



Journaling Techniques for Effective Stress Management

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Introduction

Clients seeking help to manage their stress levels report a number of factors as triggers. Here are some of the top concerns: job demands, finances, relationships, parenting, death of a loved one, illness, military deployment, caretaking of a sick or aging parent, commuting, and lack of time. Add to the list, a 24/7 culture where the workday bleeds into personal time, making any kind of balance seem unattainable.

At first, clients may be seeking ways to eliminate stress from their lives altogether. Of course this is impossible, but also unnecessary. Healthy levels of stress can help clients stay motivated and productive. What is possible is teaching healthier ways to manage their stress. This course is designed to help clinicians incorporate journaling exercises into client care. Journaling can be a helpful way for clients to explore their thoughts, beliefs, choices and possible solutions.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Define healthy and unhealthy levels of stress
2. Introduce journaling techniques as a coping strategy
3. Develop client insights into an action plan to manage stress

Let's Get Started!

What is Journaling?

People who have never tried journaling before may find the thought of it intimidating. It helps to be able to explain what this special type of writing is and is not. First, journaling is not the same as keeping a diary. Nor is it a recounting of what you did that day or a list of goals. It is not necessary to be a “good” writer. What is written is for the writer’s eyes only, so spelling, grammar, and punctuation don’t count. This is far from a graded exercise. It’s also not limited to exploring uncomfortable or stressful events. It’s just as useful to write about positive experiences, personal strengths, successes, gratitude, and joy!

Journaling helps clients to explore feelings about certain issues, revealing deeper and more complex truths. Most people have a lot of thoughts running through their head, but have never examined the feelings that go with them. Stressed individuals in particular describe a non-stop internal dialogue of worries. Inside your head, you can make a lot of sense, but when challenged to write down those thoughts, you might find you’re not quite as clear. Journaling provides clarity by synthesizing thoughts and feelings. It’s a safe way of unraveling the thoughts that otherwise are binding.

As helpful as journaling can be, it’s not for everyone. Sometimes the resistance is just an aversion to writing. It’s not enjoyable or easy for everyone. Even though there are no rules, many

clients will associate it with past negative academic experiences. Another reason for resistance is that clients know a truth deep down, but may not be ready to acknowledge it in writing. Still others will decline because they perceive journaling as “reliving” bad memories and it would be too painful. (The goal is to resolve uncomfortable feelings and find new meaning.) If journaling is met with resistance, don’t push it – just explain what it is and how it can be helpful, and then let the client decide.

How to Journal?

There are many ways to get started journaling. Some clients are able to “free write” meaning they can just start writing without any prompts or direction. Most likely, these clients have used journaling in the past and feel comfortable doing so. Other clients will need more direction and encouragement. The journaling exercises in this course are specifically designed to help clients explore triggers and improve their stress management. They can be used in groups or individually. Writing prompts are just a place to start. If the journaling ends up going in an entirely different direction – that’s exactly what the client needed to explore. So, there are no rules and no wrong answers.

The actual writing can be done free hand in a notebook or typing on a computer, whichever the client prefers. Clients who are concerned about someone else discovering and reading their journal should consider what form of writing would feel the most secure. Writing on a shared computer may leave them feeling exposed. In the same vein, an expensive leather-bound book that says “My Private Journal” on the front is also not the best choice for privacy. An affordable and convenient choice is a spiral-bound notebook. This option is portable and readily accessible whenever a client feels like journaling.

There’s no specific amount of time or frequency that needs to be spent journaling, just whatever it takes to fully explore a prompt. Sometimes a client will stay on the surface of a topic and not write enough. In these cases, the exercise can be changed to writing for 15-minutes without stopping – forcing a client to keep writing about anything, just as long as the writing is continuous. Or, the exercise could be to write 1-3 full pages on one subject. This can encourage a breakthrough to deeper thoughts and emotions.

