

# Change is Good

by Frankie D. Lemus, M.A.

**The literature suggests that journaling in general, and structured journaling specifically, is a powerful tool for permanent and positive lifestyle change.**

Lifestyle change is challenging, exhilarating, exhausting, inspiring, empowering and unavoidable. It is the core of what makes us dynamic human beings who are capable of adapting to new situations and expanding our life experiences. None of us is immune to the trials and triumph that come with change. Whether we seek change to achieve a personal goal or in order to avoid personal consequence, we have all gone through the process of change to varying degrees of success throughout our lives.

For substance-abusing populations, the motivation to change may be born out of a sense of personal powerlessness, an awareness and intolerance for the personal and financial consequences of use, or it may be externally driven by pressure from the legal system or concerned friends and family members. Whatever the source, motivation is only the first ingredient to achieving successful lifestyle changes.

Evidence shows that treatment works. In fact, multiple models have been found to be efficacious. This suggests that multiple routes, assuming that the client is motivated and committed to the process, may achieve successful change. *Two important concepts are at the base of any successful change effort:* 1) people do have the capacity to change; and 2) all change is self-change. Belief in clients' ability to change is a potent intervention in and of itself. Our attentive efforts as administrators, counselors and family members are a vital part of the change process, but will not guarantee success. It is the personal motivation and effort of the individual that will ultimately make change a reality.

## **Interactive Journaling®**

Can the use of Interactive Journaling® make a difference in an individual's life? Is such a tool useful and effective?

For many years, a number of disciplines have expressed interest in the processes and effects of journaling. It has been studied and utilized in psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, literature, art, medicine, education, and many other fields (Murtha, 2000).

Thus, there is significant evidence in the literature to suggest that journaling in general, and structured journaling specifically, is a powerful tool for permanent and positive lifestyle change. It has application in a wide variety of

disciplines and human endeavors. Journaling has evolved from the ritual of maintaining a "daily record of things thought, seen, and felt", as Thoreau and many others have done, into an effective technique for personal growth and change (1949). As psychotherapist Kathleen Adams has suggested, over the centuries the journal has proved to be a flexible tool, used by many as a means of gaining perspective in order to direct the course of their lives. She asserts that journaling is inherently an authentic instrument in which individuals will honestly express themselves (1990).

Interactive Journaling® is an experiential writing process that guides and motivates people toward positive lifestyle change. It is the vehicle by which best practices in a variety of modalities (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, 12-Step) can be applied in a format that serves the individual as a personalized tool for change.

Ira Progoff, the seminal progenitor of modern therapeutic journaling, began experimenting with the style and method of journal writing in his clinical practice in 1957. Progoff was a Jungian-trained psychotherapist who refined the model of holistic depth psychology in written self-expression. He transformed the conventional use of journaling into a powerful therapeutic intervention. Progoff began implementing a "psychological workbook" with his clients as an adjunct to psychotherapy. He asked people to keep a notebook, or journal, to record events of their inner life. Observing significant benefit with his clients, Progoff developed questions that were more definite and more pointed. As his workbook evolved, he documented a specific process that could be evoked more actively by the use of a journal procedure (Adams, 1990).

Progoff identified an "inner movement" in the depths of a person's existence, and determined journaling to be the instrument through which individuals can consciously construct a view into their inner being and cognitively experience the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviors that propel their existence. By 1965, continuous revisions culminated in the creation of Progoff's Intensive Journal method. He incorporated specific techniques and procedures into his Intensive Journal to create an instrument "...by which persons can discover within themselves the resources they did not know they possessed" (1975, p.10). Progoff's primary purpose in using this journaling method was to establish and strengthen the

integrity, autonomy and creativity of the individual. He felt the journal would function appropriately by the individual's own use of it, independent of another person, particularly an authority figure.

