

## The New York Times

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### SELF-CARE

# What's All This About Journaling?

One of the more effective acts of self-care is also, happily, one of the cheapest.



By **Hayley Phelan**

Oct. 25, 2018

It was my ex-husband who got me journaling again. Our marriage was falling apart, and, on the advice of his friend, he had started to do “morning pages,” a daily journaling practice from the seminal self-help book “The Artist’s Way.”

Though I had kept a diary throughout my teen years and early 20s, somewhere along the way I’d fallen out of the habit. At 29, though, I was deeply unhappy and looking for answers wherever — *anywhere* — I could find them.

It helped.

Once the domain of teenage girls and the literati, journaling has become a hallmark of the so-called self-care movement, right up there with meditation. And for good reason: Scientific studies have shown it to be essentially a panacea for modern life. There are the obvious benefits, like a boost in mindfulness, memory and communication skills. But studies have also found that writing in a journal can lead to better sleep, a stronger immune system, more self-confidence and a higher I.Q.

Research out of New Zealand suggests that the practice may even help wounds heal faster. How is this possible? James W. Pennebaker, a social psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin who is considered the pioneer of writing therapy, said there isn’t one answer. “It’s a whole cascade of things that occur,” he said.



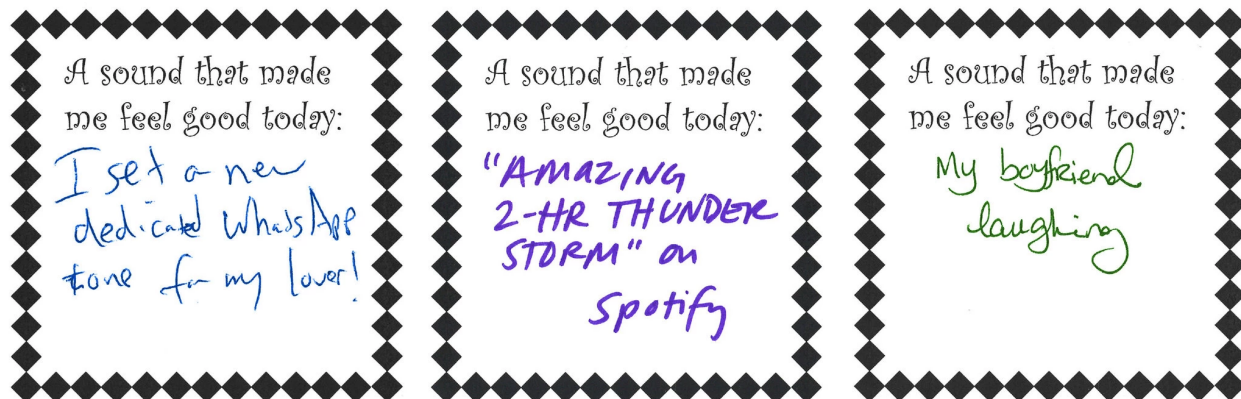
Labeling emotions and acknowledging traumatic events — both natural outcomes of journaling — have a known positive effect on people, Dr. Pennebaker said, and are often incorporated into traditional talk therapy.

At the same time, writing is fundamentally an organizational system. Keeping a journal, according to Dr. Pennebaker, helps to organize an event in our mind, and make sense of trauma. When we do that, our working memory improves, since our brains are freed from the enormously taxing job of processing that experience, and we sleep better.

This in turn improves our immune system and our moods; we go to work feeling refreshed, perform better and socialize more. “There’s no single magic moment,” Dr. Pennebaker said. “But we know it works.”

I didn’t know any of this when I started journaling again two years ago. I was in a place where I would have tried anything to feel better; if someone had told me that a daily practice of morning somersaults helped her get through a difficult time, you better believe I would have started rolling.

But, as it was, I dug up an old notebook, flipped to the third page (the first felt too exposed) and started writing. That entry begins as follows: “First ‘morning pages.’ It’s not that I can’t think of anything to write. The question is, where to begin?”



## So what do I write about?

This is often the first question a budding journal writer might ask him or herself. In some ways, though, it's the most misguided — one thing journaling has taught me is that the mind is a surprising place, and you often don't know what it may be hiding until you start knocking around in there.

In other words: Writing in your journal is the only way to find out what you should be writing about.

But when I was just getting started, the first place I went looking for guidance was the book that had inspired my ex-husband: “The Artist’s Way,” by Julia Cameron. Ms. Cameron describes the morning pages as “three pages of longhand writing, strictly stream-of-conscious,” done as soon as one wakes. They are “not meant to be *art*. Or even *writing*.” They need not be smart, or funny, or particularly deep — in fact, it's better if they're not.

