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Journaling

The Write Way to Better Health

"Change is inevitable, growth is intentional" — Glenda Cloud

Most dieters recognize that losing weight and keeping it off requires purposeful lifestyle changes. Yet many feel that the emotional commitment required to permanently change their lives is illusive. Often they say, "I know it in my head, but can't make it happen in my heart." The power to bridge the head/heart gap may be as close as their fingertips.

Researchers now believe what philosophers and psychologists have preached for decades. Journaling can help people discover inner strengths that fuel change and uncover beliefs that may block the emotional growth needed for purposeful change. The power of journaling is that it forces people to work at an inner level. Only to the degree that a person *inwardly* changes will outward results be achieved. For this reason, journal writing is an important part of the weight loss process.

Journaling Boosts Emotional and Psychological Health

Increasingly scientists are finding that writing about your history, the issues that trouble you, or your desires, can lead to better health and improve your ability to lose weight and keep it off.

While conducting research for his book, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, Dr. James Pennebaker found that people who wrote

tools for success

- Journaling can improve weight loss and long-term management results by helping identify the subconscious origins of self-defeating behaviors.
- Journaling can reduce stress, focus thinking, deepen self-awareness, and improve mental and physical health
- Asking the right question before you begin to journal can improve your results.
- A variety of journaling techniques can help people achieve their personal weight management goals. Self-monitoring tools are the most basic form of journaling. **When*Where*Why**, and **Think*Blink*Ink*Link** journals require more intense evaluation.

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about painful or traumatic events in school had better quality friendships and stronger immune responses than did those who tried to repress their experiences.

The Journal of the American Medical Association published a landmark paper documenting significant health improvements in patients who wrote about painful life events. The study followed 112 people for four months. Half spent 30 to 60 minutes per day writing about their most stressful experiences. The others spent the same amount of time writing about neutral topics. For the participants who wrote about stressful events, those with asthma experienced a 10% improvement in lung function. Those with rheumatoid arthritis reported a 28% decrease in the severity of their symptoms.

Weight management expert Laurel Mellin, MS, RD, and journaling guru Jon Pergoff believe that journaling can help people conquer body weight issues as well. Mellin developed The Solution approach to weight management. It combines journal writing with development of fundamental

internal skills such as self-nurturing and effective limit setting. Beginning with journaling exercises, people examine their emotional responses and beliefs when presented with various scenarios. Change is possible by exploring beliefs and how they come to be held (topics many dieters try to avoid). This type of probing journaling can elicit strong and sometimes uncomfortable feelings.

"Feelings Letters" create a safe environment for processing these feelings. Feelings Letters help the journal writer examine the memories and insights that come up during the journaling process and explore the strong emotions attached to these recollections. This allows weight managers to reduce tension and negative emotions that often prevent weight loss.

Dr. Ira Pergoff used journaling successfully to address weight management and body image issues. His clients found writing helped them to develop an appreciation for their bodies. Others found writing helped them analyze the underlying issues that caused them to overeat and eventually allowed them to gain control of their weight.

How Exactly Does Journaling Improve Health?

Writing can improve health by counteracting the negative effects of stress. This is significant because excess stress can disrupt normal body rhythms, contribute to overeating, and exacerbate chronic illnesses. Pergoff believes that the process of writing cultivates the awareness and emotional growth that leads to inner healing, and does so more quickly than other forms of therapy. Mellin believes it helps reduce the build up of negative emotions, allowing psychological space for growth and development of new life-management skills.

After her husband died, Judy built up a network of people whom she routinely met for dinner. While enrolled in the OPTIFAST® Program she avoided these dinners. Instead, she worked late, visited her children, took her dog for longer walks, or worked on her hobbies. Despite her best efforts to stay busy through the dinner hour, Judy found herself snacking each evening.

The OPTIFAST Program counselor suggested that Judy keep a daily journal. At first, Judy resisted. The idea of journaling conjured images of a diary that she kept as a teen — a diary where she recorded her secret fantasies. She told the counselor she didn't need dreams, she needed solutions to her problems with food.

The counselor agreed. She explained that the kind of journal she intended for Judy to keep was focused on helping Judy connect her unconscious thoughts with her conscious behaviors. Once she made these connections on the inside, she would be able to make the lifestyle changes she was trying to achieve. Judy agreed to try for one week. After the week, Judy reported journaling helped her discover things that she had no idea were on her mind. She found it to be a wonderful way of knowing what was going on inside

of her. She recognized she had made her life so busy to deal with widowhood and recently to avoid eating that she didn't take the time to know how things affected her.

From her writing, Judy learned that she felt let down by her friends because they had not contacted her and lonely because she wasn't spending time with them. She realized that she ate at night when she felt the most alone. Judy admitted she didn't like writing some evenings, but after she wrote and sometimes cried because of what she learned about herself, she felt better. Judy said often times she didn't eat after writing, or if she did eat, she ate far less than she did before. Judy agreed to continue journaling. She also agreed to begin meeting with a counselor outside of the OPTIFAST Program to help process the feelings that surfaced from the writing and to begin developing a plan to deal with these newly discovered emotions.

Asking The Right Questions

The success of journaling techniques hinges on asking yourself the right question before you begin journaling. Unguided journaling can lead some people into circular thought patterns and leave them stuck in their current habits or negative emotional stages.

focus question

Questions focus thinking and have the power to lead people into new territory and self-discovery.

Various techniques are used to ask questions. Some include asking a person to answer specific questions, to tell a story from beginning to end, have a conversation with an unwanted behavior, or to describe the future and then detail the steps needed to get there. If a person is not ready to probe her own history too deeply, or feels they have hit a developmental wall, they may be asked to describe their response to an inspirational quote. All of these approaches to journaling can create change.