Scheduling time to journal first thing in the morning ensures it will get done and allows the client to consider any insights throughout the day. Some clients prefer journaling before bed to release their thoughts from the day. As long as the journaling doesn’t stir emotions that prevent rest, this is also a viable option. What matters most is that the client chooses a time free of interruptions and distractions.

It’s important to discuss the process of journaling with clients, explaining these phases:

Before You Begin

- Choose a location and time of day free of interruptions and distractions
- Quiet yourself by taking a few deep, cleansing breaths
- Date every entry at the top of the page (this helps to track progress and monitor patterns)

During

- Write quickly, without censoring
- Keep writing – don't stop to think or edit
- Tell the truth

Ending

- STOP if you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed
- Close your journal and put it in a safe place
- Take a few deep, cleansing breaths
- Move in some way by stretching, walking, or changing environments

Benefits of Journaling

There are multiple benefits to journaling. By teaching clients to journal, you are offering a life-long, affordable, and healthy way to cope. Clients who struggle sharing their feelings can find solace by writing them down first. There's great power in putting things down on paper. In addition, taking time to journal means the client is taking time for personal care. Many times, this is the first step necessary in managing their stress.

Understanding Stress

Stress is personal. It's not a separate entity that exists outside of the individual, but how the person reacts to the surrounding world. The situations that clients find overwhelming may be a non-issue for somebody else, and vice versa.

Stress isn't necessarily bad, either. In fact, a certain level is healthy and productive. It motivates clients to get up, do well, and even perform at peak levels. The human body and brain were designed to experience short spurts of high tension known as "fight or flight" when we choose to either conquer the situation or escape from it.

However, humans were not designed to endure *chronic* stress by staying in the "fight" mode for weeks and months at a time. There's a tipping point at which too much stress becomes destructive and causes deterioration under the pressure. Unhealthy levels of stress manifest in feeling drained, irritable, and physically sick. Relationships and decision-making can suffer as well. A good stress management plan will inform clients where they are on the continuum between healthy and unhealthy levels of stress and help them to manage symptoms before they develop into bigger problems.

How to Use the Journaling Exercises in Session

The following journaling exercises will help clients explore common stress triggers and coping strategies. The subject of each exercise is listed first. Choose the best journaling prompt or prompts to address your client's needs.

The discussion/reflection portion can be used one of two ways. The first option is to discuss the topic with an individual or group, then assign the journaling prompt. The second option is to give the client the reflection to process privately before journaling. Each exercise concludes with an action step designed to support healthier choices in the subject area.

These assignments can be given between sessions so that insights can be processed at the next session. Note: clients don't have to share their personal writing, just talk about what they gained or realized from the experience. They may want to read portions of their writing out loud, but it's not necessary. They may ask the clinician to read their writing, but it's more powerful to ask the client to read it out loud.

Journaling Exercises for Stress Management

1. Subject: Align Actions with Values

Discussion/Reflection: When you hold values that you don't support with behavior, the result is stress. The more you stray from what is truly important to you, the more intensely you will suffer. For example, if relationships are important, but you spend more time at work, something is misaligned. If your health is important, yet you behave in unhealthy ways, your actions reveal the truth. When your behavior consistently conflicts with your values, you're either lying to yourself about what's important or you're lying to others by your behavior. Either way, it's stressful.

Journaling prompt: Based on how you spent your time and money in the last week, what does the evidence show that you currently value?

Action: Determine what you value and the behaviors to support it.

2. Subject: Listen to Your Body

Discussion/Reflection: Unhealthy levels of stress can take a physical toll. Examples include headaches, stomach upset, muscle tension, high blood pressure, racing heart, recurring injuries, hair loss, or disruptions in eating and sleeping habits. These symptoms are your body's warning signals that immediate changes are necessary. If your current coping strategy is to ignore your body's signals, you may be relying on food, alcohol, medication, or drugs to numb your discomfort. These may offer temporary relief, but will never solve the underlying issues. Consider your body's aches and pains as an invitation to cope in healthy ways now, while you still can.

Journaling prompt: Where does stress show up in your body? What is your body trying to tell you right now?