Ms. Cameron encourages practitioners to think of them as “brain drain,” a way to expel “all that angry, petty, whiny stuff” that “eddies through our subconscious and muddies our days.” After years working as a writer and journalist, making my living trying to sound smart on the page, this was a huge relief.

“I'd like to say here that morning pages differ from conventional journaling, in which we set a topic and pursue it,” Ms. Cameron said when I spoke with her recently for this article. “In morning pages, we do not set a topic. It is as though we have A.D.D.: jumping from topic to topic, gathering insights and directions from many quarters.”

On the other hand, Dr. Pennebaker's research has found that journaling about traumatic or disturbing experiences specifically has the most measurable impact on our overall well-being.

In his landmark 1988 study, outlined in his book "Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotion," students were randomly assigned to write about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics for four days in a row. Six weeks after the writing sessions, those that had delved into traumatic experiences reported more positive moods and fewer illnesses than those writing about everyday experiences.

## How often must I write, and when?

Dr. Pennebaker's research has found that even a one-time 15-to-30-minute session of focused journal writing can be beneficial. In fact, he said he is not "a big fan of journaling every day."

"One of the interesting problems of writing too much, especially if you're going through a difficult a time, is that writing becomes more like rumination and that's the last thing in the world you need," he said. "My recommendation is to think of expressive writing as a life course correction. As opposed to something you have commit to doing every day for the rest of your life."

If you're distressed about something, Dr. Pennebaker advises, set aside three to four days to write for 15 to 20 minutes a day about it. If you don't find a benefit from it, he says, "stop doing it. Go jogging. See a therapist. Go to a bar. Go to

church.”

## What tools should I use?

Dr. Pennebaker is also not a purist when it comes to tools. Techies can take heart in knowing that, contrary to the romantic ideal, typing out journal entries on a laptop or even on a phone can yield effects that are just as positive, particularly if it's more comfortable and convenient for you. The point is simply to get started.

“Try doing it different ways,” Dr. Pennebaker said. “Some people like writing with their nondominant hand. Others find talking to a tape recorder works too. Experiment.”

Over the years, I have switched up my process here and there, even embarking on an overly ambitious plan involving color-coded pens. The one I've come back to again and again, however, is closest to what Ms. Cameron advocates: I write three to five pages every morning by hand.

For her, the timing and frequency is essential to a beneficial practice. “Jungians tell us we have about a 45-minute window before our ego's defenses are in place in the morning,” she said. “Writing promptly upon awakening, we utilize the authenticity available to us in that time frame.”

## Will it change my life?

Journaling may sound hokey to some. But it can be one of the most useful and cost-effective tools we have to forge a better, more emotionally and mentally healthy life. As Dr. Pennebaker said of his research: “I'm not a granola-crunching

kind of guy. I got into journaling because I'm interested in what makes people tick."

Ms. Cameron's book, on the other hand, is steeped in the kind of earnest spirituality that New Age skeptics will no doubt bristle at. Yet one of the quotations that has stuck with me the most is straightforward and practical: "It is very difficult to complain about a situation morning after morning, month after month, without being moved to constructive action."

When I started journaling, I felt stuck. I was nearing 30, facing the personal reckoning that always comes with such milestones. I was unhappily married and dissatisfied with my career. Worst of all, I had no idea what would, theoretically, make me happy. I didn't know what I wanted.

Then journaling provided me with an important outlet for the debilitating anxiety that had come to paralyze me at odd hours each day. And besides, I enjoyed it. It was fun to wake up every morning and spew a hurried black scrawl all over those straight blue lines.

Still, I remained unconvinced by Ms. Cameron's grander claims about how journaling could change one's life. And yet, today, as I write this, just two years later, my life has completely changed: I split from my partner of 10 years; began a new, fulfilling relationship; enrolled in an M.F.A. program; rekindled my freelance writing career; and am planning a move to Los Angeles.

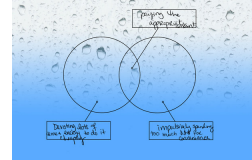
I don't know how journaling helped me make these changes. Perhaps, as Dr. Pennebaker may suggest, it simply allowed me to purge some of my anxiety, leading to a better night's sleep and more energy to accomplish the task. Or maybe, as Ms. Cameron would say, it put me in contact with my very own spiritual guide. Certainly, I got to know the dusty corners of my brain better, and, when I did, my true desires became harder to ignore.

In the end, though, I'm not sure I care how it worked. The point is, for me, it did. And, if nothing else, I now have a written record of the more notable — and, in retrospect, often hilarious — ups and downs along the way.

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