



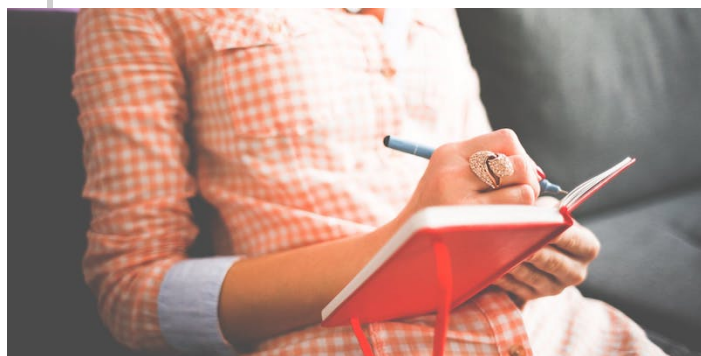
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83 Benefits of Journaling for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Management (PDF)

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“Writing in a journal reminds you of your goals and of your learning in life. It offers a place where you can hold a deliberate, thoughtful

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*conversation with yourself.” –
Robin S. Sharma*

You might picture a tween girl, laying on her bed with her feet waving lazily through the air and writing about her crush in a pink diary when you think of “journaling.”

The word often has that connotation for adults: the sense that it’s for young people who are trying to figure out who they are and deal with intense emotions and hormones.

While it can certainly be helpful for those purposes, journaling is not exclusively for teens and tweens—it’s for anyone who can write!

Simply putting words on a page will probably not get you all the benefits of journaling, but effective journaling can result in many positive outcomes and improvements to your quality of life.

This article contains:

- **What is Effective Journaling?**
- **The Scientific Research on Journal/Writing Therapy**
- **How Can Students Benefit from Journaling in and Out of the Classroom?**
- **30 Tips, Prompts, and Exercises for Journaling (PDF)**

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What is Effective Journaling?

Effective journaling is a journaling practice that helps you meet your goals or improves your **quality of life**. This can look different for each and every person, and the outcomes can vary widely, but they are almost always very positive.

Journaling can be effective for many different reasons and help you **reach a wide range of**

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goals. It can help you clear your head, make important connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and even buffer or reduce the effects of mental illness!

How Can We Use Writing to Increase Mental Health?

“Whether you’re keeping a journal or writing as a meditation, it’s the same thing. What’s important is you’re having a relationship with your mind.” – Natalie Goldberg

You might be wondering how writing in a journal can have a significant impact on your **mental health**. After all, it’s just putting some words on a page—how much can that really do for you?

It turns out that this simple practice can do quite a bit, especially for those struggling with mental illness or striving towards more positive mental health.

Journaling requires the application of the analytical, rational left side of the brain; while your left hemisphere is occupied, your right hemisphere (the creative, touchy-feely side) is given the freedom to wander and play (Grothaus, 2015)! Allowing your creativity to **flourish** and expand can be cathartic and make a big difference in your daily well-being.

Overall, journaling/expressive writing has been found to:



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- Boost your **mood**/affect
- Enhance your sense of well-being
- Reduce symptoms of depression before an important event (like an exam)
- Reduce intrusion and avoidance symptoms **post-trauma**
- Improve your working memory (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005)

In particular, journaling can be especially helpful for those with **PTSD** or a history of trauma. It's hypothesized that writing works to enhance our mental health through guiding us towards confronting previously inhibited emotions (reducing the stress from inhibition), helping us process difficult events and compose a coherent narrative about our experiences, and possibly even through repeated exposure to the negative emotions associated with traumatic memories (i.e., "extinction" of these negative emotions; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005).

Even for those without a traumatic experience to work through, we have a good idea of how writing can enhance our mental health. For instance, we know it can make us more aware (and **self-aware**!) and help us detect sneaky, unhealthy patterns in our thoughts and behaviors. It allows us to take more control over our lives and puts things in perspective. Further, it can help us shift from a negative **mindset** to a more positive one, especially about ourselves (Robinson, 2017).

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However, to have a positive impact on mental health, we need to be sure that we have an appropriate method. Simply doing a “brain dump” of words on the page may feel good in the moment, but there’s little evidence that it will **increase your well-being** or decrease your **symptoms of depression**.

