

Journaling: A valuable tool for registered nurses

By Lynda J. Dimitroff, PhD, MEd, BSN, RN, MCHES, CC

● Write about your life and experiences to better understand them and yourself.

NURSES' FOCUS on compassion can be both rewarding and depleting. To offset the fatigue that can come with nursing care, nurses must find ways to express their feelings and tend to their own well-being. Journaling is a valuable resource that nurses can use to support their health and wellness. Using journaling to script feelings and thoughts promotes understanding, self-compassion, and self-awareness. In addition, writing strengthens cognition, fosters insight, and improves emotional regulation.

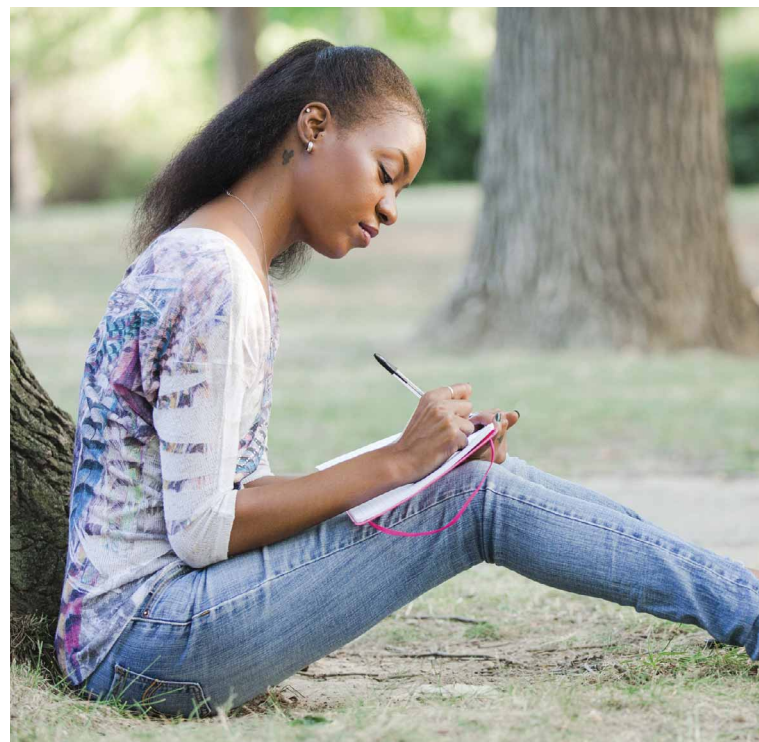
Although the benefits of journaling are well established, it's underused as a method for self-care and reflection. Philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey wrote that "reflective thinking alone is educative." Journaling provides a foundation for reflective thinking and can help anyone, including nurses, express their emotions and improve their health and well-being.

Journaling defined

At its most basic, journaling is a record of personal thoughts, daily events, and evolving insights. It also provides a foundation for creativity, guidance, self-awareness, understanding, and spiritual development. While journaling, authors can express themselves without censorship, disapproval, or judgment. Screaming, expressing anger, whimpering, feeling sad, wailing, and raging may occur while journaling.

Journaling benefits

Journaling has been shown to decrease blood pressure, ease symptoms of depression, and improve immune functioning. Francis and Pennebaker researched how journaling about emotionally distressing situations affected a person's thoughts, feelings, and physical health. The results indicated that journaling reduces blood pressure, improves mood, and decreases absenteeism. And in a study by Dimitroff and colleagues, the authors concluded that journaling increased nurses'



compassion and decreased burnout and compassion fatigue symptoms. In addition, they identified three themes in their qualitative analysis: "journaling allowed me to unleash my [innermost] feelings," "journaling helped me to articulate and understand my feelings concretely," and "journaling helped me make more reasonable decisions."

Research also shows that journaling is an important tool for developing critical-thinking skills. Nurses use journaling to explore "general observations, questions, speculative statements, expressions of self-awareness, statements of synthesis, revisions of previously held ideas, and the accumulation of new information to develop critical thinking..." as noted in a 2017 article by Dimitroff and colleagues. Scheffer and Rubenfeld defined reflection as "contemplation upon a subject, especially one's assumptions and thinking, for the purposes of deeper understanding and self-evaluation." And Raterink found that journaling was valuable in the clinical setting when used by graduate nursing students. As the students became more comfortable with journaling

and self-reflection, they felt more competent about their critical-thinking skills and habits.

Journaling tips

Use these suggestions to get started with your journaling.

Medium—Choose the medium you would like to use. Some people prefer paper and pen or pencil, while others journal on their computer or laptop. Another option is a cell phone app.

Date entries—Dating entries will give you a timeline and historical perspective.

Choose when—Decide how many days a week you would like to journal and make time in your schedule. You may consider journaling for 15 to 30 minutes each day.

Shared or private—Do you want to share your journal or keep it private? Your journal is about you, and you get to decide whether you share it. After you decide, ensure your journal is easily accessible for writing.

Decide what to write about—You will need to decide what to write about in your journal. This article highlights the benefits of writing about feelings and experiences for the purpose of reflecting on them. So, you may consider writing a narrative about an experience and detailing what happened as well as describing your thoughts and feelings about the situation.

Freewriting—Freewriting is unstructured, without concern for spelling, grammar, introductions, conclusions, or outlines. It allows you to write without judgment. When we need our writing to be perfect, being creative and free-flowing with our thoughts is difficult. In freewriting, you start with a sentence such as, “Today I am beginning my journal entry. I am going to write about what happened at work yesterday...” and then start writing whatever comes to mind. Remember, you can always go back and edit later.

Reflection—After you complete a journal entry, reflect on what you have written and your insights about the experience. Ask yourself: What was my response? What went well? What would I do differently next time? Who do I want to be in the future? How will I become that person?

A proven tool

Journaling provides an opportunity to express emotions and gain self-awareness. It also is a proven way to gain perspective and achieve a higher level of health and wellness, which benefits nurses directly and, in turn, all of the people whose lives we touch. ★

Lynda J. Dimitroff is an educational and leadership consultant in Rochester, New York.

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