Dear Diary

September 25, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez

Whether you're grappling with a temporary frustration or an ongoing sense of anger or sadness, the act of writing about your negative feelings can help you turn them around. In fact, journaling can be an integral part of a holistic health regimen. Through journaling, you can focus on a problem, define it and explore why it's happening. This releases stress, which research shows can have a positive effect on both the mind and body. Freeing your mind can also strengthen your immune system. But to gain the maximum benefits of journaling, you have to let go of the "Dear diary" middle-school version of writing. Instead, write with honesty, intention, purpose, process and commitment, says Janet Conner, author of *Writing Down Your Soul*. Here's how you can write your way to a healthier you.

Stay On Schedule

"It takes 30 days to create a new habit," Conner says. So to make your journaling as healthy and powerful as it can be, make it deliberate. First, choose a journal that speaks to you. (Do you prefer blank pages, or the structure of ruled lines? Maybe you're more modern and prefer typing on laptops or even your smartphone.) Next, choose a peaceful place to write—one that makes you feel free and safe. Finally, carve out a chunk of time that's available to you every day. This is your journaling ritual: same vessel, same spot, same time, every day.

How to Overcome Writer's Block

Don't let a blank page or screen intimidate you. Your journal is a safe and private space; it's OK to be grief-stricken, foul-mouthed or romantic. If you're having trouble getting started, write about why you think you can't write. The key is to write as much as you can, as fast as you can in the time you have set aside and to keep writing until you are spent. "Write quickly and allow anything to come through," Conner says. "No editing, no judging, just write." You'll spew out the negative feelings and distractions and ultimately get to what's really onyour mind.

Read What You Write

After you've accumulated a few pages, go back and look for themes, trends or subjects worth exploring further. "You want to capture the wisdom and blessings that come through," Conner says. She suggests circling passages that contain special meaning so you can go back and review them later. Also look for lessons you've learned. You'll see an evolution of thoughts and emotions that hopefully leads to healing and health.

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