Baikie and Wilhelm (2005) offer the following tips to ensure your journaling is constructive, gleaned from their comprehensive overview of the literature:

1. Write in a private and personalized space that is free from distractions.
2. Write at least three or four times, and aim for writing consecutively (i.e., at least once each day).
3. Give yourself some time to reflect and balance yourself after writing.
4. If you’re writing to overcome trauma, don’t feel obligated to write about a specific traumatic event—journal about what feels right in the moment.
5. Structure the writing, however, feels right to you.
6. Keep your journal private; it’s for your eyes only—not your spouse, not your family, not your friends, not even your therapist (although you can discuss your experience with your therapist, of course!).

Another good set of guidelines on effective journaling can be found on the **Center for**

Journal Therapy website. When you journal, remember the simple acronym: WRITE!

- **W – What** do you want to write about? Think about what is going on in your life, your current thoughts and feelings, what you're striving towards or trying to avoid right now. Give it a name and put it all on paper.
- **R – Review** or reflect on it. Take a few moments to be still, calm your breath, and focus. A little **mindfulness or meditation** could help in this step. Try to start sentences with "I" statements like "I feel...", "I want...", and "I think..." Also, try to keep them in the present tense, with sentence stems like "Today...", "Right now...", or "In this moment..."
- **I – Investigate** your thoughts and feelings through your writing. Just keep going! If you feel you have run out of things to write or your mind starts to wander, take a moment to re-focus (another opportunity for mindfulness meditation!), read over what you have just written, and continue on.
- **T – Time** yourself to ensure that you write for at least 5 minutes (or whatever your current goal is). Write down your start time and the projected end time based on your goal at the top of your page. Set a timer or alarm to go off when the time period you have set it up.
- **E – Exit** strategically and with introspection. Read what you have written and take a moment to reflect on it. Sum up your takeaway in one or two sentences, starting with statements like "As I read this, I

notice...”, “I’m aware of...”, or “I feel...” If you have any action items or steps you would like to take next, write them down now (Adams, n.d.).



Now you have an idea of how to get started with your journal, but you might need a little more convincing on the benefits. If so, read on to learn about the science behind journaling and journal therapy!

The Scientific Research on Journal/Writing Therapy

There is a ton of evidence out there on the outcomes of journal **writing therapy**, and overall this evidence points to its effectiveness in helping people identify and accept their emotions, **manage their stress**, and ease the symptoms of mental illness.

It has even been shown to impact physical well-being; avid journal writer and journalist Michael Grothaus notes that there are studies suggesting journaling can strengthen the immune system, drop blood pressure, help you sleep better, and generally keep you healthier (2015).

There are also other, more specific benefits for people struggling with a wide range of issues.

Can Journaling Help Manage Depression?

Yes! Journaling has been shown to be effective in helping people manage their depressive symptoms. Journaling is no substitute for professional guidance when the depression is particularly severe, but it can complement other forms of treatment or act as a stand-alone symptom management tool for those with mild depression.

Here's just a sampling of the evidence for journaling's effectiveness in managing depression:

- Expressive writing can reduce symptoms of depression in women who are struggling with the aftermath of intimate partner violence (Koopman, Ismailji, Holmes, Classen, Palesh, & Wales, 2005).
- Writing in a journal may also be as effective as **cognitive behavioral therapy** (CBT) for reducing symptoms of depression in high-risk adolescents (Stice, Burton, Bearman, & Rohde, 2006).
- Expressive journaling may not reduce the frequency of intrusive thoughts in depressed individuals, but it moderates their impact on depressive symptoms, leading to a reduction in symptoms (Lepore, 1997).
- Journaling can help college students who are vulnerable to depression reduce their brooding and rumination, two contributing

factors of depressive symptoms (Gortner, Rude, & Pennebaker, 2006).

- In general, people diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder reported significantly lower depression scores after three days of expressive writing, 20 minutes per day (Krpan, Kross, Berman, Deldin, Askren, & Jonides, 2013).

Overall, the benefits of journaling and expressive writing for those suffering from depression are pretty clear: it gives them the opportunity to release pent-up negative emotions, keeps them in a more positive frame of mind, and helps them build a buffer between their negative thoughts and their sense of well-being.