Action: Make an appointment to get a physical. Now's the time to find a regular doctor if you don't already have one. If you've had a physical within the last year, make sure you're following through on your doctor's advice.

3. Subject: Recognize Triggers

Discussion/Reflection: What triggers your most stressful reactions? Understanding the specific conditions, environment, people, and situations that feel overwhelming will teach you when to interrupt your pattern of response and do something differently for a better outcome. Typically, people wait until they're stressed to make a change. It's far more effective to intervene before reaching that state. While you won't always be able to change the triggering event, you can learn to avoid it, exit the situation earlier, or be prepared with a practiced response instead of getting caught off-guard. Proactively preparing for triggers is more empowering than hoping they won't occur.

Journaling prompt: What are the specific conditions, environment, people, or situations that cause you to feel stressed?

Action: Choose one of your stress triggers and create a specific plan of how you will respond differently.

4. Subject: Focus on What You Control

Discussion/Reflection: What you focus on expands so if you're focusing on people or circumstances that you cannot control, your anxiety and frustration are expanding. The only things within your control are your thoughts and responses. That's it. Accepting how little you have control over invokes anxiety for some, yet it can be freeing as well. Imagine the impact of redirecting all the energy you put into worrying about things you cannot affect and investing it into areas where you can make significant change. Rather than feeling stuck and helpless, you'll feel energized by positive movement.

Journaling prompt: Who or what do you attempt to control that's really outside of your control?

Action: Write down everything that worries you. Consider what parts, if any, of your worries that you actually control and restate them. Cross off anything from your list that you cannot control and circle what you can. Focus only on the things you circled.

5. Subject: Banish All-or-Nothing Thinking

Discussion/Reflection: Your thoughts direct your actions so it's important to challenge skewed perceptions. All-or-nothing thinking limits the way you see the world. Statements like, "Nothing ever goes right," or "Everyone hates me," are rarely true. It's more accurate to say that some things go well while others don't, or some people like you and others don't. Describe your situation using specifics that are truthful rather than relying on blanket statements. Gain an accurate perception by paying attention to the exceptions to your stress.

Journaling prompt: How often do you fall into all-or-nothing thinking? How does it affect your mood?

Action: In your thoughts and speech, replace the words, “always, never, and everyone” with the more accurate, “sometimes, occasionally, and some people.”

6. *Subject: Manage Energy, Not Time*

Discussion/Reflection: No matter what you do, you can’t add hours to your day. Time and energy aren’t related. You can have a five-minute interaction that zaps all your energy, or you can have a thirty-second belly laugh that fills you up for the rest of the day. You may have to spend time in a stressful situation, but you don’t have to expend all your energy. Well-managed energy means that you have some left over each day to spend on yourself.

Journaling prompt: What activities or experiences drain your energy and what rejuvenates?

Action: Create two lists, labeled green and red. Reflect on your activities over the last week. Whenever you’re doing something that feels energizing, write it on the green list. When an activity makes you feel drained, apprehensive, or anxious write it on the red list. Make sure green list activities are part of each week.

7. *Subject: Release Guilt*

Discussion/Reflection: If you’re a human, you’ve made mistakes in the past, and you’re bound to make more in the future. Some level of remorse is understandable, especially if your mistakes have hurt others. However, unrelenting guilt continues to hurt everyone, especially you. Every mistake you make has the potential to teach you a helpful lesson. Mistakes shape you for the better, if you let them. By retaining guilt, you remain captive in a self-imposed jail, without applying the lesson. You’ll never be able to redo the past, but you can create a better future through the lessons past mistakes provided.

Journaling prompt: What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned from the mistakes you’ve made? How is that lesson apparent in your life today?

Action: Address guilt by acknowledging your wrongdoing, apologizing if necessary, and then making the necessary changes to show the lesson you’ve learned.

