

The Power Of Journaling



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Dear Diary, this year I resolve to.....

Every January, a large proportion of the population set their mind to achieving a goal in the form of a New Year's resolution. Research suggests that only 8% of people achieve their goal with more than a third of people abandoning their resolution before February begins. The most popular focus for New Year's resolutions is self-improvement or education which account for 47% of all goals. Research also indicates that explicitly making a resolution, as opposed to just vaguely indicating it would be beneficial to get healthier for example, increases the likelihood of achieving the resolution ten-fold.ⁱ



One common resolution amongst those seeking self-improvement is that of keeping a diary or writing a journal. Whilst it is not possible to ascertain how many diaries are sold each year, or indeed how many are actually used, one popular brand of journals and notebooks reports a significance increase in sales in the last decade according to a New York Times article from 2011;

“Moleskine, based in Milan, sold nearly 13 million products worldwide in 2010, helping the company reach 195 million euros (\$280 million) in retail sales last year. Its retail sales since 2006 have risen 26 percent on average, year over year.”ⁱⁱ

Whilst you might be forgiven for assuming that journaling is for the older generation who have yet to embrace the digital age, it seems that keeping a diary is also a very popular past time for young people, with a recent survey suggesting that 83% of teenage girls aged 16 to 19 keep a hand written journal or diary.ⁱⁱⁱ

Diary or Journal?

The words diary and journal share the same etymological root; with diary originating from Latin and journal originating from old French, with both words meaning, ‘of the day’. Today, most understand a diary to be a book in which we record events and experiences every day whilst a journal can be completed periodically as we feel inclined.

The Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius wrote a book in Greek which translates as ‘To Myself’ and is probably the earliest example of a diary style work, being written in the latter part of the 2nd century AD. The oldest examples of diaries still in existence today, herald from the Middle East in the 10th century AD and 9th century China where a scholar Li Ao kept a diary as he travelled



through southern China. For the next four hundred years, diaries acted as personal accounts of events rather than as a vehicle for personal emotional expression.

The Renaissance saw the birth of diaries as we know them today as Western European society became more focused on the individual and the expression of emotions and personal responses to events were recorded in a written format without the intention of them being read by anyone else.

Perhaps the most famous example of a diary was that of Samuel Pepys who was born in 1633. He was the first notable writer to include frank and very personal responses to the events recorded in his diary.

Diaries have continued to feature in the lives of artists and authors since the works of Samuel Pepys. From the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde;

"I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read on the train."
(Gwendolyn in The Importance of Being Earnest)

To the poems of Leonard Cohen;

"Dear Diary
You are greater than the Bible
And the Conference of the Birds
And the Upanishads
All put together...
Sometimes just a list
Of my events
Is holier than the Bill of Rights
And more intense

(taken from Book of Longing)

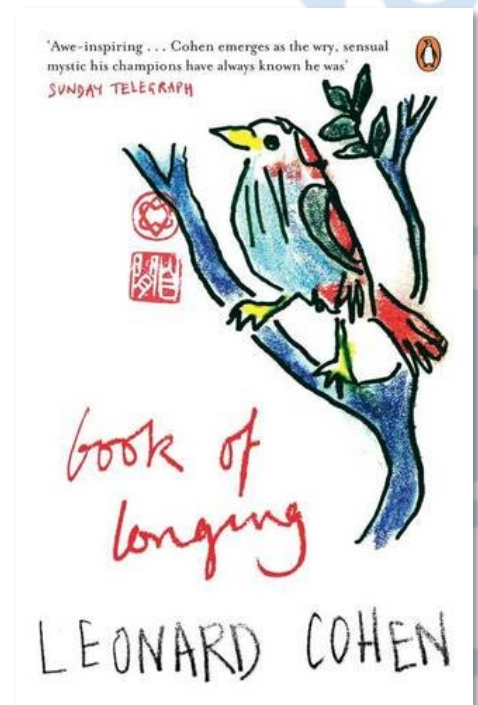
The Benefits of Journaling

The writing prowess of Pepys, Wilde and Cohen eludes most of the population and yet many remain undeterred and committed to regularly recording their thoughts and feelings in a journal. The most common reasons given for journaling include;

- It can help you to get to know your true self better.
- It can be a great support for those who don't feel that they have someone safe and non-judgemental to talk to.
- It can be very interesting to reflect on past experiences at some future point.