11 Benefits of Journaling for Anxiety

“For me, writing is a way of thinking. I write in a journal a lot. I’m a very impatient person, so writing and meditation allow me to slow down and watch my mind; they are containers that keep me in place, hold me still.” – Ruth Ozeki

Journaling can also help people suffering from anxiety disorders. Like depression, the positive outcomes are well-documented for this purpose. In fact, compared to many other aims when journaling, it is extremely well-suited to helping you **deal with anxiety**.

Why is it so beneficial for anxiety?

According to psychologist Barbara Markway,

“There’s simply no better way to learn about your thought processes than to write them down.”

She notes that to address our problematic thought patterns, we first have to actually know what they are! Journaling is instrumental in helping us identify our negative automatic self-talk and get to the root of our anxiety.

Writing in a journal can positively impact your anxiety through:

- Calming and clearing your mind.
- Releasing pent-up feelings and everyday stress.
- Letting go of negative thoughts.
- Exploring your experiences with anxiety.
- Writing about your struggles and your successes.
- Enhancing your **self-awareness** and teaching you about your triggers.
- Track your progress as you undergo treatment (Star, 2018).

Through mechanisms like those listed above, journaling has been shown to:

- Reduce anxiety in patients with multiple sclerosis (Hasanzadeh, Khoshknab, & Norozi, 2012).
- Reduce physical symptoms, health problems, and anxiety in women (LaClaire, 2008).
- Help students manage their stress and anxiety and improve their engagement and enhance meaning found in the classroom (Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2012).

As you may have guessed, the benefits of journaling naturally extend to more general stress management as well as anxiety.

11 Benefits of Journaling for Stress Management



Journaling is also an excellent method for anyone who simply wants to manage their stress, perhaps to keep it from pushing them well into the realm of anxiety and depression.

Keeping a journal can help you fully explore your emotions, release tension, and fully integrate your experiences into your mind (Scott, 2018). Further, it can help you work on reducing specific sources of stress or aid you in reaching

an important goal (perhaps reducing your overall stress?).

Besides the outcomes listed above, journaling can also help you manage your stress through:

- Decreasing symptoms of various health conditions
- Improving your cognitive functioning.
- Strengthening your immune system.
- Examining your thoughts and shifting your perspective.
- Reducing rumination and promoting action.
- Planning out your options and considering multiple outcomes of a situation (Scott, 2018).

Journaling can help with general sources of stress, but it is also a valuable tool for addressing issues and **reducing stress** from more specific problems.

The Importance of Journaling in Recovery

Whatever event, habit, or disorder you are struggling to overcome, journaling can help you find healing.

If you are suffering in the aftermath of a **traumatic event**, journaling can help you find the good in life. It can even help you see the positive side of experiencing the trauma, which helps reduce the severe symptoms that can accompany trauma (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002).

If you are grappling with an eating disorder, journal writing can be a huge source of relief and healing. Keeping a journal can help you stop distancing yourself from your issues, encourage you to confront your problems head-on, and reduce the obsessive component of your disorder (Rabinor, 1991).

If you are struggling with a debilitating psychiatric condition, journaling can help you get your thoughts down on paper and stop ruminating and worrying over them. This can free up your mind to manage your emotions and cope with stress that could trigger a relapse (Provencher, Gregg, Mead, & Mueser, 2002).

If the recovery you seek is for the death of a loved one, one of the most traumatic and heartbreaking events of all, journaling can help with that as well. Writing can give you a chance to process your enormous loss and reduce the most severe symptoms of grief. This has been proven to be especially effective for children dealing with bereavement (Kalantari, Yule, Dyregrov, Neshatdoost, & Ahmadi, 2012).

However, the recovery that journaling can have the biggest impact on is recovery from addiction. If you're struggling to overcome an addiction, journaling can help you record your struggles and your accomplishments, hold yourself accountable and allow you an opportunity to work through difficult thoughts and emotions in a healthy manner (Milios, 2015).

Why does journaling help so much with recovery?

