

WHEN MEDITATION MEETS JOURNALING

Combining these two potent practices
can boost their already considerable benefits.

// BY KATHERINE WESSLING //

Meditation and journaling have both been practiced for centuries, and in the past few decades, scientific research has begun to catch up with the anecdotal accounts. Now experts are realizing that by combining these two modalities, we can access even deeper self-reflection, a greater ability to be present, more peace of mind and a variety of other health benefits.

Both meditation and journaling can help us notice whatever is coming up in the present moment, accept it, then return our focus to the now. “These practices can help us increase our conscious awareness of our own minds,” says Christa Santangelo,

PhD, assistant clinical professor at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of *A New Theory of Teenagers: Seven Transformational Strategies to Empower You and Your Teen*. They can help us understand our own psychological processes and gain a sense of agency over our thoughts and feelings. Santangelo points out that all of this can help us “reap the benefits of a calmer mind and a clearer knowledge of ourselves.”

Maud Purcell, MSW, LCSW, CEAP, a psychotherapist and corporate consultant in Darien, Connecticut, agrees. She uses both meditation and journaling in her practice, sometimes in tandem, and notes that meditation can help

writing-phobic patients start journaling, while journaling can ease the meditation-resistant into that practice. “I like to start with whatever can open the door because, for me, it’s all about trying to remove barriers like self-hatred, self-loathing and lack of confidence.” Both modalities can help her patients learn to “spend less time worrying about the future or beating themselves up about the past,” and more time being in the present.

ESTABLISHING A ROUTINE

Once you are ready to sit down and start the practice, Purcell says, “It seems to work best if you get in the habit of doing it daily, either first



A daily meditation-and-effective-journaling practice can improve our mental and physical health and help us “to lead a more meaningful life,” says Christa Santangelo, PhD.



thing in the morning or right before bedtime.” She also recommends choosing a place that feels comfortable and safe. “It should appeal to all of the senses: an attractive spot with a great beverage and possibly candles or flowers and a comfortable pillow.” When journaling, it’s most useful to write by hand versus on a computer, and not to worry about spelling or grammar—to just let the thoughts flow, she advises. Another must: keeping your journal in a safe place, so that you can write freely without worrying about anyone finding it.

While any sort of daily writing, including bullet lists, can be considered journaling, research shows that writing about what upsets us, what we’re grateful for and what makes us happy can offer both mental and physical benefits. Probably the most studied type of

journaling is what’s known as expressive writing; the best-known expert on it is University of Texas, Austin, psychology professor James Pennebaker, PhD, who has created what is known as the Pennebaker Paradigm.

John F. Evans, MA, EdD, a Chapel Hill, North Carolina-based expressive-writing clinician, researcher and co-author with Pennebaker of *Expressive Writing: Words that Heal*, explains that the first step in this form of writing is to take a stressful or traumatic event “that is interfering with your daily life or keeping you awake at night and write about it with as much emotion as you possibly can—roughly 80% emotion and 20% facts about what happened. Be brutally honest about it.” The next step is to go away for a while, then come back after a few minutes, or maybe even a

day, and jot down more, potentially deeper, emotions about the event. Next, write about it from another perspective. Lastly, “create a story about what happened that you want to take with you into the future.”

A POWER COUPLE

One way to combine meditation and journaling is to meditate for five minutes, then write for five minutes, then meditate for five more minutes. As you meditate, notice any thoughts and sensations, acknowledge them, and return to your breath. When you journal, don’t edit your thoughts or feelings.

Evans recommends that for the journaling portion, you try an exercise inspired by a component of the extended framework that he and his colleagues have added to the Pennebaker Paradigm called mindful writing. It’s based on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) founder Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD’s seven attitudes for living and consists of reflecting on six words (awareness, attention, acceptance, affection, appreciation and affirmation).

As you journal, reflect on each word for one minute by finishing the sentence, “I just finished meditating and I am aware that...” Then continue with “I just finished meditating and I am paying attention to...,” and the other four words.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

“Don’t judge your thoughts,” says Evans, “and then don’t judge your judging.” He also points out that it’s important not to write about the same thing in the same way over and over again, as “it becomes an emotional addiction.” The goal is to change your perspective, which is what expressive writing can help you do. He recommends that if you write about the same thing in the same way for more than three days, “don’t write about it again unless you can change the story you’re telling yourself about it.”



TRYING IT OUT

Would meditating and expressive writing really enhance each other?

Armed with all of this expert advice, I decided to give it a go. I lit a fig-scented candle, brewed a cup of turmeric-ginger tea and sat myself down on a cushion in my favorite part of my office, next to two lovely orchids (one real and one fake). I set a timer for five minutes, crossed my legs, closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing...but noticed that my throat was sore. My heart started beating faster. Was I sick? Was it COVID? Was I going to die? I breathed in. I breathed out. My mind filled with questions: "Am I doing this right? How will I know?" I tried not to judge myself—a herculean task. My curious Chihuahua came trotting in. It took an effort to keep my eyes closed

and stay on task. I next noticed that my jaw was clenched in an Olympian death grip. Then an image of swimming with my sisters years ago flashed into my mind, soon to be replaced by restlessness at the slow passage of these five minutes.... And then the alarm sounded.

I set the timer again and started writing. I wrote what I had experienced, then, remembering John Evans' advice, I started the sentence: "I just finished meditating and I'm aware that..." I wrote, "...that I'm trying to control the moment; I'm rushing; I feel like I'm doing it wrong." I then found myself writing: "I'm aware that I'm actually safe and that this is OK. I'm aware that I am

noticing these things about myself." Before I knew it, the chimes sounded.

I reset the timer and closed my eyes for the second round of meditation. I felt calmer. I noticed the ticktock of the clock; the whoosh of the AC, the hooting of owls outside. I felt myself relax into my body, into the space, into the soft cushion. I felt my shoulders lower. My jaw released. I wasn't worrying about meditating; I was just noticing what was happening in the moment. After the five minutes, I opened my eyes. I felt rested and more refreshed after 15 minutes than I often do after other mindful practices, and I knew I would be trying it again soon.

James Pennebaker, PhD, suggests focusing on a single issue that's causing you anxiety or pain when journaling.