8. *Subject: Fill Your Own Cup*

Discussion/Reflection: Reaching a state of overwhelming stress often exposes how much you give to others and how little you think about yourself. If helping others is causing feelings of resentment, and focusing on yourself makes you feel guilty, your intentions are coming from the wrong place. Service to others needs to come from your energy overflow, not reserves. If you keep serving others out of your own cup without filling it up, you’ll soon be empty and then everyone suffers. Don’t wait for things to slow down or expect someone else to fill you up. When you’re at the point of overflow, serving others is energizing.

Journaling prompt: What do you need to stop or do less of in order to fill your own cup?

Action: Schedule non-negotiable appointments with yourself into your calendar first, before considering other obligations. If someone needs your help during that time say that you already have a commitment.

9. *Subject: Establish Healthy Boundaries*

Discussion/Reflection: A relationship boundary is the line where you end and another person begins. Like fences dividing property, some boundaries are sturdy with gates, others are brick walls, and some are broken with gaping holes. Healthy boundaries are firm, yet flexible based on need. They're built on honest communication, reciprocity, and an understanding that each person is responsible for fulfilling his or her own needs. In contrast, unhealthy boundaries are either too distant with little communication (brick walls) or overly dependent and needy (broken). Establishing healthy boundaries requires communicating expectations and respectfully informing those who cross the line. What you allow, you teach.

Journaling prompt: What type of boundaries have you established in your closest personal and professional relationships? How do these boundaries increase or decrease your stress?

Action: Communicate your relationship expectations to someone who has continually violated your boundaries, but you have yet to correct.

10. *Subject: Refuse to Remain a Victim*

Discussion/ Reflection: You may have been a victim of circumstance in the past, but do you remain one by choice? Harboring anger or fear long after the incident has occurred turns you into your own worst enemy. You become the offender by reliving past pain. Today, your options may be limited or less than ideal, but you still have the choice to be a victim or the hero of your life story. Are you talking more about what was done to you or what you're going to do about it? If it's not happening now, it's not happening. Don't waste time living like it is.

Journaling prompt: What past hurts are you still keeping alive today? How does this help or hurt your stress level?

Action: Stop telling victim stories and recast yourself in the role of hero.

11. *Subject: Change the Question*

Discussion/Reflection: When you're stressed, your mind can lock in on repetitive thoughts that leave you feeling even more exhausted. Usually, they're questions that create more worries or that you can't answer. If the questions you're asking make you feel stuck and powerless, change the question. Start by replacing "why" with "what" or "how." For example, instead of asking, "Why is this happening?" or "Why did they do that?" ask, "What can I do for myself right now?" or

“How can I change the way I cope?” The first two questions will keep you stuck while the last two will give you answers to move you forward.

Journaling prompt: What question do you repeatedly ask yourself that increases your stress? What question can you ask instead that will move you forward?

Action: Replace “why” questions with “what” or “how.”

12. Subject: Turn Off Technology

Discussion/Reflection: Research suggests the use of technology has literally rewired our brains. Jumping between multiple computer windows, responding to phone messages and texts, playing video games, and using social media has made our brains more adept at quickly scanning information. The downside is that the information is cluttering short-term memory. Without taking the time to deeply focus on one idea and then reflect, lessons and insights never form in long-term memory. Being able to make those connections is how you cultivate personal knowledge. The more insights you have, the less likely you are to repeat mistakes. Imagine how much stress that would save you!

Journaling prompt: How would you spend an entire day unplugged from technology? What about a week?

Action: Set aside at least one hour of free time a day to spend without using any technology.

13. Subject: Purge Clutter

Discussion/Reflection: The environment you create often reflects on the outside what you’re feeling on the inside. So, if you’re feeling overwhelmed and frazzled, there’s a good chance that all, or some, of your living space appears the same way. Clutter has emotional roots. What’s the source of your accumulation: Guilt? Fear? Sadness? Anger? Any of these underlying emotions can result in avoidance, indecision, and lack of motivation. Clearing away material items that represent those feelings will help to release them. Focus on one space and determine its purpose. Spend ten minutes each day purging anything that doesn’t support the purpose of that space.

Journaling prompt: What is the emotional root underneath your most cluttered space?

