underlying factors that might have precipitated the other person's behaviour, such as a traumatic childhood and to begin to see what they might have learned from it or even any positives that have resulted from what they went through.

This form of journaling is even more powerful if you can be absolutely truthful in your own heart. We often automatically blame other people when things happen and it takes courage to really open up and explore whether some of the fault might be ours. We are only doing this through writing and only we will know what we have written, yet even so this can be a powerful way to make peace with ourselves.

Even if we are not to blame in any way, gaining perspective and recognising what we have learned from the experience can help us move forward. Having said that, we might not be able to do this during the heat of the moment, or even soon after, until we have acknowledged how we feel and are able to see things more clearly.

As Napoleon Hill said, "*Every defeat, disappointment and adversity has a seed of equal or greater opportunity.*" The more you can recognise what lessons can be learned from each challenge in your life, the more you can grow stronger and move on.

## **7) Ending your journaling:**

Whenever you finish writing, remind yourself that this journaling has a purpose in that you are acknowledging underlying emotions which have resulted in your

pain. Acknowledge that you are happy to have addressed them and that you know this will help you move forwards on your journey to recovery.

In order not to drag yourself down with all this emotional journaling, it's always a good idea to finish on a more positive note. Below are a few simple methods you could try to do this:

- i) Picture a really happy/relaxing/peaceful time in your life and visualise it. Using all your senses, try to paint as real an image as possible so you smell the smells, see the colours etc. Try to 'feel' how you felt at the time.
- ii) Write down 5 things for which you feel grateful for that day. Be imaginative, but make sure you write, 'I feel grateful for.....' each time and then **feel** the emotion of each one before moving on to the next.
- iii) Note down your achievements for that day or week, or even from your whole life, however small. We are so good at putting ourselves down for any mistakes, or things we feel we should have done better, yet completely ignore things we have achieved. e.g. rather than focussing on the fact that you still have pain, why not make a note of why you feel there has been some progress, even if you had just one moment in the day when your pain felt easier.
- iv) Acknowledge how thankful you are that you are experiencing these emotions and reinforce the fact that you know this is helping you move further forward on your journey to recovery.

We are so used to focusing on the negative things that happen in our lives that our brains are tuned into that. Studies have shown that if you spend just 5 minutes a day looking for positive things and things to be grateful for in your day you can retrain your brain to automatically begin looking for these things which can help your mood. This part must definitely be worth focusing on then!



## *Happy Journaling!*

Don't forget that journaling isn't just useful for acknowledging emotions related to past events. It's also a useful tool to use regularly in order to keep on top of things in your day to day life.

### **About the Author**

**Georgie Oldfield** qualified as a physiotherapist in 1983 and since 2000 has been developing her interest in how the mind and body work together. Her work in the field of Stress Illness began in 2007 when she came across the work of John E. Sarno MD, Rehabilitation Specialist at the New York University of Medicine.

Since visiting Dr Sarno in 2007 Georgie has been completely committed to developing her work in this field and now specialises in working with people from throughout the UK, Europe and even further afield, running clinics in Yorkshire and London.

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