

Habit #5. Journal Out of Your Head

The bad habit

Have you noticed how you rarely write these days? You know, put pen to paper and join letters together to make words, that kind of thing....

Yeah, me too. It's just one of the side-effects of the digital age we're living in. We just don't do that stuff as much as we used to because we just don't need to.

But it turns out that journaling is another powerful weapon you should add to your toolbelt if you want to lift yourself out of depression and reclaim your life.

It's not that typing and texting are bad.

But in this case, technology is barrier.

It stands between you, your thoughts and the rest of the world.

It prevents you from expressing yourself fully, from making sense of what you're experiencing in your mind and from processing many of the emotions we find ourselves battling on a daily basis. Plus the majority of the most influential people in history kept a diary or journal, so if it's good enough for them...

Sit down with a pen and paper and start writing, even if it's literally just for five minutes. You'll be astonished at the results.

The science

There's a growing body of evidence that writing down our thoughts on a daily basis has a positive effect on our mental health, and could help manage our emotions and fight back against depression.

According to a study published in *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, writing down your thoughts can help you deal with traumatic events and boost your physical and psychological health.

Another study by the University of Iowa discovered that writing down your personal story plus your thoughts and feelings can help you through times of stress.

And yet other carried out by the University of California showed that participants who followed a programme of expressive writing were found to have significantly reduced their anxiety levels at their three-month follow up check.

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This is just a quick snapshot of the formal studies and research projects that have been carried out so far.

But if you've ever kept a journal before, you'll know for yourself just how powerful the practice can be.

Instead of swallowing your thoughts and emotions, instead of trying to keep them all inside, you can let them flow onto the page without worrying who is going to read it, whether anyone is going to take offence, or get angry or hate you forever.

You can just let go.

Here are some more of the benefits:

#1: You can make sense of what you're feeling

Journaling allows us to unlock our inner most emotions and literally see them on the page. In fact, many people are surprised by what they write when they start journaling!

Emotions that are deeply buried will start to rise to the surface and you'll often gain new insight into your feelings.

You'll understand why you feel the way you do about certain things, you'll notice what is bringing stress or anxiety to your life, and you can even start dealing with any past trauma you've gone through.

#2: You'll start to deal with these emotions, however difficult

It might seem counterintuitive to go in there, stirring up potentially negative emotions that are hard to deal with, but it's an important part of the healing process. It will allow you to process these emotions and start to move forward in your life.

If you're anything like me, then you've bottled it all up for most of your life. This doesn't solve any problems, rather it *compounds* them. As the years go by it becomes harder and harder to face them.

#3: It helps you take back control

You're likely scared of those emotions inside. You want to hide away from them. Or you want to lock them away so they keep hurting you, or causing you so much pain. But that's the whole problem. Keep them inside and they fester and grow in strength. They can burst out on you when you least expect it and wreak their havoc whenever they damn well please.

If instead you prise them out with your pen, if you refuse to let them ferment inside and you demand that they pay you attention, YOU are the one in control. You are their master, and not the other way around.

#4: You'll start to notice patterns

Writing helps you to take a more objective view of your feelings and start to identify if there are any patterns to the way you're feeling.

Perhaps there are certain days, times or activities that make you feel better or worse. Perhaps you keep having the same kind of toxic relationships, or difficult friendships, or working the same kind of dead-end jobs.

Journaling will help you identify all of that. It can serve as a powerful diagnostic tool, help you become aware of your mental and emotional state and help you on your journey forwards.

#5: You'll change your life

Starting a regular journaling practice will help you identify where you are on your journey through life, where you're heading and any changes you might want to make.

The good habit

Most of us have either never journaled. Some of us did for a short while when we were kids but soon gave it up when we got bored.

So, like me, you properly don't yet understand why people would take time out of the day to start writing.

It's slow and time consuming, right? **Wrong.**

Journaling is quick (it doesn't need to take more than 10-15 minutes), it's cheap (just grab some paper and a pen) and it's effective too.

The key is to be brutally honest, without filtering or editing.

Don't worry about swearing, cursing, spelling mistakes or grammar and no editing.

The less you worry, the more you benefit!

Your only focus is to get what's in your head, out onto paper.

If you're worried about other people reading what you've written then consider ripping up whatever you write. While you won't be able to look back and spot patterns, it will still serve as a powerful symbolic action, especially when writing about negative emotions.

Don't avoid writing negative things but try to avoid doing so for a long period of time. Limit negative writing to 20 minutes and don't re-read it afterwards.

You can think of journaling as a 'toothbrush for the mind'. A short task that can have profound long-term effects.

The action

Simple. Just set aside 10-15 minutes in the morning to sit down and journal. That's it.

Leave your journal in a place where you'll see it each morning (next to the bed is a good idea) so you can make it a habit without needing to think too much.

Then choose a place where you feel comfortable that has no distractions.

Next take a moment to become aware of your surroundings and feelings. Don't try to change anything, just bring awareness to the moment.

Then start to write.

Part 1: Freestyling

First spend around 10 minutes writing anything that comes to mind.

I like to think of this as free styling - no rules, anything goes. Negative or positive.

It could be about yesterday, the day ahead, an interaction you've have, a person, a thing, thoughts that have come into your mind, your dream from last night... anything.

If you're having a hard time getting started, use one of the prompts below to get the ball rolling.

Prompt #1: Physical Body

Start by considering how you're feeling right now.

- Where does this feeling exist in your body? *Perhaps it's your chest, face or belly...*
- What does it feel like? *Dull ache or sharp pain? Hot or cold? Light or heavy?...*
- Is there a color that comes to mind when you think of it?
- How long have you felt this? *Just now, a few weeks or perhaps longer?*
- What is your energy like? *Low, high, erratic, slow...*
- What words come to mind when you think of your physical body?

