

Podcast: Journalling for Wellbeing during the pandemic

By Femke Stokes

In this podcast, I'm going to talk about the practice of journalling, as a wellbeing tool that might be particularly helpful during the period of change and uncertainty that we are currently facing, with the Covid-19 pandemic. You may have noticed that many lists of tips for coping emotionally and psychologically with COVID-19 include the suggestion of keeping a journal. But if journalling is something you've never done, you may be unsure of the benefits or how to go about it. That's where this podcast comes in. Marilyn Monroe expressed in a poem that she liked to 'think in ink', a phrase that nicely captures the potential of personal writing to help explore thoughts and feelings. As I'm going to discuss, journaling presents an opportunity to regulate emotion and to gain insights.

Each of you will have your own relationship to the impact that Covid-19 is having on our lives. You will have your own particular set of needs at this time. What's for sure is that we have all been under the emotional pressure that comes with coping with a set of rapidly occurring changes. Some of you may be noticing that you are experiencing more feelings, or more intense emotions, than in normal times, and perhaps you are not sure what to do with these feelings. They may not be stable: they may shift and change, or you might find that persistent feelings keep recurring. Others of you may respond by going numb: trying to have no feelings at all. This can leave you feeling disconnected, and not sure how to engage. A particular feature of the current time is that you don't have your usual friends around you in person to talk things through with. This may mean less of an opportunity to work through your emotions and perspectives right now. Some of you might also be finding that others in your lives are less emotionally available than usual, or busier, with the new set of pressures they are managing. It can be harder to process or digest feelings with less of these interactions with others whom we trust. Depending on your living arrangements, you might be spending this time alone, especially if you are still in Oxford, in which case you'll be probably be spending a lot more time with your own thoughts. This can make it harder to shift perspective. If, on the other hand, you are living back in the family home you may find that you have little privacy and not much space for your own reflection. In all of these various contexts, journaling can offer a useful space for you to identify and reflect on what is going on for you. One of the advantages of this kind of writing is that it puts you into the observer position. As you write, you begin to become a witness to your experience. This opens up a space between you and your feelings, which can lessen that sense of being at sea, or awash with emotion, and can help new perspective to come through. Another advantage of your journal is that you can say absolutely anything in it. It's ok if it's raw. It's for your eyes only. In the act of writing something down you are allowing yourself to release and process it, and on the page it gains more tangible shape and meaning, even in just a few words. Afterwards you can close the journal and leave that material behind if you need to. In this way a journal is great as a designated safe space to help to contain your feelings. Journalling can also help to clarify what you are thinking and feeling, by offering an opportunity to sift through what is on your mind. If it feels like there is a jumble there to start with, you can select one thing at a time to give your attention to.

In supporting wellbeing, a journal need not only be a repository of difficult feelings. It can also be a creative space where you can weave together thoughts and reflections on what is striking you as meaningful at the present time. The very process of starting sentences with 'I' and reflecting from your own perspective can help you establish a sense of agency, in a time when much might have been feeling outside your control. The poet Seamus Heaney remarked, "If you have the words, there's always a chance that you'll find the way."

The role of writing in wellbeing has been well established in some interesting research. One of the first studies was undertaken by Professor James Pennebaker at the University of Texas. He ran an experiment in which he asked his students to write about a personal trauma for 20 minutes a day for four consecutive days, including details of the facts and emotions associated with the traumas. He found a significant increase in the mental and physical health in the students who wrote about their upsetting experiences.

Reflecting on this, trauma expert, Dr Bessel Van der Kolk, tells us: 'Writing is one of the most effective ways to access an inner world of feelings that is the key to recovering from genuine trauma and everyday stress alike.'

So, let's have a think about some ways in which you can go about using journalling. Firstly, you will need to think about where you want to do the writing. Don't worry if you don't own a notebook. You can write on sheets of paper and keep them together; you can also write on a computer or phone if you prefer, although personally I think there is something freeing about the physical experience of handwriting that is a bit different from our on-screen habits. Whatever you use, try to keep the notes all in one place, so you can look back over your writing if you want to.

Secondly, you will need to think about how you'd like to use your journal. There's no single way to use a journal, and you will want to find a way of writing that suits you best. The different possibilities I'm going to suggest are just some options that you could consider, in terms of what to write about.

1. **Expressing feelings.** First up, you can use your journal to note down and explore your feelings, which can help to externalise them. You could begin by asking yourself the questions, what am I feeling today? Is it different from how I felt yesterday? What is troubling me? What soothes me, what am I longing for? Or what do I hope for?

