



# A Guide to Journaling

Different styles and how they can  
help your mental health

It goes without saying, it's important that we do everything we can to look after our mental health. And there are many ways to do that – exercise, therapy, medication, mindfulness techniques. But one tool, one of the easiest and cheapest we have, is the journal.

The journal has been around for centuries (think of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, essentially his journal whilst Roman Emperor), and is recognised by psychologists as a great method for supporting mental health issues, especially anxiety, depression, stress and PTSD. And with benefits such as clarity, self-awareness, problem solving and the refocusing of our mindsets, it's easy to see why.

But where do you start with a journal? It can be daunting to launch right in, especially if you're not natural a writer. And it can be hard to know what style of journal might be best for your needs.

To ease all these doubts, we've put together this quick-and-easy guide of different journal styles and their mental health benefits. We've also thrown in some top tips for journaling to help you get started.

By the end, you'll have discovered just how versatile and varied journaling can be. You may find an approach that works for you and stick with it, or you may try different ones depending on how you feel on the day. It's entirely up to you.

The important thing is that you're doing something to help support your mental health.



# Types of journals

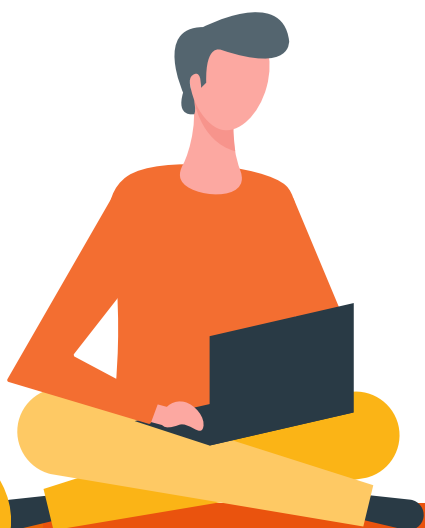
## One Line a Day journal

This is the perfect introduction to journaling. It's so simple: write one line a day. And it can be about anything. Whatever strikes you in the moment. It might be a funny instant in the day, how you're feeling, something you struggled with, a goal you want to achieve, who you saw that day – anything.

It's a lovely approach to journaling as it so effortlessly captures what's happened in our lives. Having a snapshot of our lives like that allows us to see what we've achieved and how we've developed and changed as people.

### Mental health benefits

As it isn't a demanding style of journaling, it's the perfect choice for those who are nervous about writing or find it a daunting task. It forces you to start small, which is exactly what you need to do to build the habit.



### Top tip

Whether you prefer long sentences or punchier lists, these can be adapted to any writing style.



## Gratitude and What's Going Well journals

These are two popular types of journals, which are quick and easy to carry out. Though they have slightly different focuses, the ways in which they help our mental health are similar.

**Gratitude** journaling aims to document what we're grateful and thankful for in our lives. It usually encompasses objects, people, or experiences.

**What is Going Well** journaling helps us to assess, or reassess, our days. The aim is to encourage us to look at our day with a focus on the positive, and log the things that went well, no matter how small.

### Mental health benefits

These journals aim to help us change our mindset. The act of thinking about what to be thankful for or what's gone well in your day encourages your mind to refocus and avoid dwelling on anything upsetting or challenging. It helps you see life in a different way, and, as a result, can help reduce anxieties and beliefs that life is one stream of challenges, problems and upsetting events.



## Reflection journal

This journal is used to reflect on the day – whether that is reflecting on what is to come and how it may be faced or reflecting on what has been and lessons that can be learnt. Or both! You can write when it suits you – either in the morning and the evening, or just once a day.

### Morning Reflection Top Tip

Ask yourself questions such as, what am I facing today? What do I need to do to achieve it? Will there be any struggles?

### Evening Reflection Top Tip

Ask yourself, how did the day go? Did I achieve what I wanted? Was there anything surprising? What went particularly well? What did I struggle with?



## Deep Thought journal

If you want to delve deep and understand yourself better, a deep thought journal is the way to go. It is perfect for externalising our inner worlds, which we need to do to tap into and understand ourselves, what we're facing and what's on our minds. It's only through this understanding that we can make any changes.

Patience and time are needed for this one, as the in-depth nature of it often requires long, wordy sentences. But it's the depth that helps increase self-awareness and provide insights which will help you grow and develop as a person.

