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## Could keeping a journal help your mental health?

There are a number of methods for coping with stress, including mindfulness, meditation and exercise, all of which are good options. But many people are touting another way to keep worries at bay: journaling.

Put simply, journaling is a way of recording your thoughts and emotions in writing. It's something I've often turned to when I'm feeling [anxious](#), as a way of thinking through issues and understanding them better. It's also really cathartic to write things down - it's like offloading worries from your head on to the page in front of you. Writing down your worries can be a healthy way for anyone to help relieve stress, and all you need is a pen and paper.

"Some people like to keep a traditional journal, like a diary, with a daily reflection or affirmation but it doesn't have to be as structured as this," says [Rebecca Vivash](#), a counsellor and member of the [British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists](#).

"The calm and comfort that come with putting your thoughts and feelings down on paper, together with the insight that comes from identifying and understanding your emotional triggers, is a real recipe for improved mental health."

### Benefits of journaling

From work and [money concerns](#) to health worries, it's normal to feel overwhelmed sometimes - but particularly at the moment. The uncertainty and fear surrounding the pandemic have seriously taken their toll on our mental health, leaving lots of us anxious, [stressed](#) and feeling low.

One of the key benefits of journaling on your mental health is that it helps with emotional regulation. Keeping a written journal can help to identify patterns in your feelings and behaviours, which in turn allows you to recognise whether there are specific triggers that affect your mood.

"These can be explored either in therapy or through your own reflections, as you consider alternative ways to control how these triggers affect you," Vivash says.

Journaling is also about externalising worries and fears too. Your journal can be an outlet for anxiety where you can 'worry dump' and get all your thoughts and emotions down on paper.

"Writing your worries down can be cathartic in itself as the simple act of putting pen to paper helps to organise your thoughts," adds Vivash. "It can also help to revisit your writings the next day, often a new morning with a fresh perspective can reduce the intensity of your [anxiety](#)."

## Positive journaling

But a journal doesn't have to be all about negative emotions. Positive psychology, placing emphasis on the good stuff, can help to shift our mindset to a more positive one. And the 'little wins' we experience don't have to be major events or milestones – it can be as small as a text from a loved one, or seeing the sun come out.

It's easy to dismiss positive psychology as happy talk but, in general, we have a tendency to focus on our difficult experiences by default. "Actively bringing the positives to the forefront of our mind and into a journal can really help to improve mood," Vivash says. "It can also help us to feel that we have some semblance of control over our lives, particularly at the moment, with the outside world looking so bleak and uncertain."

Yuko Nippoda, psychotherapist and spokesperson from the [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#), adds that journaling can help you better understand yourself. "It is a very good way to get to know yourself, to take control of yourself and create your own world," she says. "Writing journals is a productive part of your personal development."

# How to start journaling

## Try 'free writing'

Set aside up to ten minutes each day at a time when you are usually less busy. It can help to channel your 'stream of consciousness' – aka, writing down whatever comes into your head.

"I often recommend 'free writing', whereby you put pen to paper – or finger to keyboard – and just write, unfiltered, without pausing to check spelling, grammar, punctuation," Vivash says. "It can be really insightful to journal in this way and often leads to some valuable exploration around what is going on for you that you might not have previously been aware of."

## Pick a topic

You could also try picking a topic each day. This could be a broad subject such as your relationship, friendships or work, depending on what is on your mind.

"Within each topic, reflect on your fears, hopes, ambitions, what you wish you'd done differently, how you made a positive impact, how you arrived at your decisions," Vivash adds. "There are so many different ways to explore your world in a journal."

## Think positive

Specifically trying to 'be positive' can feel quite trite, especially if you are feeling [anxious](#). That being said, it can help to write down three things that you are grateful for at the end of each day. "This can be really simple – just a short sentence to summarise each one can be a great mood booster," Vivash says.

## Remember it is only for you

When you start to write a journal, you may feel self-conscious or embarrassed. "If this happens, it is useful to write about these feelings," Nippoda says. "Your journal is only for you and you do not need to show it to anybody, so it is your secret friend."

"Please do not think that you need to write perfectly. If you want, you can include images, pictures and colours and you can swear if you feel angry," she adds. "One page can be filled with very untidy circles, spirals or zigzag lines. In your journal you can write anything in any way you like, as it is only for you."

### Keep the journals safe

Keep the journals somewhere private but accessible as it can be useful to re-read, to reflect on how you coped with past issues and what helped get you through. "At some point in the future - it could be the next day, or in a week, month or year - you might read back what you have already written," says Nippoda. "New awareness might come along."

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