Prompt #2: Your Environment

Describe what your surroundings are like.

- What does the room that you're in look like?
- What colors, shapes and items do you notice around you?
- How does this space make you feel? *Secure, safe, vulnerable, cold, warm, anxious, relaxed?*
- How would you like the space to feel?
- Are there things you could change to create a better space?

Prompt #3: Your Inner Atmosphere

Use this space to describe how you're feeling inside.

- What do you feel deep inside? Is it hard to tell? *Hazy and distant, or painful and vivid...*
- How does this influence your day?
- Do you have a sense of optimism or feeling of dread?
- Do you think other people notice this?
- Is the world serious or do you feel lighthearted?
- When did you last smile or laugh?
- When did you cry last? How did it make you feel?
- What feelings and emotions would you like to carry with you?
- Do you feel like you're carrying around emotional baggage?

Of course, don't feel like you have to work through each of the questions I've shared here. Pick on and let the words flow freely. If you get really stuck, explore another until you've finished writing for the day.

It's important to note that you don't want your journal to end up being a place where you sit and wallow in negative feelings.

You want to get the emotions out, become aware of them, learn what you can and move on with your day.

Then once you've spent 10 minutes free styling, it's time to move on to the final 5 minutes of your journaling session.

Part 2: Get Positive

You've just got everything negative off your chest, so now we need to switch to the positives.

Your goal now is train your brain to scan for positives in your life, rather than the negatives.

Here's how we'll do this. I'll give you three prompts. You'll give me three answers. Here goes...

1. I am grateful for...
2. What would make today great...
3. Daily affirmation, I am...

When you write your affirmation (number 3) congratulate yourself for everything you've achieved so far, whilst also keeping an eye on where you want to be in the future. Keep it in the present tense and be realistic.

What do I mean?

For example, let's say you've just managed to go out for a run around the block, despite not having run since you were in elementary school. You're feeling exhausted and it was tough, but you're proud of yourself.

You could write, *'I am getting fitter every day and moving forwards in my journey towards my first 5K'*.

Got it? Good. Then go ahead and write. Done.

Overcoming those common journaling problems

Below are some common pitfalls that you'll probably come up against when you start journaling, plus my tips on how to avoid them.

Repetitiveness

If you find your daily entries becoming repetitive then it's likely you're being too vague. Drill down into the details and be more specific.

They don't need to be earth shattering observations. Stick with specific, small and meaningful. Then take a few moments to ponder each prompt, no need to rush.

It can also be worth shaking up your journaling practice by writing about one of the following prompts:

- A relationship old or new that has helped you.
- An opportunity that you have today. Doesn't need to be big. Something to work on, to call someone, to learn something etc.
- Something that you heard or saw yesterday.
- Take a look around you - what do you see? It's often the small things in our lives that make the biggest difference, yet we often don't appreciate them. The room that you have, the food you eat, the freedom to do what you want, company of others.

You don't feel a connection to what you've written

The goal of your journaling practice is to engage your emotions, to feel them and to connect to what you have written. The best way to check if you're doing this is to see how you feel after you have made your entries.

Wait a moment, have a think and wonder.

How do the entries feel to you? Do you feel connected to what you have written? If not, simply rewrite them.

Overwhelm

Journaling isn't meant to feel like a burden or another task to end to your endless 'to do' list.

Go easy, go slow and be kind to yourself. It doesn't really matter how much you write, just the fact you're taking time to put pen to paper.

If writing for 10-15 minutes is too much, try to write for five. If this doesn't work, how about just one sentence? Don't feel like you have to do it all.

The goal of journaling is to start getting your mind into a positive space. Don't let the process distract from the bigger picture.

Struggles with the Daily Affirmation

The whole idea of a daily affirmation is often misunderstood. It's not about standing in front of the mirror 80s-style pumped with energy, shouting words at your reflection in the mirror, trying to feel pumped up.

It's about guiding yourself to think beyond where you are to where you want to be. Remember- you need to be gentle with yourself, keep it realistic and write in the present tense. (*'I am...'*)

Let me give you another example.

Say you've completed three weeks of the Mornings of Domination training. (*That's awesome, by the way!*)

- ➔ You could say, '*I am excited to be fit and healthy.*' But it's vague and perhaps a complete exaggeration.
- ➔ Or, '*I am stoked to have completed three weeks of morning workouts.*' That's true, but it doesn't look beyond where you are now.

→ Here's what you need to write instead- *'I am three weeks into my training and pumped to be on this journey. Looking forward to getting fit and healthy over the next year.'* This is precise, realistic, and you're also congratulating yourself where congratulations are due. You're also looking towards the future.

Once you've written out your affirmation. Take a moment to see how you feel about it.

- *Do you believe it? Do you feel better?* If yes, then you're on the right track.
- *Do you feel worse?* Chances are you're biting off more than you can chew.
- *Do you feel neutral?* It's a good indicator that you're not thinking big enough. Dream big!

[Photos of examples]

I am grateful for...	What would make today great...	Daily affirmation, I am...

The Tools

OK, let's get you started with this.

Basically, there are two routes you can take.

#1: You grab a notebook from the corner store.

#2: You buy a printed journal.

Which one you choose is really up to you. The only difference is that when you buy a printed journal you'll have the daily sections laid out for you already, and you'll find prompts and quotes to help you get the most out of each session.

But this isn't essential. Just a blank notebook and a pen or pencil are perfectly fine. The important thing is that you have something to write in.

Either way, it's a low barrier to entry. No expensive gadgets and no time-consuming process.

