

•LETTERS•

JOURNALING CAN HELP WITH COVID-19 EMOTIONS

Editor:

In the midst of a global pandemic and economic turndown, many Americans are battling stress, depression and despair. Since COVID-19 emerged, the number of adults who have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder has risen from 1 in 10 to 4 in 10. Many have also experienced difficulty sleeping, worsening chronic illnesses, and other negative health impacts due to worry over the coronavirus. The isolation and job losses that have come with social distancing and business closures have only exacerbated these problems.

At the same time, the supportive services intended to help people cope have been overwhelmed. Behavioral health organizations and private psychotherapists have seen an increase in demand for services, yet in many cases their capacity to handle that demand has diminished. Overburdened providers have been forced to turn away new patients or put them on waiting lists. We're greatly in need of accessible, affordable, and autonomous ways for boosting our physical and mental health.

I'd like to suggest that some comfort may be as close as the tip of your pen and as inexpensive as a 99-cent notebook. Over the past few decades, researchers in psychology and medicine have discovered that expressive writing—which involves writing about your deepest thoughts and feelings related to traumatic events or emotional upheaval—has some pretty astounding benefits for both mind and body. Here are five research-backed ways that putting pen to paper and expressing yourself in your journal can benefit your wellbeing in the time of the coronavirus and beyond.

- 1. Improved mood and resilience:** Expressive writing can significantly reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety. It can also lower the physiological signs of stress (such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure) and fortify emotional resilience in the face of traumatic events.
- 2. Better sleep:** Expressive writing has led to decreases in sleep disruption in populations as varied as cancer patients and college students.
- 3. Enhanced immune function:** Expressive writing can boost CD4 lymphocyte counts, which is a gauge of improved immune functioning, and accelerate wound healing.
- 4. Fewer symptoms of illness:** Expressive writing can diminish disease symptoms among those with asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, irritable bowel syndrome, and other chronic illnesses. It can also decrease the number of illness-related healthcare visits that patients make.
- 5. Better coping with isolation:** NASA studies on astronauts aboard the International Space Station have shown that expressive writing provides a cathartic outlet to help manage the stress of seclusion and confinement.

You don't have to be a wordsmith to benefit from expressive writing. There's no need to write in complete sentences, spell correctly, or use proper grammar and punctuation. Just write naturally, honestly, and confidentially. The most important thing is to link your emotions to the events in your life. If you need help getting started, consider picking up a book like "Writing to Heal" by James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D., or sign up for a journal-writing class. As journal therapist Kathleen Adams wrote in her book "Journal to the Self," just remember there's always a friend at the end of your pen.

Rachel B. Levin is a Pasadena-based journalist and "journal-ist." She has completed training at the Center for Journal Therapy and the Therapeutic Writing Institute and teaches a journal-writing course called Journal to the Self at PCC Extension at Pasadena City College. The next course will be held via Zoom on six Sundays, March 21 to May 2 (no class on Easter), 1 to 3 p.m. To learn more, visit writestrongconsulting.com and register at pcclearn.org.