

Journaling for Self-Discovery

The path to spirit is through self. A daily journaling practice can provide a way to greater self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and compassion for others. Your journal can serve as a friend, a confidant, and even a readily-available therapist. You can use your journal to process what happened today or what occurred decades ago that may still be impacting your life. In your journal you can reflect, clarify, explore or even rage. You can examine your actions and your relationships with others. A daily journal practice will help you rediscover your creativity and foster your spiritual growth.

Journaling has been called a “near-perfect hobby.” I like to think of it as my psycho-spiritual practice. However you choose to think about your journaling practice, frame it in a way that it is something you look forward to rather than a chore.

Making a Commitment and Carving out the Time

First make a commitment to yourself that you will write everyday. A good time to journal is in the early morning. Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist’s Way*, calls the journaling practice she recommends the “morning pages.” We are in touch with ourselves in the early morning before the frenzy of the day sets in, before we hear the news, before we remember everything that didn’t get done on yesterday’s list. Morning really is best, but if it just will not work for you, set aside another time, perhaps in the late evening before bed.

Setting aside a specific time each day to write will help make journaling a habit. Making it a ritual will help keep you motivated.

Making Journaling a Ritual

First assemble your tools. I prefer an 8 ½” x 11” spiral notebook that will open flat rather than one of the smaller, hardback blank books. Whatever you choose, find a journal that’s attractive to you.

Next find a pen that feels just right to you. If you don’t have a favorite pen, enjoy shopping for just the right refillable one, and don’t use it for any other purpose.

Now find a comfortable place where you won’t be disturbed. If possible, write in the same place everyday. You can make it your own special ritual by creating a special place to write. Perhaps you’ll want to create a small altar on a table next to the chair where you’ll be journaling. You may want to light a candle or play soft music. Set the stage by reading a daily inspirational thought before you begin. Sniffing the same essential oil such as lavender or lighting incense before journaling can help relax you and remind your subconscious that it’s time to journal. Maybe you’d like to sip a cup of your favorite tea while you write. The more pleasant you can make your journaling ritual, the more you will look forward to it and the easier it will be to establish your practice.

**It doesn’t matter *what* you write,
only *that* you write.**

**It’s all about the process of
writing, never about the product.**

Rules for Journaling

There are very few rules for journaling, but one hard and fast one is DO NOT JUDGE YOURSELF OR YOUR WRITING!

Unlike any other writing you may have done, this type journaling is all about the PROCESS and NOT about the product. You journal for the act of journaling—to get your thoughts and feelings down on paper. It does not matter in what format, if the grammar is correct, if it's neat, or if all the words are spelled right. In fact, you may never even read back what you wrote!

“Journals become an ongoing conversation with our souls. They help us become aware of the incessant chatter of the ego and allow us to integrate the fragments of our lives into a meaningful mosaic.”

Marlene Schiwy
Simple Days

By focusing on the process of journaling rather than what you are writing, you can freely express whatever emotions you are feeling. You will often find that as you write about uncomfortable feelings, they dissipate. In time, you'll recognize your ability to transform your emotions through your writing. This all requires that you never, ever censor yourself.

Your journal should be a sacred space for you. For this reason, you will want to be sure your journals are kept private. While you may choose to share parts of your journal with others on some occasions, you will probably want to keep it off limits to others.

What to Write About

The best way to begin a journal practice is just to start writing! Write about *anything* that's on your mind—your hopes, fears, doubts, dreams, relationships, job, children, old hurts, what's going on in the world—anything that you need to express is a good topic for today's entry in your journal.

While you may choose to write about what you did on any given day, journaling for self-discovery is more about what you are feeling than what you are doing. You will find that if you keep your writing in first person, it will be easier to get in touch with how you are really feeling about an issue. Be aware when you are drifting away from first person. For example, if you write “We often think that...” try to switch to “I often think...” or even better “I often feel...” In this way, you force yourself to own your own feelings rather than abstractly philosophizing about the rest of the world. Remember, the goal is for *you* to get in touch with *your* deepest self.

Try to write at least three pages each day. In the beginning, that may seem very daunting. After you've kept a journal for a while, you'll find that journaling is like meditation in some ways. The longer you meditate, the deeper you go. The same can be true for journaling. As you continue writing, you peel back the layers of your thoughts and begin to see your feelings more clearly. From this awareness of feeling comes insight. From this insight comes good choices and conscious action.