Writing our thoughts, feelings, and actions down in a journal allows us to craft and maintain our sense of self and solidifies our identity. It helps us reflect on our experiences and discover our authentic self. Keeping a journal can give you a chance to create and consider the narrative of your life, with all of the choices you have made and the memories that make you who you are today. In a word, the benefits of journaling on recovery is “cathartic” (New Roads Treatment, 2017).

If you want to really up the impact of journaling on your recovery, consider writing with gratitude.

What Are the Benefits of Writing with Gratitude?

You might get a quicker answer if you asked, “What AREN’T the benefits of writing with gratitude?”

Cultivating **gratitude** has already been shown to be an extremely effective tool for reaching all kinds of goals and improving quality of life. However, you don’t necessarily need to write to cultivate gratitude—there are lots of ways to be more grateful.

Luckily, applying gratitude specifically through writing can contribute to most of the general benefits of increasing gratitude, and some of the outcomes reported from gratitude journaling include:

- Boosting your long-term well-being, encouraging exercise, reducing physical pain and symptoms, and increasing both length and quality of sleep (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).
- Increasing your optimism and, indirectly, your happiness and health (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).
- Reducing your symptoms of depression, for as long as you continue **gratitude journaling** (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).
- Helping you make progress toward your goals (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).
- Making you friendlier, more open, and more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, which can enhance and expand your social support network (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).



If none of these benefits make you wonder what gratitude journaling could do for you, it seems you don't need the help that gratitude can give you! Joking aside, there are more benefits to gratitude journaling than we can feasibly list here, and there's almost certainly at least one or two that are desirable to you. It's worth a shot!

9 Psychological Benefits of Journaling Every Day

Journaling every day is a great habit to get into. Of course, any time you can carve out for effective journaling is time well spent, but the best practice is a regular, daily journaling session.

What is so great about journaling every day?

There are tons of benefits to keeping a regular journaling practice, including:

- It promotes and enhances your creativity in a way that once-in-a-while journaling simply can't match.
- It propels you toward your goals, helping you bring your vision to life.
- It offers you a daily opportunity to recover from the daily stressors and leave the unimportant stuff behind.
- It can help you identify things that would otherwise go unnoticed, such as patterns in your thinking, the influences behind your feelings and behavior, and any incongruencies in your life.
- It gives you a chance to get all of your emotions out on paper, reducing your stress and releasing tension.
- It facilitates learning by creating a record of the lessons and key ideas you have discovered and helps you remember them more effectively.

- It boosts your overall **sense of gratitude** and your sensitivity to all that you have to be grateful for.
- It makes you a better writer and helps you discover your “voice.”
- It leaves a written record of your experiences, which can be helpful today and extremely precious years into the future (Hardy, 2017).

For a more comprehensive list of all the potential benefits of journaling (although lacking in references), check out **this page** from John Robson and Patrice Steen.

How Can Students Benefit from Journaling in and Out of the Classroom?

Along with all of the groups mentioned above, students of all ages can benefit from journaling as well. It has proven effective in an area that is vital for child and adolescent development: increasing self-efficacy and promoting a healthy sense of control over one’s life (Fritson, 2008).

In addition, children can gain some of the same benefits that adults get from journaling, like:

- Helping them deal with “big feelings” in a healthy and safe way.
- Improving their writing skills, including spelling, sentence structure, vocabulary, and

grammar.

- Enhancing their reading skills.
- Enhancing their communication skills (both written and verbal).
- Taking advantage of an outlet for things that are difficult to express or uncomfortable to share.
- Exploring and identifying their emotions.
- Allowing themselves to feel “taboo” emotions like anger.
- Examining the pros and cons of something to help them make a decision.
- Reflecting on their thoughts about something after the fact.
- Gaining insight into their own motives and the motives of others.
- Seeing the positives as well as the negatives.
- Planning out tough conversations in advance (Morin, 2018; Rodriguez, 2017)

Most of these benefits will serve children both in the classroom and out of it, helping them to navigate difficult parts of life in different domains.

To help children gain these advantages from journaling, suggest the following journals for them to try (at home, **in the classroom**, or both):

1. **Nature Journals** – these journals can be used to keep track of the flora and fauna

they see in nature, especially the species that interest them most.