If you want to get a fuller idea of an emotion it can be helpful to close your eyes and to pay attention to your body. Where in your body do you think you might be able to notice the emotion you are interested in? As you locate it dwell on the physical sensations. What are they like? If the feeling had a voice what would it say?

It's important to remember in the current situation that there are no right feelings. Someone else you might know might be thinking and feeling very differently, but your feelings are no less valid, and it is important to take your own feelings seriously. This is a way of looking after your well-being and building your resilience.

- 2. Reflecting on what has happened.** Another way you can use a journal is to reflect on what has happened.

As I mentioned, so much change has taken place in a very short space of time recently. You may feel drawn to writing about some of it and what it's meant for you. Or that might feel a daunting task, but you might want to reflect on how the last day (or couple of days) have been for you: what has been difficult, and what has made a positive difference? What have you been grateful for? Is there anything you've learned about yourself, about what you value or are capable of? About others? It might also be worth reflecting on aspects of continuity, in the midst of all the change and uncertainty: what are the threads of continuity that you do hold, running through your life and yourself?

- 3. Focusing on what you want/need.** Your journal can also be a place to focus on what you want and need right now.

It can be a helpful place to jot down ideas and plans for ways in which you can meet your needs, especially at this unusual time of the pandemic. What helps you get through the day? Thinking about realistic possibilities during current conditions, what might you need more of, that you could give yourself (or ask for from others?) What do you need less of?

- 4. A place to capture ideas.** Another, related, way you could use your journal is as a place to capture ideas.

As the rhythm of your life has changed at present, you may have a little more time to give to nurturing your ideas. Have you found yourself thinking over ideas of interest to you, or even daydreaming about certain things that capture your curiosity or imagination? Why not start writing them down and see if you feel like expanding on them, or if they give rise to any further thoughts? It could be anything: whether something from your academic work, a song you've been thinking of, a discussion you've had, or would like to have. Maybe you'll feel drawn to finding out a bit more about something in particular.

Also, are there plans you want to sketch for the future? Projects you are interested in? These don't have to be concrete and complete, they could be ideas that you begin to note down.

- 5. A place for observations about what is going on in the world**—both in general and in your world—as a result of the pandemic. After all, you are living through a historically significant period which will be of great interest for a long time to come. Why not document your experience of it? Two students from Oxford have founded a kind of online community journal on social media for people's thoughts on what this pandemic means for them, expressed in videos and artwork. If you want to check it

out on Facebook, it's called 'What Does Covid-19 Say?' This is a great example of the opportunity to reflect on what this historic period means to you. Your own private journal at this time could also be a space to gather your observations and insights into both yourself, and what you see going on around you: a chance to define and even redefine what is important to you.

So having shared some suggestions for possible ways to use your journal, here are some tips for getting started: it can really help to put aside a bit of time on a regular basis every day for your journalling: try to establish a routine for it, if you can. Maybe find somewhere relaxing to sit when you write.

Secondly, if the blank page looks daunting, remember you can start small! Just getting a single feeling down, or an image, thought or idea that has come to mind is enough. And then see if it takes you anywhere. Does it lead to any further associations? Is there any comment you want to make on that feeling, thought or idea? But remember you don't have to know where it's going, or where it ends up. The very *process* of writing can be freeing and allow a release. So try to set aside the inner critic, and to see the page as a space to play with words. If you want, you can allow a kind of writing to emerge here that is different to the kinds of writing you're used to doing: it doesn't have to be neat and well ordered. Something spontaneous and a bit messy can be really helpful at times, as it allows you to take a less inhibited approach to your feelings.

Or, by contrast, on some days you might feel you really want to order your thoughts and organise them into a structure that helps you to feel in control. That's fine too. You can vary how you use the journal if you want. Some people also like adding in mind-maps they sketch out. Those of you who draw might like to add more visual aspects.

Sometimes, as something different, you might even like to try the practice of spontaneously filling several blank pages with writing without censoring yourself, as an unfiltered outlet for what might be on your mind. The advantage of free writing like this is an openness that can allow inner experience out and onto the page in authentic expression. The writer Susan Sontag said that 'in the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could do to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood.'

Journalling can also help with sleep, as you transfer the material on your mind to paper, which can be a release. If you're having trouble with sleep then it might be worth coming back to your journal in the evening before bed and jotting down anything on your mind before you go to bed, to help you offload. Like I said, the journal can be closed again and put aside.

Remember your journal is yours to use however best it serves you.

I hope that that if you try out journalling, you can see your writing time as personal wellbeing time and come to look forward to it! Have a think about what might suit you, where you might begin, and give yourself permission.