

The Write Way

Have you heard about the therapeutic effects of journaling? I must admit, the first time that this method of dealing with emotions came to my attention, I was really doubtful that it would work. As a newly graduated Occupational Therapist, I was faced with the task of running a group on the benefits of journaling. I was supposed to tell people with serious mental health issues just to write down their feelings and it would make them feel better. Hmm, I thought to myself. Can I really recommend that people in my care try this when I am really doubtful about the effectiveness of this suggestion?

I should really try this myself first, so that I am not asking anyone to try something that I would not do myself. So I did. Quickly I learned that there is indeed benefit in putting your thoughts and feelings on paper. I was quite surprised at the depth of emotion that I could discover, and the release or relief that I felt when I was finished. Honestly, I did not see, from a practical point of view, how writing or rehashing my thoughts and feelings would bring comfort or perspective, but that is indeed what happened.

I quickly learned that there is some connection between how our thoughts are processed in our minds, and how, when we allow them to flow onto paper, they become organized, almost tangible, often resulting in clarity and perspective.

It is kind of a brain, body and environmental connection. Our brain processes our thoughts, and our bodies work, either typing or writing to get the message out.

Then our paper or computers hold that content so we can see it in a different way. It seems there is relief when our brains do not have to hold onto that content anymore. We can see our thoughts in front of us, where they are easier to deal with and may be even more validated. We can also make decisions as what to do with this content. We can choose to share these ideas if appropriate, or keep them to ourselves.

Since then I have come to learn that there are many ways to journal. You can simply take a few minutes to record your thoughts and feelings. Write about things that happened to you that day or things on your mind, that you may be dwelling on. It might even be that conversation you had that you can't get out of your head. You know things that you wanted to say, or wished you had said. When you read your thoughts back, this method lets you see patterns in your thinking and how this may be helping or harming your interactions. Good self reflection.

Another very powerful method, for people with recurring thoughts or memories, can be to write down details and then, when you are ready and feel like unloading those events, take a moment to focus on moving on. How would your life be if you could find peace or let go? Then, rip your writing pages up into small bits and dispose of them. Powerful, "moving on" kind of activity.

Some people have difficulty knowing how to start to write or what to write about. Here is a fun kind of activity to get you going. Pick a word or theme for the day. Could be money, love, joy, sorrow, future.....or something. Then be aware of that word all day. What does it mean to you? How do you see it in your life? Are there changes you would like to see? Then when you have some quiet moments sit and write about what your brain has been processing all day. Neat self discovery and could change your path in life.

There are many different ways to journal. Find a way that is meaningful to you. My only advice is to try it. I know it can sound hokey at first, but when you actually do it, amazing transformations can happen in your emotional wellness.

This article was written by Paula Frappier, an Occupational Therapist with Homewood Health Centre, CMHA WWD, and St. Joseph's Health Centre in Guelph.

The "Open Mind" column is sponsored by individuals and organizations concerned with mental health issues in rural Wellington and Dufferin counties. Contact Canadian Mental Health Association at 519-766-4450 ext. 231 or parkinsons@cmhagrb.on.ca. For access to all Open Mind columns and local mental health resources/ information, visit www.cmhagrb.on.ca or www.communitytorchlight.com