2. **Daily Prompt** – responding to a daily prompt can give children a good open-ended opportunity to write about a new topic every day.
3. **Feelings Journal** – when writing about their feelings, children can learn new vocabulary and get better at identifying and recognizing emotions in themselves and others.
4. **Vacation Journal** – this fun version can be a good bonding opportunity for the whole family (or the whole classroom, depending on how this journaling exercise is carried out); all the child needs to do is add pictures, memories, souvenirs, and anything else that reminds them of their vacation (Morin, 2018).

To learn more about how to implement journaling in the classroom, check out Karen Bromley's book on the subject: *Journaling: Engagement in Reading, Writing, and Thinking*. Bromley describes 13 different types of journals you can introduce in the classroom and shares several case studies of successful journaling implementations. If this piques your interest, [click here](#) to purchase the book!

30 Tips, Prompts, and Exercises for Journaling (PDF)

One of the aspects of journaling that makes it so effective is that writing in your journal can be a “keystone” habit that helps you focus your energy and attention where it will be most effective. You can’t fix everything in your life all at once, and trying to start good habits and stop bad habits in the span of a day will likely lead to failure. Real, positive change happens when you take on only what you can handle; often, changing one important or keystone habit will have ripple effects that improve your life and get you closer to your goals in other areas as well.

Journaling is one such habit; it can keep you centered, help you identify your **strengths and weaknesses**, give you an opportunity for **reflection** and self-analysis, and much, much more. Simply keeping a record of your thoughts, feelings, and actions can have a surprisingly big impact on your life.

If you’ve decided to start (or re-start) keeping a journal but you’re not sure how to go about it, there are some excellent tips, suggestions, ideas, prompts, and advice in this section that you might find helpful.

First, here are seven ideas you can use when you simply have no idea what you want to write about:

1. **Describing Experiences** – Sometimes, all you need to get going with writing is to describe what you did today, what you thought about, or what happened in the world today; you might find that you have a

lot more to say on the topic than you thought!

2. **Affirmations** – When you're out of ideas and feeling down about your abilities or your self-worth, try writing **affirmations** (e.g., "I am a good writer" or "I have a lot of talent"); you'll find something to write about, and as a bonus you'll get a boost to your well-being!
3. **Gratitude** – As mentioned earlier, writing with **gratitude** is a great practice. It can also help you kickstart your journal entry if you're feeling stuck. Simply write about the people and aspects of your life that you are grateful for.
4. **Critical Self-Analysis** – If you're feeling particularly blue, this one can be risky, but it could also be really helpful in figuring out your next steps. Ask yourself questions like "Who am I?" and "What did I do right/wrong?" Consider what you could do better or what is holding you back, and write about it.
5. **Mining for Anxiety** – This might sound unpleasant, but it can actually be a cathartic experience. We often feel anxiety that has ambiguous or unknown roots, which is no help when we're trying to soothe our irrational fears. Write about your anxiety, and keep digging until you get to root (this might take a few sessions).
6. **Performance Analysis** – Whatever your work, hobby, or activity of choice, write about your performance. Write about how you did, how you felt, what you could have

done better, or where you avoided pitfalls that brought you down before. This can help you keep track of your progress and lead to valuable insights.

7. **Go “Live on the Scene”** – This is a great in-the-moment technique to help you manage anxiety or strong emotions. As an event is transpiring that has you wringing your hands or struggling with powerful feelings, record things as they happen. You might notice some interesting things about your response (Motta, 2018)!

The Tiny Buddha website also has some interesting ideas and prompts that you can use to get started or get out of a rut. Their 10 tips are:

- Start writing about where you are in your life at this moment.
- For five to ten minutes, just start writing in a “stream of consciousness.”
- Start a dialogue with your inner child by writing in your subdominant hand.
- Cultivate an attitude of gratitude by maintaining a daily list of things you appreciate, including uplifting quotes.
- Start a journal of self-portraits.
- Keep a nature diary to connect with the natural world.
- Maintain a log of successes.
- Keep a log or playlist of your favorite songs.

- If there's something you are struggling with or an event that disturbing you, write about it in the third person.
- Develop your intuition (Hills, 2012).

