

JOURNALING FOR HEALTH

Lord Chesterfield said, "I find, by experience, that the mind and the body are more than married, for they are most intimately united; and when one suffers, the other sympathizes."

Along these same lines the 19th century pathologist William Boyd wrote, "The sorrow that hath no vent in tears may make other organs weep."

The implication here is that our emotional state can manifest in physiologic symptoms.

Expressing emotionally upsetting experiences by writing or talking has been shown to improve physical health, enhance immune function, and result in fewer visits to medical practitioners.

Physiologically it requires work to suppress our emotions, fears and feelings. Working like this at the subconscious level results in chronic low-grade stress to the nervous system. This stress can then manifest in symptoms such as pain, nausea and fatigue. It also can lead to excess secretion of the hormone cortisol that in turn suppresses the immune system.

James Pennebaker who is a pioneer in the field of journaling in health and healing conducted a study suggesting validity to the idea that holding in our distressing emotions manifests as physiologic symptoms.

He interviewed polygraphers from the FBI and CIA. In conducting lie detector tests they would look for changes in parameters controlled by the subconscious like heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory rate for clues. They said that when the subject of the lie detector test confessed readings in these areas dropped significantly. The changes were consistent with those seen in relaxation. The implication is that allowing expression for these confessions removed a burden on the subconscious.

Several other studies corroborate these findings. Generally these studies involve comparing physiologic measures in people writing about stressful, emotionally charged events versus writing about trivial subjects. From asthma to wound healing to improved memory function these studies all showed significant and impressive benefit in the group that wrote about emotional experiences.



JOURNALING FOR HEALTH

There's no question journaling can help us heal. And the good news is that there are no side effects!

Now for the practical how-tos:

1. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed
2. Write about an upsetting or troubling experience in your life. It's best if it is something that affected you deeply and that you haven't discussed with others.
3. Describe the event in detail. Describe the setting, surroundings and sensations that you remember.
4. Now describe your deepest feeling about the event. Allow your emotions to run freely in your writing. Talk about how you felt about the event then and how you feel about it now.
5. Just write. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. If you get stuck you can even repeat what you have already written.
6. Then write about what you may have learned or ways in which you might have grown from the event.
7. Try writing for 20 minutes every day for 4 days. The event itself is less important than just expressing emotions.
8. Consider keeping a journal on a regular basis.

Recalling stressful events can initially make you feel uncomfortable. Usually the benefits to journaling come only after a few weeks of doing it on a regular basis. You don't need to feel that you need to write about every event. It's best to write about those events that are particularly troubling for you or that you find yourself consistently ruminating about.

No one needs to read what you wrote in order for the process to be beneficial. It is the act of writing that is therapeutic. You can even destroy the document when you are done. In fact, some find that getting rid of the document is therapeutic as well.