Lively discussion continues in the field of psychotherapy, as well as other fields, about the relative efficacy of therapist-facilitated change versus self-directed change (Miller, 1999). In order to maintain therapeutic integrity in the absence of an authority figure, Proffoff developed a structure for his Intensive Journal. The result of Proffoff's structured journal is the creation of "Journal Feedback," a method that activates an individual's inner energy to draw the movement of their life forward (p. 43). Journal Feedback is a mirroring effect of an individual's inner movement, and through the use of this method one can connect with the potential of life's inner processes and achieve a greater measure of personal growth.

Kathleen Adams is the founder of The Center for Journal Therapy, and has been conducting workshops on journaling and teaching its therapeutic uses since 1985. She emphasizes journaling's application as a tool for personal growth and self-discovery for individuals who want to learn how to "heal" themselves; and even suggests that journaling is the marriage of writing and psychotherapy (1990, p. 7). In 1987, Adams conducted a study on journaling and its effectiveness as a therapeutic tool and discovered:

- 100% of the respondents said that one of the reasons they kept a journal was because; "I can talk to myself on paper and work myself through problems."
- 93% said that their journals were "valuable tools for self-therapy."
- 87% of the responses described the relationship to their journal as a "friendly" or "therapeutic" one (p. 17).

Adams is an enthusiastic proponent of the "tremendous potential" that journaling has as a therapeutic tool, and emphasizes its value in a program of counseling with a trained professional, and also in a "self-designed" program where individuals guide themselves toward personal growth (1990).

One of the most persuasive arguments for incorporating a journal into therapy is that a purposeful method of journal writing can amplify and accelerate the therapeutic process. Tristine Rainer, who published one of the first comprehensive "guidebooks" on the effective use of journal writing, states, "In many cases the diary provides a place to sift insights and feelings that occur after the therapeutic hour, integrating and reinforcing the healing process" (1978, p. 286). Likewise, Adams has found that clients move through issues more quickly and integrate new knowledge more readily when using a journal in conjunction with a program of therapy.

By the mid 1980s, the therapeutic reputation of journaling began to uphold itself in the psychiatric community. James W. Pennebaker and his colleagues designed a series of clinical studies to determine if "expressive writing" about traumatic events could produce a measurable influence on

the outcome of an individual's health in the following four to six months. Pennebaker wrote in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, "In recent years, evidence has accumulated indicating that not disclosing extremely personal and traumatic experiences to others over a long period of time may be related to disease processes" (1986).

Participants in the studies who were asked to write about their feelings associated with a traumatic event that occurred in their life, for 15-20 minutes each night for three to four consecutive nights (depending on the study), showed significantly greater increases in overall health in the following four to six months than those participants who were asked to write about "trivial" things. Expressive writing is an intense form of journal therapy that allows individuals to resolve psychological issues that have been impeding their personal growth and health. Expressive writing is especially therapeutic when used by individuals who have intentionally refrained from addressing their experience. Pennebaker noted that studies like these indicate the effectiveness of using writing as a general "preventive therapy." He concluded:

"Within psychology, it has been generally accepted that stress can increase the incidence of illness. We have proposed that one form of stress is associated with the failure to confront traumatic experience. Specifically, the inhibition or active holding back of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors is associated with physical work that, over time, can become manifested in disease.... Individuals who are forced to confront upsetting experiences in their lives show improvements in physical health relative to control subjects. More important, in our study the individuals who showed the greatest health improvements were those who wrote about topics that they had actively held back from telling others." (1988, p. 244)

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* recently published a study conducted by Joshua M. Smyth and colleagues that uses the expressive writing exercises developed in Pennebaker's studies to examine the effects this procedure has on the disease status of patients with chronic asthma or rheumatoid arthritis. This study differs from the others in that it measures the effects of expressive writing therapy in subjects who have an existing medical condition. In contrast, Pennebaker's studies were conducted with "healthy" subjects. Similarly, in Smyth's study, participants were asked to write for 20 minutes each day for three consecutive days. Participants in the experimental group were asked to write about "the most stressful experience" they had ever undergone, while participants in the control group were asked to "describe their plans for the day" (Smyth et al., 1999, p. 1305). The results of this study found: 47.1 percent of the experimental patients met the criteria for "clinically relevant" health improvement, whereas only 24.3 percent of the control patients met the same criteria (p. 1308). According to Smyth, this study reveals that expressive writing about an emotionally stressful experience is an effective "psychological exercise" that can reduce the symptoms of these two chronic diseases (p. 1309).