If you don't have any trouble figuring out what you want to write about, there are some other tips and suggestions on keeping a journal that might help you boost the effectiveness of your practice, such as:



- Write first thing in the morning, right after you wake up.
- Write whenever you're out of your regular routine (e.g., on vacation, visiting family, or just feeling "disconnected").
- Give yourself a "reset" and take some time off from your other responsibilities; spend some time writing in your journal—allow your mind to relax and let the insights flow in on their own time.
- Prepare your mental state before journaling in whatever way works for you (e.g., exercise, talk to a close friend or family member, read something inspiring, meditate).

- Be radically honest with yourself and about yourself when journaling—no one else will see it, so there's no need to try to “look good” on the page!
- Write about your big picture dreams, your biggest goals, and the important stuff that's just on the horizon for you.
- Schedule a weekly planning session in which you decide what you are going to write about each day ahead of time.
- Don't worry about “rambling” or getting a bit off-track; you can also revisit what you've written and clarify or organize it later (Hardy, 2018).

Although there are tons of guides and tips out there on what to do when journaling to maximize effectiveness, there are also a few things to make sure you don't do:

1. Don't let it allow you to live in your head too much.
2. Don't let journaling turn you into a passive observer of your life (make sure you experience your life instead of thinking about how you'll write it up).
3. Don't get self-obsessed by writing about yourself all the time.
4. Don't let journaling become an exercise in self-blame instead of finding solutions.
5. Don't allow yourself to wallow in the negative aspects of your life (Stosny, 2013).

If all of these tips still haven't satisfied your need for guidance, check out [this helpful PDF](#) from Brandeis University on effective journaling, or [this one](#) from Loran Hills of the Tiny Buddha website, or [this handy e-book](#) from Mari L. McCarthy and the "Journaling for the Health of it" series.

Here are 11 worksheets for self-expressive writing created by Seph and Craig.



With all of these resources, you should be drowning in helpful tips and suggestions!

A Take Home Message

I hope you leave this piece with a better understanding of journaling and the many positive outcomes it can have for you and your loved ones. Of course, there are some downsides and potential negative side effects that can come from journaling, like overwhelming emotions, dragging up memories that you might rather leave forgotten, or pushing you into an introspective state that leaves you too focused on your inner experience and neglectful of your outer experience.

However, the benefits of journaling far outweigh the disadvantages or potential problems. I hope your takeaway from this piece is that journaling is an effective technique to help you manage

your stress, deal with symptoms of mental illness, and recover from trauma and that anyone can do it! You don't need to be an accomplished writer or a literary genius to benefit from writing down your thoughts and feelings.

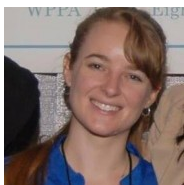
Your journal is for you and you alone, and keeping this in mind can make you feel impossibly free to pour your authentic self onto the page. Give a try! All you have to lose is a few minutes of your time, and you already know all you could gain.

Are you keeping a journal? What benefits do you get from journaling? Do you recommend journaling for your clients? Why or why not? Let us know in the comments!

Thanks for reading, and happy journaling!

References

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About the Author

Courtney Ackerman is a graduate of the positive organizational psychology and evaluation program at Claremont Graduate University. She is currently

working as a researcher for the State of California and her professional interests include survey research, well-being in the workplace, and compassion. When she's not gleefully crafting survey reminders, she loves spending time with her dogs, visiting wine country, and curling up in front of the fireplace with a good book or video game.

4 Comments



daniel *December 8, 2018 at 11:10 am* [Reply](#)

Thanks,
A great resource ,generously given and much appreciated.I am an avid journal writer and have been for years.It is literally a life saver activity. Thanks again.



Monica Gelinias *October 24, 2018 at 12:51 am* [Reply](#)

I am trying to download this article to print. Is that possible?



Cherlnell Lane *October 20, 2018 at 8:21 pm*

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This is a great resource I am working on a workshop on Journaling and this has helped out tremendously. I love it whenever I see things on journaling! Thank you for taking the time.



Philip *September 8, 2018 at 5:02 pm* [Reply](#)

Thank you for your very helpful guidance. I'm attempting writing down my experience of a life threatening disease. Before after, in amongst the hospital, day, weeks & months.

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