In addition to providing comfort and a creative outlet for many, recent research from the scientific community also indicates that journaling and other forms of expressive writing can not only help with emotional



and mental health but even provide physical health benefits such as strengthening the immune system. Whilst there are no rules dictating how much and how often a person should write in a journal to reap the benefits, there are many different approaches that cater to individual preferences.

Journaling for the Creative Mind

Many journal writers advocate writing for a fixed amount of time each day. Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way* suggests writing three pages each day, as soon as you wake in the morning. Whilst many diary writers might assume that the evening is the best time to write, Cameron suggests;



“Unlike more focused journal writing, you do not set a topic for morning pages. Typically, many topics will appear. They may tumble all over one another, arriving on the page in a disorganized heap of fragmentary thoughts. That’s fine. Please don’t judge them or yourself... Morning pages are like getting up in the morning and telephoning yourself.”^{iv}

Three pages will seem like an eternity for the first few days with the likelihood of considerable repetition of the same ideas and thoughts. What is interesting about this investment of time is that rather like the insignificant and superficial chatter at the beginning of an important conversation between friends, by the time the first page of writing has been completed, more important matters come to light.

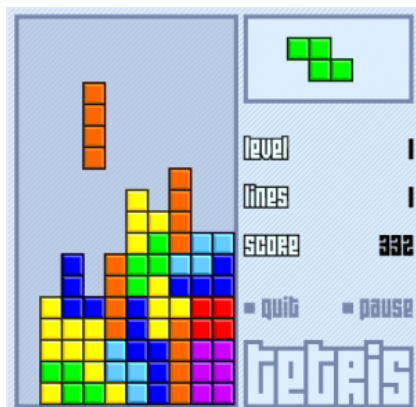
The research also suggests that it will only take a few days for this new venture to become the start of a habit. As with all habits expect enthusiasm for the first few days, followed by some personal rebellion and then the pivotal moment where a decision needs to be made about the merits of the process. Powering through this ‘doldrums’ time will be worthwhile;

“Sometimes rebellion is disguised as ‘what’s the use?’.... If we could we’d like to wriggle off the hook of our own creativity. We’d like to be ‘normal’ by which we mean dreamless... A word of advice here... Make a list of small, doable changes and execute them.....Your rebellion will pass if you let yourself ride it out with tiny triumphs.”^v

Journaling for the Business Mind

Where Julia Cameron focuses on unlocking our creative potential, Shawn Achor marries the world of psychology with the business world in his book, *The Happiness Advantage*^{vi}. Shawn Achor is considered a leading expert in the field of human potential having taught for many years at Harvard University. He has worked extensively with many large corporations to develop productivity in the workplace and enhance individual performance using his understanding of the science of happiness.

The Happiness Advantage identifies seven principles which enable people to recognise existent happiness more easily rather than plan for it at some future point. It is common to assume that success leads to happiness whereas Achor's extensive research shows that the opposite is true.