An example of the power of questioning comes from Sarah Ban Brathnach, author of *Simple Abundance*. Brathnach teaches people to improve their quality of life by asking themselves what they were grateful for and listing the first five things that came to mind each day before they went to bed. Keeping a gratitude journal can reshape one's outlook on life. Rather than seeing the proverbial glass as "half empty" it can be seen as "half full."

Another example comes from asking the question what one's weight is "saying" for them. Examples of responses include "fear," "feeling unworthy," "power," "protection from the opposite sex," or

"fear of intimacy with friends," and writing a response. Giving voice to one's inner beliefs, examining roots, and developing a plan to work through them, can help people reach the point where they no longer need their larger body to "speak" for them.

The Intensive Journal Method developed by Pergoff is an advanced form of journaling that asks people if the life they are leading is consistent with the values they profess to hold most dear. It combines the use of a daily log and a feedback section. The log tracks daily activities and important thoughts or insights the person has during the day. The feedback section examines these entries. By comparing the insights from these examinations with their actual lifestyle, tracked in the daily log, people can determine if their lifestyle matches their values and priorities. They are also able to find meaning and direction by analyzing positive as well as negative life experiences.

Raul kept an intensive journal for several months. It helped him realize he was always tense at work, despite his success as an attorney, because he was following the career path his parents encouraged, rather than pursuing the lesser paying but more satisfying teaching career he longed for.

Leanne, a working mother, decided to downsize her lifestyle and stay home after journaling

Start * Stop * Keep

If you are in the early weight loss phase of your weight management program, another good way to ease into journaling is to keep a weekly Start*Stop*Keep Journal. Divide your journal page into three columns headed Start, Stop, and Keep. In the Start column, record one behavior you want to begin doing this week and in the Stop column, one behavior you want to stop doing. Record successful new behaviors in the Keep column. The Keep column will grow each week, as this list becomes a summary of all of the behaviors you have changed over time and want to continue making a part of your new lifestyle.

Week	Start	Stop	Keep
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			

Phase 2: Examining

The next level is to examine the tendencies you have discovered through self-monitoring. A When*Where*Why Journal is a three-column record to be used when an urge to eat occurs. Most people find the "Why" column the most difficult to complete.

A When*Where*Why Journal can be useful for those beginning a weight management program. Although actively losing weight does not include freely choosing foods, having the urge to eat a food that is not included in the weight loss plan is common. It is never too early to become aware of the situations that motivate desire to eat.

Many find this Journal an important long-term management tool because it helps them stay aware of the psychological and environmental factors that may pull towards old habits. By keeping a When*Where*Why Journal, you may identify old familiar behavior patterns that encourage overeating or too little exercise. This awareness can help you deal with lapses or the urge to lapse.

Week	When	Where	Why
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			

Identifying Feelings

Don't be discouraged if you find it difficult to determine why you want to eat. When you first begin asking yourself why you want to eat, or why you ate a particular food, all you may know is that you "feel like chocolate." Be patient with yourself, and also be persistent in asking yourself "What am I feeling right now?" If all that comes to mind is "chocolate," then ask yourself again and again until you come up with a feeling like boredom, tiredness, loneliness, anger, or anxiety. Being stressed is a state of *being*, not a feeling. If your answer is "stress," keep trying. How is that stress manifesting itself? Are you irritable, depressed, tired, anxious, fearful?

Some dieters have spent so many years shoving down their feelings with food that all they truly feel is numb. With practice, you'll begin naming the feelings that in the past were identified only by the urge to eat. Once you are able to name your feelings, you'll be able to come up with actions to take instead of eating.

Angry	Creative	Envious	Helpless	Joyful	Pained	Satisfied
Anxious	Depressed	Exasperated	Hopeful	Lonely	Passive	Shocked
Apathetic	Determined	Exhausted	Hurt	Meditative	Puzzled	Sick
Ashamed	Disappointed	Frightened	Indifferent	Miserable	Regretful	Sympathetic
Blissful	Disbelieving	Frustrated	Insecure	Negative	Relieved	Threatened
Confident	Enraged	Grateful	Inspired	Obstinate	Resentful	Triumphant
Confused	Enthusiastic	Grieving	Jealous	Optimistic	Sad	Withdrawn

Phase 3: Journaling

If you feel like you are ready to begin journaling but aren't sure where or how to start, or if you are a journal keeper experiencing 'writer's block' you may want to follow the steps developed by John Robson. He suggests the Think*Blink*Ink*Link method as a technique to help people get the most out of their writing.

Think*Blink*Ink*Link

Think

Identify your prime thinking time and commit a block of that time to work on your journal. Create a peaceful environment where you can't be interrupted. Some people find playing relaxing music helps. Before you begin, take three deep breaths. Hold them for a few seconds and breathe out for twice as long as you breathe in. Relax more deeply into your chair with each breath. Some people find a short meditation exercise before they journal helps to clear their mind and get in touch with the feelings held at a deeper level.

Blink

State your intention or ask your question. Do this emphatically and with authority. Consciously tell your subconscious what you want, then repeat it twice more. For example, ask yourself three times, "What are 10 solutions to this problem?" "What does my extra weight say for me?" "Why am I eating at night after my spouse and kids go to bed?"

Ink

When you sense ideas coming to you, write them down. Write faster than normal. This is key. Write what comes to mind. Do not censor or edit your thoughts. You have asked your mind for creative or deep information. Do not block your progress by judging your train of thought. Keep the pen going. If you get stuck, write the question. If you think, "this is stupid," write it down, and then keep writing.