



# OPENING DOORS

Reflection, expression & self-discovery

**H**ealth is sought after by everyone. Some of us may exercise, while some others may change their diet. And some of us may change some of our habits to be healthier, for example, having more hours of sleep. We search for information online, we consult professionals, or we may purchase products and services to enhance our health. But there is an important tool readily available that can help us in our journey to better health. Yet, we often forget about this important tool...journalling.

Journalling may sound archaic and alien to some. Wasn't it what our grandparents used to do, you may ask. Or something we were forced to do in school. Some may also contend that they are already journalling since they blog, vlog, tweet or post on social media. There are two points that differentiate journalling from public posts and sharing. Firstly, journalling is timeless and relevant to all. Secondly, journalling has its own unique features.

Broadly speaking, journalling has certain features that differentiate it from a social media post. It is reflective and personal, while posting on social media is generally what we like others to know about us. Generally, journalling can be done in two ways:

**Free flowing expression.** This type of journalling allows whatever that comes to mind to be expressed without censorship. There is no need to worry about grammar, sentence structure or the content.

**Reflective.** This kind of journalling usually involves monitoring ourselves, taking note and narrating about a specific area that is of interest to us. For example, some people keep track of their diet, some their exercise, while others keep track of their mood or interpersonal relationships. It also involves reflecting on what helped them or what did not help them to stay on track, so that they can adjust their actions in pursuit of their goals.

## Journaling is relevant to everyone because it offers many benefits:

**1** It helps us to identify and express our feelings and thoughts. In writing without censorship, we allow our innermost thoughts and feelings to surface. By gaining access to these feelings and thoughts, which we often chuck aside or suppress, we are getting in touch with what we really need and want. In doing so, we can then take action to fulfill our needs and wants.

Some of these thoughts and feelings may be too personal and difficult to share with others. Expressing these feelings and thoughts in a “safer” medium can help us be more honest with ourselves and reduce stress as there is no ‘audience’.

**2** It helps us to identify behavioural patterns. Journaling gives us room to take a step back from our daily events and activities. We are in a better position to reflect and think about our next step of actions, rather than go with the flow or our usual response to situations or other people. It helps us to gain insight into any patterns of behaviours that we are not aware of. For example, we may find ourselves unknowingly joining our colleagues to snack when they offer us food, even when we feel full.

**3** It helps us to identify environmental cues that assist or hinder us. Besides gaining insights into our behavioural patterns, journaling also helps us to be aware of possible environmental factors that influence us. For instance, we may find ourselves buying more food than we need or planned due to sales or discounts and then end up feeling tempted or pressured to finish the extra amount of food we bought.

**4** It reinforces our learning and progress. Journaling also makes us aware of the success and progress we have made. Sometimes, we may think that a tiny action that we have taken may not have any huge impact. On the contrary, these small actions may be the building blocks to better habits and health.

I recall a lady who once told me that she was surprised her blood sugar and pressure had improved. She said she had only cut sugar from her breakfast. I invited her to journal for two weeks. She discovered while journaling that she had also just started to drink plain water for the other meals even though she did not do it deliberately. You may discover much more about yourself than you know!

**5** It helps us to develop other aspects of our identity. Changing our old habits and adopting new habits can be very challenging. Most of the time we may not be able to sustain them for long. Furthermore, from our past experiences when we were not able to keep up with lifestyle changes, we may end up thinking that it is impossible to succeed. Or we may lose confidence in trying to change.

In journaling, we may be made aware of some of the situations when we succeed. We may become aware of our inherent skills and abilities that we can harness to build our confidence. There was a gentleman whom I worked with who felt demoralised while trying to make lifestyle changes. After journaling, he became aware that since he was young, he actually had a preference for healthier food options. Instead of seeing it as a major change, journaling helped him to see that it was merely a return to his preference. This made it easier for him mentally and emotionally to choose healthier foods whenever he was tempted to consume more high caloric food!

Journaling has many benefits. How often and how you do it would depend on your goal. Generally, it would be helpful to journal at a regular frequency. For example, daily, every other day, or weekly. Or you could decide to only journal for a duration if journaling regularly seems daunting to you. For example, you could decide to journal every other day for two weeks if you want to gain insight into your behavioural patterns or environmental cues.

Journaling is free and can be done anytime and anywhere. Just reach for the pen and paper or the notes APP on your digital device. It's that easy and definitely opens doors to your heart and mind. Surprise yourself!

*About the author: Henry Lew works as a psychologist and enjoys coming up with creative ways to engage his patients and readers.*