One of Achor's principles is identified as the Tetris Effect, named after the popular computer game of the 1990s. Achor posits that when a person thinks about something often enough, they begin to notice it everywhere. The same is true when we try not to think about certain things, such as a chocolate cake when trying to lose weight. Achor suggests you can train your brain to think positively by using a journal to record three good things that have happened in the previous 24 hours;

"When you write down a list of 'three good things' that happened that day, your brain is forced to scan the last 24 hours for potential positives- things that brought small or large laughs, feelings of accomplishments at work, a strengthened connection with family, a glimmer of hope for the future. In just five minutes a day, this trains the brain to become more skilled at noticing and focusing on possibilities for personal and professional growth." ^{vii}

Research into this idea conducted in 2005, showed that participants were happier and less depressed when they were interviewed after one month, three months and six months of journaling. The research also showed that this increase in happiness was maintained even after they stopped the journaling exercise as they had trained their brains to notice the positive experiences in their life.

An additional study, also cited by Achor, revealed that writing about a positive experience for twenty minutes, three times a week resulted not only in increased happiness levels but improvements in physical health with participants experiencing fewer symptoms of illness within just three months. ^{viii}

It might be easy to suggest that merely thinking about the important events in our life is sufficient, it is not necessary to write them down. Yet again, the research suggests that there is considerable power in the verbalising of emotional experiences whether they are positive or negative.



Further research cited by Jason Zweig, a personal finance columnist with the Wall Street Journal in his book, *Your Money and Your Brain: How the New Science of Neuroeconomics Can Help Make You Rich* shows that when a person is placed in a situation with high levels of distress, recovery is quickest when the person is able to express those

negative feelings in words. This has been demonstrated with brain scans that indicate a person has a greater sense of well-being and improved decision making capabilities once they have articulated their feelings. Additionally, the expression of their feelings shrinks the impact of these negative emotions.^{ix}

Put simply, it is very easy to experience fear and worry and our internal dialogue often mutes the specific details which leads to a general sense of anxiety. The simple act of vocalising or writing exactly what we are frightened of significantly lessens our anxiety and its impact on our lives.

Journaling for the Goal Oriented Mind

Proof that journaling is not merely a creative pastime for the dreamy can be found in the research conducted by James Pennebaker, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Together with two colleagues, Stefanie Spera and Eric Buhrfeind, Pennebaker conducted a study in 1994 working with 100 senior engineers who were made redundant and whom had failed to find employment within four months.^x

The engineers were divided into three groups; the first group were not given any tasks, a second group were instructed to write about time management and a third group were asked to write about their experience of and feelings about their job loss. They were instructed to write for twenty minutes for five days.

In the two control groups, less than 5% of the engineers were reemployed three months later compared to more than a quarter of the expressive writing group. It was not the case that the expressive writing group had more job interviews than the other engineers but they were more likely to be appointed after interview. Many reported that they wrote about negative feelings towards their former employer and the financial stress of being out of work. Pennebaker suggests that this expression rather than suppression of negative emotion lifted their burden. Within a further eight months, more than half of the expressive writing group had found employment compared with less than 19% of the control group.

For those in employment but seeking more from their job, the New Year can be a popular time to set work related goals. Whilst the statistics for failing to keep New Year's resolutions are depressingly high, one psychology professor from the Dominican University in California, Dr Gail Matthews, has demonstrated in a study of 267 participants that simply writing down your goals increases your chances of keeping them by 42%.^{xi}

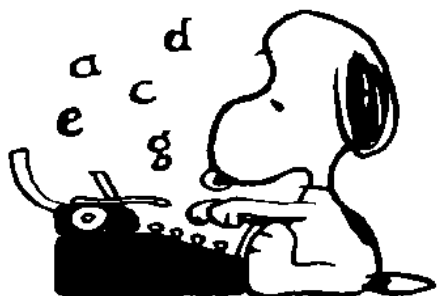
Writing down goals rather than just thinking about them helps in much the same way as expressive writing can help when feeling overwhelmed by big life events;

- It establishes a focus - what do you really want? How will life be better when you have it? The greater the clarity in the goal setting, the greater the level of motivation you will experience as you move toward the goal.
- It defeats excuse making - when your ideas are committed to paper in a positive sense, focusing

on what you want rather than what you don't want, your written goal acts as an affirmation of what is possible.

