

May 2020 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames Journaling for the health of it!

“Journaling (or keeping letters or diaries) is reported to be an ancient tradition, dating back to at least 10th century Japan.” In the 1400’s in the Arab world, the writings of Ibn Khaldun come within descriptions of “journaling”. A renowned historian in the traditional sense of a compiler of chronicles, he is recorded to be the “creator of a new discipline, ‘*umran*, or social science, which treated human civilization and social facts as an interconnected whole and would help to change the way history was perceived, as well as written.” “Gertrude Bell’s journals capture the remarkable experiences of an extraordinary and ultimately historically significant woman, in an era when most women stayed near their homes and husbands. Born into a wealthy British family in 1868, ... She led a life that is almost as incomprehensible now as it was a century ago. She was an archaeologist, mountaineer, photographer, political officer, writer, translator, traveller, and cartographer, known to the sheiks of the Middle East as “The Queen of the Desert.”

When I asked one of our WWURA members, June Hopkins, why she was journaling, she said “writing has always been my go-to activity, so when I found myself isolated at home during this pandemic, I just needed to write. I have no one living here with me so this is a way to “talk,” or to “socialize” in a way. Keeping a journal helps me put things in perspective, to keep tabs on what is going on inside my head as well as what happens here day to day. I do think that this is a way to avoid depression because thoughts are “thought out” and put into words. I want to remember what has transpired during this time--and it will go on for a long time, I fear.” “It is also an intellectual pursuit, and a way to keep my mind active and flexible.”

The concept of a diary, now called journaling, means writing down one’s thoughts and feelings. Researchers in the field suggest that journaling helps to manage anxiety, reduce stress, and cope with depression. Journaling is reported to help individuals improve their moods by helping them prioritize problems, concerns, and fears. “Journalists” can track day-today symptoms and recognize what triggers various feelings. It serves as a way to control those triggers, providing opportunity to engage in positive “self-talk!”

Intermountain Health Care reported “expressive writing (like journaling) for only 15 to 20 minutes a day three to five times over the course of a four-month period was enough to lower blood pressure and improve liver functionality. “Journaling helps keep your brain in tip-top shape. Not only does it boost memory and comprehension, it also increases working memory capacity, which may reflect improved cognitive processing.” A unique social and behavior outcome of journaling is it can improve your mood and give you a greater sense of overall emotional well-being and happiness.

Related to mood is how journaling benefits overall emotional health: “As journaling habits are developed, benefits become long-term, meaning that diarists become more in tune with their health by connecting with inner needs and desires. Journaling evokes mindfulness and helps writers remain present while keeping perspective. It presents an opportunity for emotional catharsis and helps the brain regulate emotions. It provides a greater sense of confidence and self-identity. Journaling can help in the management of personal adversity and change and emphasize important patterns and growth in life. Research even shows that expressive writing can help individuals develop more structured, adaptive, and integrated schemes about themselves, others, and the world. What’s more, journaling unlocks and engages right-brained creativity, which gives you access to your full brainpower. Truly, journaling fosters growth.”

In summation, one writer offers this suggestion: “So, great. You get it: Journaling is good for you — physically, mentally, and emotionally. But what if, like many of us, you find yourself stuck, staring fruitlessly at a blank page? Well first, ditch the guilt of not being consistent or instantly motivated. Simply start where you are. If you need to initially just write a single line, or detail the specifics of what you had for breakfast, do it. Don’t preoccupy yourself with managing perfect punctuation, grammar, or spelling. Just write and don’t censor yourself. This is for you. Remember: You don’t have to be Shakespeare.”

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