

The
POWER
of the

PEN

More than just putting words on paper, journaling can help you reach your goals, and even change your life.

by JAYME OTTO

back in her mid-twenties, 44-year-old Sandy Grason couldn't figure out why she was so unhappy. She was fit and attractive, with good friends, a lucrative career in sales, a company car and a home in Miami—and the nagging feeling that something was missing.

Grason turned to a psychologist to help her work through her discontent. He surmised that Grason was harboring pent up anger since the time she was seven, when her father abandoned her, her mother, and her younger brother and sister. The therapist suggested Grason buy a journal, a common prescription for working through stress. On the first page, she was to write a letter to her absent father, a letter she would never give him. The point was to release those emotions. When Grason had packed away her anger, sorrow and pain when her father left, she'd also locked up things like passion and creativity. "If I could unleash the anger, my therapist thought I could reclaim my creativity, the tool I needed to redirect my life, to find happiness," Grason says.

The problem was, she had never journaled before. Grason recalls putting a pen to a blank page as one of the hardest things she ever had

to do. "But very slowly, as I kept dumping out things about my father into my journal, this other voice began whispering to me," she says. It was something she came to refer to as her inner voice, an insightful aspect of herself she'd also been missing.

As she awakened her intuition, Grason would become an avid journaler, eventually stepping away from her unfulfilling career to author her first book (with a second in the works). After years of journaling and becoming a parent herself, she would make contact with her father and introduce him to her two daughters. Grason shares her process in her book, *Journalution: Journaling to Awaken Your Inner Voice, Heal Your Life & Manifest Your Dreams*.

"The beauty of journaling is that it's not just about recording and interpreting, it has the power to change who you are," she says.

Psychologist Frank J. Sileo, PhD recommends journaling to his patients for this very reason. He describes it as a technique that helps us concretize our problems in order to work through them. The first step is just getting them out, and for most people, putting problems on paper is easier than verbalizing

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JOURNALING vs. BLOGGING

Don't confuse the two, says psychologist Frank J. Sileo, PhD. Doing so will negate the positive benefits of each. **A journal is a safe place to work through personal issues**, gain self-awareness and find insight, without directly affecting other people (who may be hurt or confused by being privy to such a workspace). **A blog is a virtual support group**, a place to share information and motivation with like-minded individuals. A good example would be starting a blog for new mothers, or for training for your first marathon, or for beating back depression.

them. "Journaling can quickly get to the core of a matter because writing frees us from the filters, judgment and defenses that can hold us back when we speak," he says.

Sileo says journals can be particularly effective for goal setting, whether it's a personal development goal, a career goal or a health goal. Similar to keeping a to-do list, journals hold us accountable. "Just seeing a goal in black and white, out of your head and onto paper can be very powerful," he says.

Going a step beyond checklists, a journal is an effective problem-solving resource when striving toward a goal. According to Sileo, journaling helps people identify barriers in their training and motivation. Fitness, nutrition and stress management expert Luci Gabel couldn't agree more. The Washington, DC-based wellness consultant likes to cite a study done by Kaiser Permanente on 1,700 people trying to lose weight. Those who wrote down their foods in a journal lost up to twice as much as those who did not. "A journal creates awareness, which is the first step toward change," Gabel says. She gives her clients "homework" assignments that include keeping a food journal. "When we write something down, we can look at it later from a distance, which allows us to see patterns in our eating choices that we wouldn't have seen otherwise."

So the actual "magic" of journaling isn't magic at all. It's mindfulness. Writing down your musings, venting your frustrations, logging your meals, listing your goals—all of these acts create mindfulness, in whatever area of your life you are focusing on at the moment. From family to fitness, and everything in between, you can be stronger, healthier, more at peace. You just need to pick up a pen and write. •



Tips on Keeping a Journal

FORGET THE RULES.

You don't have to write every day. You don't have to write a certain length. Sometimes I write in my journal every day, sometimes not for six months.

WRITE ABOUT WHAT INTERESTS YOU IN THE MOMENT.

Sometimes I keep a food journal, sometimes it's a travel journal, sometimes it's just thoughts. I kept a dream journal for period of time, and it was interesting to see what patterns reoccurred. I plan to start a yoga journal soon. Thoughts that arise in subconscious moments are really fun to reread.

DON'T JUDGE YOURSELF.

We write to get to the things that we're too afraid to admit out loud. In order to be honest, I can't be afraid, which means suspending all judgment while I'm writing.

REREAD YOUR JOURNAL.

Or not. A journal can be just a place to dump your present moment. That's how my mom does it. She's never reread a single passage. I always reread mine. I like analyzing.

ADVANCED TIP:

Experiment with unsent letters. The freedom of knowing there is no recipient will allow you to be honest enough to get to the bottom of what's really bothering you. I've recently started writing letters to my emotions. Dear Uncertainty, Why do you keep coming around in this situation . . . Or Dear Sadness, I've seen you more than I'm comfortable with this weekend . . .

Source: Samara O'Shea, author of *Note to Self: On Keeping a Journal and Other Dangerous Pursuits*.

Award-winning writer Jayme Otto writes about the people, places, ideas and events that are changing the way we think about the world. She works as associate editor at Elevation Outdoors, and contributing editor at Women's Adventure. More at JaymeOtto.com.

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