Journaling

When it comes to journaling, it can be confusing and intimidating to not have guidance beyond "just sit down and start writing!" I hope the following ideas help make your journaling meaningful and rewarding.

From, Lexi

What's the Purpose of Journaling?

1. At the very least, journaling **transfers information** from our minds to the physical world. It literally "gets it out of our heads" which can help us better let go of things that trouble us. (Some people refer to this as "downloading.") Writing or typing things can also help reduce our tendency to mentally repeat and rehearse them (i.e., if it's recorded somewhere, I can go back and look at it when I need or want to).
2. Journaling provides a safe space for us to privately **express ALL thoughts and feelings** (not just the bad ones!). It gives us a chance to identify, explore, process, challenge, and purge them.

   PRIVACY NOTE: Many people decide not to journal because they fear their writing will be found and seen by others. If you can't find a "really good hiding place," it may help to destroy or delete the journal entry right after finishing. For paper, you might scribble over it, tear or cut it up, put it in a shredder, use water to smear the ink, paint over it, burn it (safely!), or bury it outside. I sometimes joke to "flush it down the toilet," but I think that's bad for our septic systems! Obviously for typing/text, destroying means to delete the information on your device.
3. In addition to mental and emotional expression, journaling can help us **process thoughts and feelings**. Processing can mean: To self-reflect; to clarify what we think and feel; to explore or examine our perspective and beliefs; to gain a better understanding of ourselves, others, or a situation; or to experience something in a different way.
4. Journaling can **assist with problem-solving**. Writing about a problem can help: Reduce or untangle overwhelming feelings; give an objective view; identify pros and cons; explore options for taking action (solutions); or predict possible outcomes.
5. Journaling can help us **prepare to communicate** with others by clarifying thoughts and feelings (see Ideas for Journaling #8).
6. I highly recommend that people **keep and revisit positive journal entries**. When we reread them, the good feelings are "activated" again in the moment, which helps counteract and redirect negatives. This can also reinforce a habit of "looking for the good" versus focusing on all the things that are "going wrong." (see Ideas for Journaling #6)
7. There are other types of **specialized and hybrid approaches** to journaling that I don't include here but may be worth a look, such: Bullet, junk, collage, project, planner, productivity, goal, travel, nature, food, reading, weather, dream, etc.

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Basic Tips (Getting Started)

1. **Choose between paper or electronics**.
    a. Paper could include individual sheets ("loose leaf"), notebooks (e.g., spiral, hard cover, composition), note pads, or post-it notes (aka sticky pads). Types of paper include blank, lined, graph/grid, or dots. You might choose plain white or colors that please your eye.
    b. Electronic options include typing on a phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer. I've known people who journal using the "Notes" application on their phones, and others use word processing programs (e.g. Microsoft Word, Google Docs, Pages) to save journal files.
2. **Add creative elements**. For example, you might incorporate different writing instruments (e.g., pencil, pen, highlighter, marker, paint) which change the appearance and texture of the words. You might use a favorite color or choose colors to match certain thoughts or feelings (e.g., red = angry, pink = happy). You could add stickers for emphasis or just for fun. Maybe add doodles, borders, or other artwork (see #9).
3. **Set intentions**. Go into each journaling session with your own set of rules and expectations. For example:
    a. Allow free expression of ALL thoughts and feelings.
    b. Be careful not to judge, censor, criticize, or stifle yourself.
    c. You could set a timeframe (e.g., I'll write for 15 minutes) or time of day (e.g., upon waking, after lunch, before bed).
    d. Keep any timelines flexible, and allow for more time, if possible, when you are "in a good flow" of writing.
    e. Remember: "**There's no wrong way to journal**." You can't mess up because you're the one making the rules (and typically your eyes are the only ones that will see it).
4. Speaking of "who will see my journal," you may choose to **share your journaling** with someone you trust, such as a family member, close friend, therapist, or religious/spiritual advisor. You could ask the person to read it, or you could read the content out loud. Through sharing, you will hopefully: Receive validation, empathy, and compassion; "feel seen and heard," and feel the relief of a shared problem or burden (i.e., versus feeling alone in it). Also, you could ask for the other person's opinion or feedback… or conversely, ask them to "just listen."
   NOTE: I mention not filtering or self-censoring when you write… However, when sharing your work with others, feel free to leave out or change any parts that feel too sensitive or too personal to disclose.

Ideas for Journaling

1. **Daily**. People tend to think of this method when asked to journal ("Dear Diary, today I…"). It involves writing "what happened" throughout the course of your day. It could be a brief description, or it could go into great detail. It could include any combination of Who? Where? What? When? Why? How? It may or may not include thoughts and feelings (your choice!).

