

START YOUR OWN JOURNAL
by Alison Waines

As part of learning about yourself and trying to make changes, a 'feelings and awareness' Journal can really help. You may already be doing this for yourself, but you may wish to look again at how you make your diary entries, to incorporate some of the factors below.

Keeping a journal of your emotional life, your moods, habits, feelings and so on, can be a very useful tool for self-exploration and self-understanding. You can look back and notice a lot about yourself and you can use it as a way of getting thoughts and feelings 'out of your head' and try to make some sense of them. This in itself can be a great release for stress! It can also help you to look after yourself and be aware of your needs and inner resources. It is not a conventional diary of recording day to day events.

Some suggestions for writing your Journal:

- Make regular entries (every day at first, if you can)
- Use 'I feel' statements (rather than focus on other people or events)
- Try to notice things about yourself, your patterns and habits
- Reflect on what is 'working' and what is 'not working' in your life.
- Identify areas you want to improve and change.
- Notice the Inner Critic within you (and work on challenging it)
- Notice the Inner Nurturing voice (and work on developing it)
- Notice the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' you demand of yourself
- Include the positive as well as the negative
- Reflect on your own personal needs and what you truly want from life
- Reflect on how you deal with problems, anxiety and set-backs
- Include your hopes and fears, strengths and limitations
- Include risks, new possibilities, new opportunities, new choices, goals
- If you wish, you could list your accomplishments each day, even small achievements
- Include drawings, brainstorming, mind-maps

The Clearing Process

One very useful way to get started on a Journal is to write for 20 minutes at the start or end of the day, using your writing to clear away lingering worries, niggles, troubles, doubts, problems, anxieties and as yet, unresolved issues. There might be recent events which have made you feel angry or resentful, which you have not spoken about or worked through. There may be new problems that have emerged which you can hardly bear to face. This is all the stuff that goes round and round in your head and never seems to go any where.

You do this 'clearing' by writing first thing in the morning if possible, and allowing all your thoughts to spill out on to the page. If you get stuck, keep your pen moving and as you do so you will go beneath the surface of your thinking into something deeper. You may discover feelings you did not even know you were carrying around with you.

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Don't be concerned with grammar or spelling, or whether what you write is making sense. You do not even need to re-read it. You can tear it up as soon as you have finished if you wish. The point is to 'empty' all the junk out of your head by putting it on the page and then to start the day with a fresher state of mind. Our mind is rather like a vacuum cleaner. It 'sucks' up worries, half-formed ideas, un-resolved problems, un-tackled concerns and collects and stores them all. We often go over and over these things in our mind, but never seem to get anywhere with them. Or we might have troubled sleep and disturbing dreams where fears and anxieties keep bubbling up. These are all the bits of 'dust' we accumulate which leave us stressed and burdened. We need to keep emptying that 'vacuum cleaner' out of our mind, we need to regularly clear it out and let everything go so that we feel lighter and have more clarity about our lives. This is an excellent way to get started with your Journal. Many people use this method as an on-going daily process.

The Constructive Journal

This method is beneficial for adding constructive and practical support for yourself, beyond the 'Clearing process'. When you are familiar with the above process and can do this easily and quickly each time you use it, you can add the following stages to your writing:

1) At the end of your 'clearing' **add a conclusion or summing up**. This is a way of drawing together what you have written and taking an overview. For example, you may realise that your writing focuses on issues with one particular person, or you may notice that you are not adjusting well to certain changes.

2) After your summing up, **add 'Action Points'** for yourself. Add ideas of how you might tackle the problems you have written about. Add ideas for how things could change, plans and goals - brainstorm possible improvements. Then break these ideas into smaller stages and put down the very first step you could take towards putting these changes into practice.

This adds a constructive, problem-solving aspect to your writing where you can start to gain some control and a sense of moving forward. It is also ideal to use this sort of writing in conjunction with counselling sessions, so that we look at your concerns together, find strategies for improvement and review and monitor your progress.

Suggested further reading:

The Self-Esteem Journal: Using a Journal to Build Self-Esteem: Alison Waines (2004)

Don't forget that sometimes 'self-help' of this kind isn't enough - and you may need the support of a professional Counsellor or Life-Coach.