They can be used for a wide range of different purposes, but two popular ones are **reflection** and **solution-finding** journals.

## Mental health benefits

As well as helping you delve deeper into your mind, this type of deep thought journal is especially useful if you want to achieve certain goals. You can set a task or focus each day which will help you work towards a goal, and then in the evening reflect on how it went. Overtime you'll get a sense of how things are progressing, what's working and what you might need to change.



## Solution-finding journal

This journal is perfect for working through any problem, challenge or upset you are facing – professional or personal. Writing down the problem and how you're feeling helps clarify what you're facing and allows potential solutions to come to light.

### Top tip

Don't stress about finding the right solution. Explore any that come to mind, even if it turns out they wouldn't work.



## The 'Unsent Letter' style

This isn't a traditional type of journal and is a great example of just how flexible journaling can be. Unlikely to be used every day, it helps you express anger, grief, sadness, love – any emotion that, for whatever reason, you can't express out loud. It's usually written to a person – whether it's yourself (for example, a past or future self) or someone else – and is a way of unloading your mind. It can then be burnt or stored – anything but sent.

### Fun Fact

Abraham Lincoln used this method, scrawling at the bottom 'Never Sent. Never Signed'.



### Mental health benefits

As it relieves you of thoughts or feelings that may be crowding your mind, you can imagine how cathartic this can be especially if you want to get something off your chest. It can also help prevent stop you from saying anything damaging or regretful in real life, especially if you're writing in anger!





### Aspiration journal

The aim of this journal is to collect inspiring quotations or thoughts relating to how you want to live, and the type of life you aspire to.

This journal is harder to write daily. You might not have something to say each day, so relieve yourself of that pressure and just make note whenever you hear, read or think of something that is relevant.

#### Mental health benefits

This style was a big part of Marcus Aurelius' journals. It gives you focus, and helps you live a life of purpose and meaning, acting as a reminder of how you want to live and the type of person you want to be.

### Art journal

Journals don't have to be about writing. Artists, or anyone who prefers to express themselves visually, can benefit from this style. Draw, collage, paint, or sketch to capture your inner world, whether that's your feelings, what you're grateful for, or the best or worst part of your day.

This style is so versatile and can be a lot of fun. Be open to trying new things and don't put pressure on yourself for it to be perfect. Like we advise not to worry about words, grammar, or sentence structure (see top tip #3), here you shouldn't worry about composition, colours, or presentation.

#### Mental health benefits

This journal works in just the same way as any other. Whether we do this visually or through writing, it's all the same – to relieve anxiety, or burdens and weights we may be carrying.



# Top tips for starting your journal

Carol Butler, our Content Writer and a huge fan of journaling, offers her top tips for starting your journal.

## 1. Find your notebook

Find a notebook that suits you. There are many useful journals out there, but I still think an old-school lined notebook is the best. They are incredibly versatile and can be used for any sort of journaling. So whichever journaling style you choose (which could vary from day to day), a notebook will always be fit for purpose.

## 2. Write every day – but your way

Make a habit out of it, but don't feel you have to choose one style and stick to it. Instead, listen to yourself. Do you want to just write a line? Go ahead. Or maybe list what you're grateful for? No problem. Is there's something you want to get off your chest? Write that unsent letter.

It's your journal and there is no right or wrong way. Whatever journaling style helps you build that habit of writing a little every day, do it. The freedom to write in your way will help free your mind of the pressure of having to do it the 'right way', and overtime, you'll find writing in your journal comes more easily. Even something you look forward to!

## 3. Don't overthink

I think there is a tendency to overthink what we put in a journal. It really doesn't matter, it's whatever feels right at the time. And as a journal is for your eyes only, you don't have to worry about other people's reactions, or your spelling, grammar and sentence structure. If you think about it, a journal helps you be in the moment. It's a reflection on what you're thinking, feeling, battling, wondering about at the time – it doesn't matter if it's not relevant by the next day. So don't overthink, just go with your gut.

## 4. Reflect on what has come up

Reflection is a lesser talked about aspect of journaling. It definitely wasn't part of my journaling as a teen! But it's a huge benefit. Acknowledging what you've written and then assessing what you need to do, what the next steps are – even if it's nothing – is the only way to really discover and learn about ourselves. It's what brings the change about, and helps us grow and develop as people.

So, what are you waiting for? Grab your notebook, pen and get writing. It might be the boost your mental health is looking for.

