

THERAPEUTIC JOURNALING

Rationale

As children and teens many of us kept journals. We called them “diaries.” Some parents promote journaling by buying their child a Dear Diary book of blank pages, complete with a lock and key to reinforce the power and privacy of journaling. Typically, such journals are topical or relational. Many a teenage girl fantasizes about “that cute boy who sits two rows up and one over in front of me in math class.” Boys often write stories about their athletic exploits, or they take on the persona of a superhero or action figure. People make these journal entries periodically, when they are in the mood, or when they want to record an event or an intense situation. Such topical or relational journals have their place, and are a good place to vent feelings but they are not therapeutic.

Therapeutic journals are designed to provide a reference and a foundation for everyday healing and stress release. You are the main character in your journal. You chronicle your daily events and your thoughts and feelings about them. The act of journaling becomes second nature to you, just as brushing your teeth or using the bathroom is before going to bed each night. A therapeutic journal, over time, provides a vehicle for healing, for noticing your life and the activities that promote or detract from your health. It is a source of perspective, hope, and change.

Procedure

Dedicate a new, clean notebook or pad for the purpose of journaling. Opening a pass protected file on your computer would also work, but I find that the hard copy version is more therapeutic and not as easily deleted.

Begin your journal entries with today's date. Some people simply launch into the day's events from there. Others find added value by making each journal entry a letter to God. If you choose the latter, don't get all flowery, with the King James "thee's and thou's." It's just you and God, so write it because you are writing to a dear and trusted friend. Go through your day's events and your feelings about those events. You don't want any one journal entry to be much longer than a standard notebook page, so you won't be able to include all of the day's events.

Focus on your highlights and lowlights. Try to avoid editorial comment about people and places, as these can be distracting to the therapeutic value of journaling. With each recorded event, think of how or why it happened and also write your feelings before, during, and after the event.

After completing your journal entry, rank the day on a scale of 1 to 10. If your journal is generic, your rankings define relatively bad days (1) from good days (10). However, the process can be tailored to address specific issues in your life as well. The rankings could measure how depressed, anxious, or stressed you were that day. They could also define your relative success at conquering an addiction, losing weight, or making new friends, for example.

Make your ranking after you write your journal entry. Over the years, I have found that rankings may change by virtue of the journaling process, so include journaling in the day's events and feelings that you are ranking.

The best time to journal is right before going to bed. This is a natural break in your day's events. It promotes the value of bringing the day to a close with journaling. It is easily associated with other bedtime routines, and therefore more likely to become a positive habit. When effectively written, journaling should not take longer than ten minutes per night.

Therapeutic Benefits of Journaling

1. It increases your self-worth over time. You are committing to a positive behavior that sheds light on your thoughts and feelings and gives you a forum for perspective and release.
2. It brings definitive closure to the day's events, thereby making it less likely for you to feel overwhelmed. Days don't bleed over to the next when you have "closed the book" on today by journaling.
3. It increases your feelings of personal control. You choose what goes into the journal and what's not worth recording. You see the connection between action and reaction in your daily events. You begin to focus on changing the things over which you have control, rather than putting time and energy into changing things over which you have no control.
4. It becomes a repository of tools for living a fulfilling and productive life. Previous entries become reference material for making subsequent decisions to help you continue your journey toward "having life more abundantly" (John 10:10)
5. It becomes a source of ideas for ways to change your feelings for the next day. When you've had a bad day, you can thumb back through your journal entries to find a particularly good day. In re-reading that day's journal entry, you will find something that you can do to increase your ranking for tomorrow.
6. It becomes a track record, and your positive changes are more noticeable over time. Some people even graph their daily rankings to visually appreciate their progress.
7. You become much better at capturing the essence of what you are feeling. You also get really good at noticing subtle differences, shades, or nuances in your feelings. At

first you know clearly how a 1 ranking differs from a 10 ranking. With time and practice, you get good at distinguishing a 4 from a 5. Such subtle distinctions promote healing and control over the subtle changes in your feelings.

Journal Spin-offs

Although not therapeutic journaling per se, several forms of therapeutic writing often spin off from the journaling process. They include;

1. “To Do” lists. People naturally feel more organized while journaling. It is likely that the process may lead to keeping a separate list of things to do tomorrow that will enhance your journey. If you write these lists, keep them relatively short, five or less items. Also, actually cross each item off as it is completed. Such a simple act is a literal affirmation of your success and motivates you to go to the next item. It also is helpful to attach a time estimate to each item, so that you can gauge your efforts through the day.
2. Letters. As a part of bringing closure to ended relationships, promoting healing from bad relationships, and providing a context for apology/forgiveness, therapeutic letters are valuable. I encourage writing two letters, if you intend to actually communicate with the other person. The first letter is written with the knowledge that it is not going to be sent. This “letter not sent” gives you opportunity to put any level of emotional intensity and/or invective that you need to release. It becomes a personal brainstorming session, where you write out everything that comes to mind. The second letter is edited for the purpose of the recipient reading it. The purpose of the letter not sent is changing you. With the letter sent, you hope to change the recipient.

3. Time sensitive goals. This would be a list of objectives to be completed, goals to be reached within a prescribed time frame. Often the goals are listed as;
 - a. By one month from now, I will...
 - b. By six months from now, I will...
 - c. By one year from now, I will...

The purpose of such goal statements is to help you keep the big picture in mind and stay on track. They promote a longer term healing experience.

Getting Started

Tonight would be good. However, while therapeutic journaling works best when it is on-going, give yourself a short period of time, a week or a month, to try it out and see how it feels. Consider this a personal experiment before committing long-term to the process. You can tweak the process to see what works best for you. With consistency it will become a positive habit that will continue to promote your healthy journey.