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In short, journal therapy, in the form of expressive writing, has proven in several studies to be a useful tool in relieving psychological distress and improving the health of its users. In Freudian terms, expressive writing therapy is "cathartic" in the sense that the resolution of an emotionally distressful experience has direct benefits on the physiological health of an individual.

Journal therapy continues to proliferate, proving its value in a diversity of programs. For example, Cook County Jail in Chicago has implemented an Expressive Therapy Program that includes a "Creative Journaling Project." Through journaling, the project "...encourages inmates to express their ideas and emotions through creative writing" (Vitucci, 1999, p. 13). Journal therapy offers inmates the opportunity to clarify and intensify the issues that are prevalent in their course of recovery.

Journaling® is an experiential writing process that motivates and guides participants toward responsible lifestyle change. This method of journal therapy encourages individuals to use their own unique experiences to promote self-reevaluation and encourage behavioral change. The process is based on experiential learning, defined as "...creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses" (Jarvis et al, 1998, p. 46). The end users of Interactive Journals internalize knowledge, skills, and values that are relevant to the behavior they wish to change, by linking them with a meaningful event that has occurred in their own life. Personal responsibility for lifestyle change is established in this manner, and the journal becomes an instrument of structure and guidance.

Furthermore, Interactive Journals incorporate the Prochaska Transtheretical Model of Change, and feature 16 techniques that facilitate self-change based on the end user's current aptitude for change. Prochaska states, "Any activity that you initiate to help modify your thinking, feeling, or behavior is a change process" (Prochaska et al, 1994, p. 25). Interactive Journals provide the end user with an appropriate change process for an identified stage of change. A real strength of Interactive Journaling® is that it takes the guesswork out of matching an appropriate change process with a stage of change, an important requirement that many end users may either be unaware of or confused by.

Interactive Journaling® also employs cognitive-behavioral techniques that encourage individuals to become proactive in the therapeutic process. For example open-ended questions stimulate individuals' participation in their personal journey of behavioral change. Interactive Journaling® incorporates a number of therapeutic components and strategies derived from the most effective techniques from the major disciplines of psychotherapy, like Rational Emotive Therapy by Albert Ellis and Motivational Interviewing by William R. Miller.

### Change is Good

Interactive Journals have been utilized by more than 12 million "self-changers" in substance abuse treatment,

criminal justice settings, impaired driving intervention programs and prevention education programs. The consumers of Interactive Journaling® range from substance abuse recovery centers to therapeutic communities within prison facilities and even employees of major U.S. corporations participating in corporate wellness programs. In fact, any person who wishes to make a positive lifestyle change can implement the power of Interactive Journaling®. The journals create a bridge between academic research and program practice, while also making the programs' goals and objectives accessible to the clients they serve.

For the last 18 years, The Change Companies® has been dedicated to assisting individuals in this process of self-change. The Change Companies® started in 1988 in Madison, Wisconsin, as Serenity Support Services. Over its first three years, it tailored patient materials for more than 30 hospital-based treatment centers collaborating with physicians, nurses, counselors and program specialists.

Convincingly, journal writing, in its various methods, has diverse and beneficial applications as a therapeutic tool. There is significant evidence to suggest that journaling in general, and structured journaling specifically, is a powerful tool for lifestyle change. Ever committed to the mantra, "*Change is good*," The Change Companies® has embraced a collaborative approach, integrating the vital input from researchers, practitioners and participants in the ongoing creation of its journals. ▼

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