

# *Why reflective writing is a powerful wellbeing tool*

One writer explains how journaling changed her life

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Every evening after I finish work, while my mind is still whirring with tasks and stresses, I sit down with my notebook and I write. I don't think about what to write in advance; I just let the words tumble from the tip of my pen. I write about the errands I'll need to run tomorrow. I write about a problem at work I'm still figuring out, plus some possible solutions, followed by a motivational affirmation to myself: "You will get there!" I write a gift idea for my partner's birthday. I write about a childhood memory that popped into my mind that afternoon. I write and write and write, until my brain feels clear and my heart feels calm.

Writing, in my opinion, is the most underrated and underused wellbeing technique. It's an opportunity to sit with your thoughts and get to know yourself better, which is something that can be easily lost in the bustle of work, home life and social commitments (even if they are only on Zoom). There's something soothing about that connection between pen and paper; it can feel almost meditative. I started daily writing last year, as a way of comforting and reassuring myself during all the upheaval and uncertainty. Before long, my notebook became a steadying anchor whenever I felt unmoored.

And it turns out, I'm not the only one who thinks there's power to be found in the pen. According to Megan Hayes, researcher and author of upcoming book *The Joy of Writing Things Down* (Greenfinch), there are many benefits to daily writing. "It increases self-understanding and empathy, allows greater mental focus, gives us the opportunity to enter a creative state of 'flow', and even improves physical health," she says.

It's true: one study found that those who wrote for 20 minutes a day for four days had a marked mood improvement. They also visited the doctor 43% less often than those who weren't writing, for ailments such as respiratory infections and the flu, something that feels especially important right now.

"The best part is it's widely accessible, infinitely adaptable and easily transportable," continues Megan. "For me, writing is truly one of the best self-care practices we can establish." I can guess what you're thinking: "That all sounds great, but I'm not a writer." It's an understandable response. In truth, as someone who writes for a living, I used to think that if I'm not penning something 'good' – something to be read and enjoyed by others – then what's the point? According to Allison Fallon, author of *The Power Of Writing It Down* (Zondervan), this misguided idea explains why so many of us avoid it altogether.

"We have a cultural idea that writing is an elite activity reserved for the uniquely gifted, skilled or trained, but that couldn't be further from the truth," she explains. Most of us write in some

form or another every day, whether it's noting down a reminder, sending a text, or compiling a pitch at work. That all counts as writing, so why not take it a step further?

"Writing is not just for certain people; it's for everyone," adds Allison. "It's communication, self-discovery, creativity, spirituality and self-expression."

In short, everyone has the right to write. Your sentences don't have to be elegantly constructed or grammatically correct, and I promise you never have to share your writing with anybody else. In fact, you don't even need to read over what you've written. But the act of tuning in to your thoughts and putting them down on paper, can be transformative.

Just ask psychotherapists, who regularly recommend writing practices to their clients.

"Expressive writing" – that is, writing about your innermost thoughts and emotions – is often used as a tool for helping people process trauma, from soldiers returning from war, to those who have suffered from heartbreak, bereavement or serious illness.

"Writing down our struggles helps us externalise what has been hidden and swirling internally," says Charlotte Fox Weber, psychotherapist and co-founder of [Examined Life](#), who commits to daily journalling herself. "The process helps shift our perspective, helping us confront ourselves in new ways. When you put something into writing, it becomes real; it can document and validate something by making it visible. I once wrote down: 'I will get through this', and it encouraged a powerful shift in my thinking."

## Meaningful focus

You don't have to write down your deepest, most vulnerable thoughts; even just writing lists and short diary entries documenting your daily life can be of benefit. "When you write down the boring stuff, you realise how many needless thoughts are taking up space in your brain," says Allison. "Getting them out on to the page clears a lot of mental space for you to focus on things that are interesting, meaningful and purposeful."

Plus, she says, even writing about the mundane can have value, because it can help you see patterns in your own behaviour. "If you constantly write: 'I am exhausted', you can start to question why that is, and work on ways to change it," she says.

Jotting down what you're thankful for can be game-changing, too, especially during turbulent times. I love to write down three things I'm grateful for each day, which can range from the big (my family being healthy) to the small (a kind note from a neighbour), because I know it makes me feel better.

And writing creatively – whether poetry or fictional short stories – has its advantages, too. Research has found that writing about a fictional trauma offered similar wellbeing benefits to writing about a real one.

Plus, research shows that creativity has mood-boosting effects; one study from 2016 found that those who engaged in a creative activity every day reported feeling more enthusiastic and energised.

Ultimately, it's about writing whatever you feel a connection to; whatever helps you feel closer to yourself. As Megan puts it: "Writing is a profound way of developing and maintaining my friendship with myself through all of life's ups and downs." And if you can be a good friend to yourself, you'll be an even better friend to those around you. So why not start? Write now.

## ***Getting Started***

### **Gather your materials**

While typing on a computer can still be beneficial, I would recommend using good old-fashioned pen and paper. It reduces unnecessary screen-time, and it encourages you to slow down, allowing you to focus more intently on each word. If your handwriting is out of practice, even better; perhaps it'll trigger some joyful nostalgia. I recommend buying a lovely notebook, and a pen in your favourite colour. This will turn the experience into something luxurious and pleasurable, so you'll look forward to doing it. After all, enjoyment is what will keep you returning to a habit again and again. If your writing is messy, or you scribble something out, don't worry. It's all part of the process of self-exploration.

### **Commit to writing most days**

Consistency is key, and research has shown that 20 minutes daily is ideal, but some studies have even found just two minutes a day to be worthwhile. However, Megan suggests not giving yourself a stringent limit: "On some days, you might feel inspired to sit for much longer. I warmly encourage you to enter a 'state of flow', where you become completely absorbed in what you're doing and you lose track of time, as this enhances your enjoyment."

### **Write what feels right**

Allison recommends starting with 'stream of consciousness', which is when you write whatever is going on in your mind and seeing where it takes you. Often, it won't make much sense and you might feel silly at first, but you'll soon fall into a rhythm. Or give yourself a set structure or tasks if that feels easier.

## ***What should you write?***

### **Do a 'brain dump'**

This is similar to 'stream of consciousness', except I usually write in bullet-points. Tip all those thoughts that are taking up valuable space in your brain and you keep going until it feels like you don't have any thoughts left. Once you're finished, you should feel lighter.

### Interview yourself

Come up with a list of questions that you answer every day. Some examples could be: What went well today? What went badly? What am I grateful for? What am I looking forward to tomorrow? It can be fun to read back over these mini-interviews a year later, to see how much you've changed.

### Unleash your imagination

Think of something that happened during the day – it can be mundane, such as buying vegetables from the greengrocer. Then come up with a short story based on this event – it can be as fantastical as you like. Perhaps in your story, you bought a magic apple, or maybe a murder-mystery ensued. It's a great opportunity to get in touch with your childlike sense of imagination, and let your creativity run wild.

*Find Allison at [allisonfallon.com](http://allisonfallon.com); Megan at [meganchayes.com](http://meganchayes.com). For helpful writing resources, visit [positivejournal.org](http://positivejournal.org)*

<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/uk/lifestyle/a36146217/reflective-writing/>