Action: Label five large boxes: Keep, give away, trash, repair, and relocate. Place items in the appropriate boxes during each ten-minute purge. Afterwards, distribute contents to the appropriate location.

14. Subject: Get Moving

Discussion/Reflection: A sedentary lifestyle actually produces stress because your body was designed to move. In fact, your brain craves it! The brain represents only about two percent of

most people's body weight, but accounts for about 20 percent of the body's total energy usage. The fuel your brain needs is oxygen and exercise is its delivery system. Exercise increases blood flow to all tissues, including your brain. Not only does it release stress, it boosts brainpower and functioning. You'll gain clarity and make better decisions. Make your movement aerobic and you'll enjoy the added benefit of endorphins, your body's natural feel-good chemical.

Journaling prompt: Describe a time when you were more physically active than you are right now. How did you feel about yourself then?

Action: Purchase a pedometer and track how many total steps you take in a day. Set a goal of reaching 10,000 steps per day, the recommended amount for a healthy lifestyle.

15. Subject: Practice Deep Breathing

Discussion/Reflection: Pay attention to the way you breathe when you are nervous or angry. Most likely, you're taking short, shallow breaths with a constricted chest. If so, you're depriving your body of one of the easiest and most effective stress-release agents. Deep, rhythmic breathing expands the cone-shaped muscle under your lungs, called the diaphragm, expanding the lung's air pockets and massaging the lymphatic system. This stimulation assists your body in ridding itself of toxins. At the same time, it triggers the relaxation response by calming the parasympathetic nervous system. Better yet, it's natural, free, and available any time! Slow down and take a deep breath.

Journaling prompt: What do you notice when you start paying attention to your breathing?

Action: Sit tall in a chair with feet flat on the ground. Place your hands lightly on your lower belly. Inhale through your nose filling your diaphragm so that your belly pushes out your hands. (Shoulders and chest should not move.) Exhale fully through your mouth like blowing out a candle. Repeat four times. Increase strength by holding inhale two counts before exhaling.

16. Subject: Eat Mindfully

Discussion/Reflection: What's your relationship with food? Is it your friend, enemy, reward, or entertainment? Simply put, food is fuel for your body. Physical hunger comes on slowly; emotional hunger is felt instantly. When food is used as a solution to stress, it creates bigger problems. Become aware of what, where, and when you eat. Are you really hungry, or just stressed? Take time to plan each meal and eat in a pleasant environment, sitting down. Eat as though you value your health.

Journaling prompt: Based on your eating habits over the last week, how well are you treating your body? What changes would improve your health?

Action: Eat at least one meal per day sitting down at a table. Resist doing anything else while eating, like reading, watching TV or talking on the phone.

In Conclusion

Everyone experiences stress. The goal is not to eliminate it, but to manage it better. Journaling can be an excellent resource for clients to explore stressful thoughts and discover new solutions. Journaling is a special type of writing that's different from writing down facts, making lists, or documenting goals. It helps process the underlying emotions that motivate current choices and replace them, if necessary. By discovering insights, the client can break free from unhelpful patterns.

Journaling is a coping strategy that's safe, healthy, accessible and affordable. Not every client will embrace the technique, but for those who do, it can offer lifelong benefits. Adding it to client sessions can also increase a deeper discussion that leads to better solutions.

TEST

Journaling Techniques for Effective Stress Management

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. Journaling can be described as:
 - a) A list of personal goals.
 - b) Documenting daily tasks.
 - c) Exploring thoughts and expressing feelings on paper.

2. Clients may resist trying journaling because:
 - a) They love writing.
 - b) They dislike writing.
 - c) They are creative.

3. Stress is at healthy levels when:
 - a) The client is motivated and productive.
 - b) The client describes feeling overwhelmed.
 - c) The client describes feeling tired and irritable.

4. The best time to journal is:
 - a) In the morning.
 - b) Whenever the client will be free of interruptions and distractions.
 - c) At night.

5. Grammar, spelling and punctuation count when journaling.
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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