



## Book Reviews



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### Personal Journaling: Writing About Your Life

Reviewed by Karen Cangialosi, MFA, MA

In the April 14, 1999 issue of JAMA, David Spiegel, MD, said, "... Smyth and colleagues demonstrate that merely writing about past stressful life experiences results in symptom reduction among patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis. Patients wrote ... following a method developed by Pennebaker et al,<sup>3,7</sup> who showed that such an experience improves immune function."<sup>1:1329</sup>

#### How to Keep a Journal—And Why

For many years, "journaling," or keeping a journal, has been a way for people to process and reflect on what gives meaning to their lives and thus act as a healing agent. Numerous workshops and workbooks teach people how to journal. Through writing, people are often led to the deeper recesses of who they are and sometimes discover things they have yet to understand. The healing power of this reflection is well documented and is used extensively in all forms of the healing arts—especially psychotherapy<sup>2</sup>—but more recently has been used by people affected by diseases such as asthma or rheumatoid arthritis.<sup>3</sup>

*Personal Journaling: Writing About Your Life*<sup>4</sup> is a bimonthly publication from *Writer's Digest* that began with the Winter 1999 issue and focuses each issue on a different topic. Selected articles from past issues of the magazine are available from [www.journalingmagazine.com](http://www.journalingmagazine.com).

As the editor of *Personal Journaling* says, "Your life is like no one else's."<sup>5:4</sup> With this introduction, the magazine concentrates on helping people to write about their lives. For example, in her "Dream Journal" column in the October 2000 issue, psychotherapist-author Joan Mazza discusses the answer to the common question, "What does this dream mean?"<sup>6</sup>

So why does autobiographical writing work? In his book, *Opening Up*, James W Pennebaker explains: "Like other stressors, inhibition can affect immune function, the action of the heart and vascular systems, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous systems."<sup>7:13</sup> Auto-biographical writing releases patients' inhibitions.

Articles about the benefits of keeping a journal, writing about their own anger, getting to know themselves better through "self-acquaintance journaling," or balancing their lives by using a mind-body journal are just a few examples of the ways this publication can help patients get in closer touch with important issues of life and health. Although established workshops that teach people to journal have obvious value—people can sit back and learn the process of journaling by listening to someone else—*Personal Journaling* gives people the tools they need to begin keeping a journal on their own. The beauty of this magazine is that it serves as a handy reference guide as well as a source of inspiration and motivation. Keeping a journal might be as easy for patients as picking up pen and paper and starting to write, but to get the real healing value out of the writing process, clinicians will find *Personal Journaling* useful for deepening and broadening their scope of work with patients and for helping patients to work through the inhibitions that function as stressors in their bodies. ❖

#### References

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