- Success can be celebrated as progress is made – effective goal setting requires small steps that can be recognised; everyone relishes striking items from a to-do list.

Journals in the Digital Age



Whilst accomplished typists may averagely achieve 50-80 words typed per minute, a study in 1998 revealed that the average keyboard user composes text at 19 words per minute and can copy text at 33 words per minute. This data is surprising as many would suggest that word processing a journal would be far quicker than handwriting.

Comparative studies of handwriting speeds suggest that the average person writes at 31 words per minute or only 22 words per minute when copying text. This would suggest that a handwritten journal would not only be quicker for most to produce but also that the process of composition might in fact be slowed down and therefore hindered for most computer users rather than those who opt for a handwritten journal. For those that consider this data inaccurate in the smartphone generation, studies suggest that average texting speeds are also in the low thirties per minute.

Beyond the science of word counts, many advocates of handwritten journals would highlight that the process of writing is organic with words being recorded directly from the mind to the page without the interference of a mechanised process. It is also true that whilst word processing, it is instinctive to correct misspelt words and grammar errors; such disruption to the stream of consciousness writing detracts from the personal reflective aspect of journaling and can act as an unintentional censor to your thoughts and ideas.

Established authors are also returning to fountain pen and paper, recognising the benefit of slowing down the thought process and writing at a more natural speed. Rosemary Clement-Moore writes in her blog;

“When I write long-hand, there’s something magical in the process. Maybe it’s because I’m adding another part of my brain to the process. But I think it’s also because I slow down. Instead of freaking out because I can’t think of any words, I have time to think of it while my pen moves across the paper. There are more enjoyable things to think about than my fear and frustration. The curve of the letters, the scratch of the nib, the stroke of the ink. One word at a time, I get past the block.”^{xii}

Neil Gaiman, author of *Stardust* agrees that writing with pen and paper is better than word processing;

“It started in 1994 when I wrote the novel *Stardust* - in my head I wanted it to be written in the same way as it would have been in the 1920s, so I bought a big notepad and Waterman pen. It was the first time I’d used a fountain pen since I was about 13. I found myself enjoying writing more slowly and liked the way I had to think through sentences differently. I discovered I loved the fact that handwriting forces you to do a

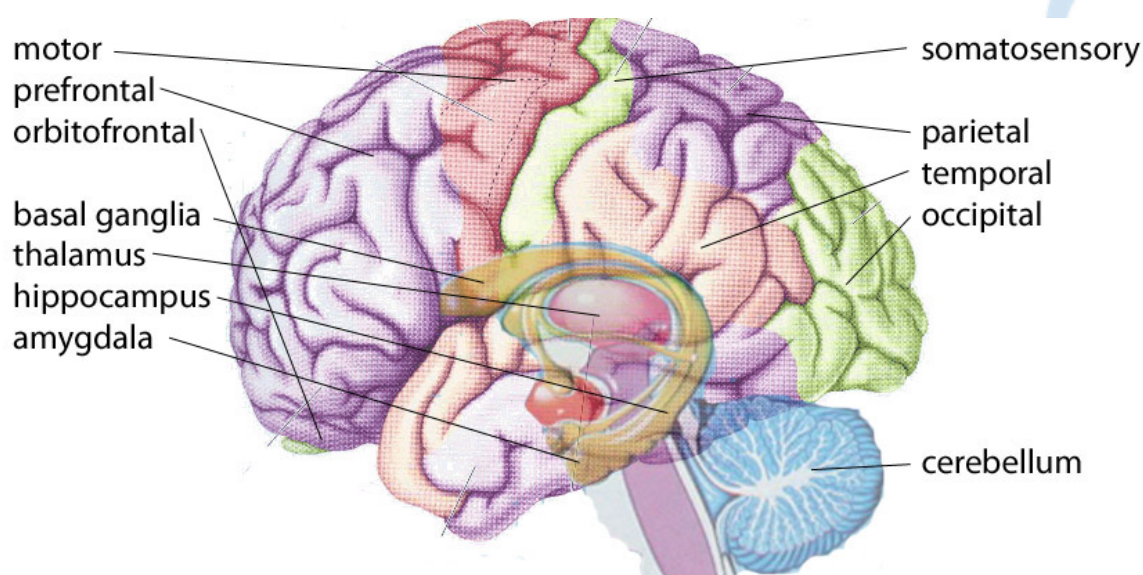
second draft, rather than just tidying up and deleting bits on a computer. I also discovered I enjoy the tactile buzz of the ritual involved in filling the pens with ink.”^{xiii}

