



writing toward wellness

Journal writing can help you start a new chapter in your life—

one that's physically and emotionally healthier.

WORDS | Rachel B. Levin

We're turning the page on a new year, which means it's an excellent time to literally turn a page ... in your journal.

If you already have a practice of putting your thoughts and feelings on paper (or typing them in a digital app), you probably know that journal writing is an ideal way to process the transitions of life. The act of writing is a meditative pause that allows us to reflect on experiences in the past year (or month or day) and use the insights that emerge to distill our goals, hopes, and dreams for the one ahead.

Perhaps you're aiming to cultivate a happier, healthier "you" in 2023? Journaling can support that, too. Abundant research has proven that journal writing is a powerful wellness practice. Putting your deepest thoughts and feelings into writing (aka "expressive writing") can help heal your body and bolster your mental health.

The benefits are so expansive that you might just want to make regular journal writing one of your New Year's resolutions.

Let's get physical

The physical health benefits of expressive writing were first documented scientifically in the 1980s. In a now-famous experiment, research psychologist James W. Pennebaker found that people could lower their risk of illness just by writing about their emotions.

Subjects in the study were assigned to write for 15-20 minutes a day, for four consecutive days, about either traumatic topics or non-emotional ones. In the weeks and months after the writing task, it turned out that those who wrote about trauma made 43 percent fewer doctor visits for illness than those who wrote about superficial topics.

About a decade later, another study revealed that writing about stressful events doesn't just keep people healthier—it can actually diminish the symptoms of chronic conditions. In the study, expressive writing improved lung function among asthma patients and decreased disease severity among rheumatoid arthritis sufferers. Today, the list of ailments whose somatic >

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symptoms are known to improve with expressive writing has grown to include irritable bowel syndrome, breast cancer, and lupus, among others.

How does it work? While keeping your innermost thoughts and feelings bottled up can cause physiological stress, getting them out on the page is a stress-reliever associated with beneficial biological changes. Expressive writing has been shown to boost immune function, lower resting heart rate, promote sleep, and accelerate healing from wounds and injuries.

Pretty impressive for something you can do in as few as 15 minutes each session, in a 99-cent notebook.

Write your heart out

It's not necessarily easy to write about traumatic events and difficult emotions. Temporarily, you might feel sad and even shed some tears.

But any negative psychological effects of expressive writing are typically short-lived. In the long term, writing about the tough stuff can actually improve your mental health. Studies show it can ease anxiety, even in chronic worriers, and lessen the symptoms of depression. And if you find yourself in the throes of a traumatic event, expressive journaling can fortify your emotional resilience.

But expressive writing isn't the only effective choice of writing style. Gratitude journaling (writing about what you're grateful for) has also been shown to reduce psychological stress and significantly improve mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and PTSD. It can create new neural pathways in your brain that support positive emotions.

Because journal writing is so impactful for mental health with negligible side effects, some physicians are now proposing that it should be “prescribed” by primary care doctors for common mental health issues.

And as for keeping that New Year's resolution? Journal writing can up your chances of following through—because writing about adopting healthy behaviors can help make them stick. ▲

WHEN INSPO DOESN'T STRIKE

Staring at the blank page and not sure what to write? Try one of these journaling jump-starters.



Go with gratitude:

Begin with “Today, I am grateful for...” to reflect on your present gifts.



Check in with your body:

Close your eyes and slowly scan your body for any tension or pain. Ask your spot of discomfort, “What are you trying to tell me?” and write the answer.



Link events to feelings:

Write about what happened in your day and then explore how each event made you feel.

TAKE THIS TO HEART

Journal writing can support your heart health during times of stress. So can these herbal supplements.

- **Ashwagandha** can mitigate the negative effects of mental stress on the heart.
- **Ginseng** can counteract cardiovascular changes caused by stressors.
- **Rhodiola rosea** can ease stress-related symptoms and protect the heart from damage.

Rachel B. Levin is a Los Angeles-based wellness and sustainability writer. Her Word Medicine newsletter (wordmedicine.substack.com) explores the science of writing to heal. Follow her on Instagram @rachelbethlevin. rachelbethlevin.com

Use as directed

You don't have to write in your journal every single day in order to reap its physical and mental health benefits. Pennebaker recommends writing only when you think you need it: "It is like having medicine in your cabinet," he notes in his book *Writing to Heal*.

