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**Pen, Paper, Power! Five Benefits of Journal Writing**

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Not everyone is willing to try writing as a primary or supplementary approach to problem solving. Those who are—even when they are skeptical at first—almost always find writing to be a powerful and surprisingly accessible means to insight, healing, growth and change.

The handwritten personal journal has enjoyed a renaissance as a tool for problem solving, life management and creative expression. It’s impossible to know how many journal writers there are—journaling is, after all, usually a solitary act—but a popular brand of blank books is estimated to sell more than 1,000,000 journals per year.[[1]](#endnote-1) Considering that this number accounts for only one manufacturer of blank books, and the majority of journal writers choose spiral notebooks or composition books, the number of potential journal writers out there is staggering.

As a licensed psychotherapist and the founder/director of the [Center for Journal Therapy](http://www.journaltherapy.com/) in Denver, Colorado, the use of journals in the counseling process has been my life’s work for more than thirty years. I have worked with men and women of all ages and stations in life, with all manner of presenting problems. Even those with literacy limitations can successfully use writing.

There are many reasons to journal other than emotional healing. Here are five benefits to expressing yourself on paper.

1. **Writing by hand can make learning easier.** Neuroscientists are strongly opposed to the decline in teaching penmanship, or cursive writing, in public schools, “When we write, a unique neural circuit is automatically activated,” said Stanislas Dehaene, a psychologist at the Collège de France in Paris. “There is a core recognition of the gesture in the written word, a sort of recognition by mental simulation in your brain. And it seems that this circuit is contributing in unique ways we didn’t realize. Learning is made easier.”[[2]](#endnote-2)
2. **Writing by hand can improve memory.** A research study comparing college students who took notes on laptops and those who took notes by hand found that students remembered lectures better with handwritten notes. It seems digital note-takers tend to transcribe a lecture rather than assimilate it. Manual note-taking requires discernment about ranking information according to its relative importance, allowing the hand-writers to remember core learning more readily.[[3]](#endnote-3)
3. **Writing in a journal, by hand, helps you achieve the maximum benefit of journaling.** My anecdotal research as a journal therapist suggests that clients who write by hand are much more likely to have positive attachment to their journals and sustain the practice longer than those who write digitally. The handwritten journal, which is portable and accessible, is what therapists call a “constant presence.” It’s deemed by clients to be amore intimate, personal and relatable experience than writing on a phone app or computer; thus, the results tend to last longer and imbed more deeply.
4. **Writing by hand can have similar benefits to meditation.** In an article called “The Simple Joy of Writing by Hand” Barbara Bash writes, “It is something about the physical act—the holding of the hand and pen—that is meditative, bringing me into the present.” [[4]](#endnote-4)
5. **Writing by hand can help enhance creative expression.** According to British novelist Jon McGregor, "Pen and paper is always [at] hand. Writing on the page stays on the page, with its scribbles and rewrites and long arrows suggesting a sentence or paragraph be moved and can be looked over and reconsidered. Writing on the screen is far more ephemeral. A sentence deleted can't be reconsidered."[[5]](#endnote-5) For decades, my own journals have been incubators for creative projects. Each time I start a new book, workshop or business expansion I use my journal to work out questions, obstacles, details, procedural notes and deadline management. I also benefit from the safe container for my own self-doubts, uncertainties, frustrations and other feelings that are part of the creative process.

Sounds good, but are you unsure of how to start? Here are six quick tips.

* **Begin with the date.** Dating your entries gives you a chronological timeline as well as allows you to note the space between journal entries. You can also begin to track cycles, patterns and trends in your writing. People who journal often describe the rhythm and flow of handwriting with words such as calming, soothing and focusing. They report that insight and solutions are more reliably accessed; clients remark that answers bubble up and spill onto the paper when they write by hand.
* **Start small.** Set your timer for five minutes and start with what you already know or can easily remember. Sentence stems such as *Today I want to….* or *I’m thinking about….* or *Three things I want off my to-do list are….* are all great starting points.
* **Ask yourself a question.** *How do I feel? What do I need? What’s my next action step?* Questions tend to take us deeper, often into reflective or more emotional territory, contrasted to the narrative or more cognitive focus of sentence stems.
* **Don’t plan to write every day.** Aside from your own personal preference, there’s no particular advantage to daily writing. Even writing once or twice a week is sufficient to develop a journaling habit, and you’ll likely benefit from a more relaxed approach.
* **Protect your privacy.** Think through where you’ll keep your journal so that it’s out of sight and out of mind for curious housemates. I reserve the first two or three pages of every new journal for privacy protection. On the first page, I write the starting date and a note: *This is my personal journal. Please don’t read it without my permission. Thank you for respecting my privacy.* On the second page I write, *As I was saying…. Please don’t read!* Under this, I draw a large stop sign. Note that this will not deter anyone who is intent on reading your journal, but a healthy boundary often gives an impulsive reader enough time to close the book.
* **Don’t fret about your handwriting.** If your writing is illegible, that’s a great privacy protector! No one is grading or judging you. If you’re judging yourself and want to improve your penmanship, check out “Tips for Improving Your Handwriting” by Dyas A. Lawson on the Paperpenalia[[6]](#endnote-6) site. Write on!

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The following individuals/organizations are not affiliated with the Paper and Packaging Board.

1. [Note](http://www.notebookstories.com)book Stories, “Moleskine Monday: A Million a Year? Or More?” June 6, 2011. http://www.notebookstories.com/2011/06/06/moleskine-monday-a-million-a-year-or-more/?doing\_wp\_cron=1475100755.6957299709320068359375 . Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Konnikova, Maria, “What’s Lost as Handwriting Fades,” *New York Times*, June 2. 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/science/whats-lost-as-handwriting-fades.html?_r=0>. Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Myer, Robinson, “To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand,” *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/> Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Mindfulness* Magazine, April 2016. Reprinted online June 3, 2016, http://www.mindful.org/the-simple-joy-of-writing-by-hand/. Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Rourke, Lee, “Why Creative Writing is Better with a Pen,” *The Guardian,* November 3, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/03/creative-writing-better-pen-longhand>. Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lawson, Dyas, “Tips for Improving Your Handwriting” Paperpenalia, <http://www.paperpenalia.com/handwriting.html>. Accessed September 28, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)