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2. **Free association**. Other ways to describe this are free form, stream-of-consciousness, "downloading," or "brain dump." Write or type anything that comes to mind without judging, filtering, self-censoring, criticizing, or holding back. Don't stop to analyze or reread. Since thoughts and feelings move quickly, it may help to leave out capital letters, punctuation, any words you deem "unnecessary," or even spaces! Don't worry about grammar, sentence structure, or making complete sentences. Also, this process can result in messy handwriting, so please give yourself a pass if this is a sensitive point.
3. **Thought web**. I recommend this strategy to help discover underlying thoughts and feelings about a specific person, subject, or situation. This is similar to idea #2 in that it involves free association, meaning "write whatever pops into your head." However, unlike true free association, you give yourself a starting point by choosing a key word.
    a. Start by writing your key word in the middle of the page. (I like to put a circle around it, but that's not mandatory.)
    b. Next, draw a line extending from any part of the first word, and write the next word that comes to mind. Now you have two words from which to branch off… You can add another line/word to the original one, or you can extend a line from the second word.
    c. Keep drawing new lines and words from any of the previous words as needed to express yourself.
    d. A short example would be: Start with "Apple" and branch off to "Red" which then leads to "Anger." Or "Apple" leads to "Round" then to "Circles" then to "Confusion."
    e. Although this method may elicit serious or emotionally "heavy" content, you can also use it in a playful way to see what funny associations your mind makes.
4. **Use a prompt**. A prompt is a short sentence that helps "get you started." These can be especially helpful when you're unsure what to write about.
    a. For example, "What went well today, and why?" "What does 'success' mean to me?" "If I could change one thing about the world, what would it be?" "Write about a memory that touches your heart." "What do I most need to get off of my mind today?"
    b. Another use of prompts is to select "how many" responses you would like. For example, "Name 3 good things that happened today." This can keep it time-limited and prevent you from feeling intimidated or overwhelmed by a broader question.
    c. You can do an internet search for general "journaling prompts," or make it more specific, such as "journaling prompts for forgiveness" or "journaling prompts for problem-solving."
    d. You could have a brainstorming session where you come up with personalized prompts.
    e. You might also choose to make a running list of prompts to keep on hand.
5. **Specific topic**. You may journal about a specific thing that feels "urgent," unresolved, or otherwise troubling, such as a situation, problem, conflict (e.g., internal, relationship, moral), decision, dilemma, or challenge. This might also be something you want to take a closer look at or "dive into," whether it be about yourself, someone else, a situation, or event (good or bad). You may choose to write in free form, paragraph form, or use bullet points/numbers with one sentence for each thought.

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6. **Gratitude or Happiness**. This is an example of using journaling to create and record positive feelings. Write about anything for which you are thankful, brings you joy, makes your heart sing, warms your heart, helps you laugh or smile, etc. I like to use this prompt: "What do I like, love, and appreciate about… (myself, my daughter, my house, my job, the world, etc.)?"
7. **Unsent Letter**. Write a letter to someone expressing what you truly think and feel without filtering or self-censoring. Most of the time, these letters are intended for personal use only and are not actually given to anyone. For example, if you are angry about an unresolved conflict, or if you were mistreated, you can "let them have it" without fear of getting into an argument, hurting their feelings, or making things worse. This can help you feel as if you've "had your say" even though the recipient will most likely never read it. Of course, you always have the option to send your letter if you need to do so for your own reasons (e.g., healing, closure). Another option is to use the first "raw" letter as a prototype for a second, calmer version that you may choose to send instead. And finally, as with any journaling method, you could also take a positive route and write all of the things you like, love, and adore about someone… and definitely share it! (see #6).
8. **Talking points**. This refers to communication. You could create one-sentence "discussion points" for an upcoming conversation. Talking points could include: Describing how you felt or what you thought in a specific situation; sharing observations about behavior or events; checking for or clearing up a misunderstanding; voicing a request or expectation; and sharing intentions.
9. **Doodle**. Draw anything that comes to mind (more free association as in #2). You could make a simple scribble and turn it into something else. You could draw patterns or shapes. You could do a "continuous line drawing," meaning you try to draw something without lifting your pen. Draw a simple scene or object. Add some color if that sounds like fun.
10. **Vent**! This is a deliberate, purposeful, intentional expression of negative feelings as opposed to the "let's see what comes up" approach of free association (see #2). There's also overlap with the unsent letter method (see #7). With a specific topic or person in mind, allow all of your angry, frustrated, vengeful, etc. thoughts pour out, as always without judgment, filtering, or self-censoring. Rant! Rave! Don't hold back! (You may also want to review the PRIVACY NOTE in #2 of the "What's the Purpose of Journaling?" section above.)

Have fun experimenting with these ideas to create your own personalized journaling experience!

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