Journaling and the Brain

Dr M Lieberman, a psychologist at University of California at Los Angeles, suggests that the writing process helps the brain to regulate emotion, in a similar manner to that which is seen in people who try to control their emotions. The regulation of feelings is a by-product of the writing process. When a person writes down their feelings, activity in the amygdala (which is the part of the brain which controls the intensity of our emotions) is reduced. Lieberman suggests that it is not always necessary to write a journal; the same effect can be achieved from writing poetry or song lyrics as a method to express feelings.

Lieberman also conducted experiments focusing on the articulation of phobias as a technique for reducing their impact on the sufferer. Spider phobics who were able to verbalise their fear of a nearby spider were more likely to be able to move closer to the spider than those who kept their feelings to themselves. Lieberman describes what he believes is happening in the brain at this time;

“When this prefrontal region is more active, regions involved in negative ^{xiv}feelings, like the amygdala, become less active. It just so happens that labelling our feelings produces this same pattern.... If the amygdala is like an alarm clock alerting us to potential threats, putting feelings into words is like hitting the snooze button.” ^{xv}



It is also noteworthy that Lieberman’s research supports the notion that hand written journals are more beneficial than typed journals and that men tend to show greater benefits from journaling than women which might contradict society’s expectation. Samuel Johnson, the great literary critic was able to recognise the power of writing some 250 years before Lieberman published his study;

“No man was more foolish when he had not a pen in his hand, or more wise when he had.”

- ⁱ Statistics taken from Journal of Clinical Psychology, Scranton University, Jan 2014 cited at <http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/>
- ⁱⁱ G Schmidt, *Fans Fill Moleskine Notebooks With Love*, published in New York Times in June 2011, located at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/29/business/media/29adco.html?_r=1&
- ⁱⁱⁱ Statistic cited at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/18/keeping-a-diary-more-teen_n_2506071.html
- ^{iv} J Cameron, *The Artist's Way Morning Pages Journal*, p VIII, 1995, The Penguin Group.
- ^v J Cameron p 155 (see end note iv)
- ^{vi} S Achor, *The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work*. 2011, Virgin Books.
- ^{vii} S Achor, p101 (see end note vi)
- ^{viii} M.E.P. Seligman, T.A. Steen, N Park & C Peterson, *Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions*, 2005 published in American Psychologist, 60, p 410-421. Study cited by S Achor, p101, *The Happiness Advantage* (see endnote vi)
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- ^x J Pennebaker, S Spera & E Buhrfeind, *Expressive Writing and Coping with Job Loss*, 1994, Academy of Management Journal available at <http://amj.aom.org/content/37/3/722.short>
- ^{xi} Statistic quoted by M Hyatt, *Five reasons why you should commit your goals to writing*, located at: <http://michaelhyatt.com/5-reasons-why-you-should-commit-your-goals-to-writing.html>
- ^{xii} Quotation taken from <http://www.genreality.net/the-power-of-the-pen>
- ^{xiii} Quotation taken from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-18071830>
- ^{xiv}
- ^{xv} M Lieberman, *Diaries: A Healthy Choice*, New York Times, December 2012, located at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/11/25/will-diaries-be-published-in-2050/diaries-a-healthy-choice>

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