- Journaling

Try journalling to boost health and wellness

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Keeping a journal has proven to be a stand-out practice of the self-care movement, and for good reason: studies show it's essentially a panacea for modern life. The most obvious benefits include a boost to mindfulness, memory and communication skills, although studies have found writing in a journal can also give you better sleep and, when done right, stronger immunity.



Research by US psychologists James Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth found that writing about emotions and stress improves immune functioning in people with illnesses such as asthma and arthritis.

A New Zealand study showed that venting negative feelings in a journal can even help wounds heal faster. In that study, published in Psychosomatic Medicine, 49 healthy adults wrote about upsetting events or daily activities for 20 minutes on three consecutive days. Two weeks later, to ensure any negative feelings stirred up by the exercise had passed, they had a medically necessary biopsy. After 11 days, 76 per cent of the group that did expressive writing had fully healed, compared with 42 per cent of the control group.

Pennebaker, a pioneer of writing therapy, says journalling is most powerful when used to label emotions and acknowledge traumatic events.

By helping people organise events in their mind, the writing frees the brain from having to keep processing difficult experiences.

A person's working memory and quality of sleep then improve, lifting moods and immune function.

However, it is not enough to simply pour out feelings. The activity must be used to better understand and learn from emotions.

"There has to be growth or change in the way they view their experiences," he told the American Psychological Association; using words like "because", "realise" and "understand" can help.

Working through emotions is only one part of modern journalling. Entrepreneurs do it to gain clarity of thought when developing a business plan; researchers do it to track ideas, avoid plagiarism by noting
sources, and strengthen writing skills; artists do it to aid creativity.

Of course, everyone can do it to chronicle their lives for later reflection. In its most basic form, journalling is simply recording thoughts, feelings or observations about the world. It can be long paragraphs or single words. Some people start with bullet points to get past a daunting blank page.

There is no need to try appearing smart, experts say; rather, treat it as a "brain drain".

Pennebaker says it is not necessary to write daily or for very long; 15 to 30 minutes is about right for most.However, others advise daily writing, typically to help form habits among people wanting to keep a diary of events or to be more creative, as opposed to seeking emotional healing.Whatever the motivation, don't judge yourself, and let it flow.