Writing Can Help Release Old Hurts from the Past

Most of us in Western civilizations spend a good part of our lives trying not to feel. We bury old hurts, resentments, and anger in order not to feel the pain. The problem is that it often gets stuck only to surface later. In the meantime, carrying old, unprocessed emotion can be a lot like pulling around a sled made of lead. If you keep trying to suppress old hurts, they get buried deeper and deeper. Your journal can be the perfect safe place to unload all that unnecessary weight that is holding you back.

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”

Carl Jung

Emotions are energy—and just the way yoga helps you process stuck energy, keeping a journal can help you release old emotions. Name each emotion as you write about it. The fear is always that you if you go down into a negative emotion, you will stay there. The opposite is true. Keep writing.

Rereading Your Journal Entries

Once you have written a specific entry in your journal, you may feel that it's finished. You may choose never to reread what you wrote—and that's fine.

There are also some good reasons for rereading what you wrote at a later date. Rereading can help you to see the ebb and flow of your everyday moods and concerns. How you were feeling last Wednesday is probably not at all how you are feeling today. Remembering this helps you weather strong emotions.

You may choose to reread your journal for nuggets of wisdom. Once a month, reread your journal and using a highlighting pen, highlight the revelations and inspirations that appear on your pages. You may even want to create your own book of wisdom gleaned from your journaling.

Some Journaling Tips and Techniques

Bring a little yoga into your journaling. Before you write, stretch your arms over your head. Breathe and feel your ribs expand. Center yourself. When you are relaxed, begin to write.

Try alternate nostril breathing before you begin. This technique activates both the right and left sides of the brain and will increase your creativity and intuition.

After you've finished journaling for the day, do some sun salutations to help release any remaining tension. Now you're ready to greet the day focused and rejuvenated.

Keep a small notebook or index cards with you. Write down any thoughts, questions, or observations that you think you might want to explore in your journal. This will help you capture any important information that comes to you throughout your day, and it will give you a place to start in your next journaling session.

Try Unsent Letters. This is a journaling technique that can work for many, many situations.

- If you're having difficulty with someone, write a letter to that person expressing the feelings that may not be appropriate to share with him/her. Don't send the letter!
- Feeling down? Switch into second person and write a fan letter to yourself.
- Write a letter to someone who has died. This can be a way of releasing grief or resolving old issues with someone who is no longer here.
- For physical issues: Pretend you are your body or the part of your body that is having an issue. Write a letter to yourself from your body or body part. For example, what is the pain in your neck trying to tell you about your life? Start the letter *Dear (Your First Name), I am your (body, body part). I need you to know that...*
- Write a letter to God—a letter of gratitude, a plea for help, or a request for clarity.

Write It Down—Make It Happen

Write about your ideal day or situation as if it were already happening. Use present tense wording and as many details as possible. Writing down what you want can help manifest it for you—whether it's a meeting you would like to go well that day or something much larger that you would like to create for yourself.

Journal Starters

If you have trouble getting started, try using one of these journal starters:

If I let myself admit it, I feel _____.

If I could give myself permission, I would _____

If I were true to myself, I would _____

If I believed I deserved to have fun, I would _____

No one but me knows that I _____

If I didn't have to do it perfectly, I would _____

I know that I am resisting _____

Make up your own journal starters and put them on index cards for the next time you have trouble getting started.

Make it Fun!

Make your journaling practice as much fun as possible—whatever that means for you. If you look forward to writing, you're much more likely to keep up your practice than if you treat it as a chore.

Make a mental note of your mood before you begin to write, and then again when you finish. You're likely to feel lighter and more positive than you did when you sat down to write.

Once you've experienced the sheer delight that can come from keeping a journal, you'll show up at the page with anticipation each time—and that is the joy of journaling that I wish for you!



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About Judy

Judy Balian holds a masters in counseling and psychology from Hofstra University. She studied expressive arts at Saybrook Graduate School with Natalie Rogers, Ph.D., a pioneer in the field who incorporates the person-centered philosophy of her father, Dr. Carl Rogers, into her training. She has also studied creativity coaching under Dr. Eric Maisel.

Judy teaches classes designed to help people uncover their natural creativity including classes on journaling. She also facilitates groups based on the popular book by Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, and coaches and mentors individual clients both in person and by phone. Excoveries is the name Judy has given her personal approach to expressive arts because her students and clients take journeys of personal exploration and discovery of their hidden selves.

Judy spent over 20 years in the corporate world in the fields of marketing, training, and product development. In addition to her work with the expressive arts, Judy and her Excoveries team offer marketing, business consulting and writing services to individual practitioners and small businesses.

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Learn more about Judy and her work by visiting her website www.excoveries.com.