

How to Create and Use a Mindfulness Journal

Adapted from Dr. Ronald Alexander's new book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

(734 Words plus Bio)

One of the concerns about meditating that my clients often have is the fear that if they quiet down, a great idea will come to them and they'll have no way of capturing it before it leaves their consciousness. I suggest you create and work with a mindfulness journal, a blank book that you can use to record your sensations, observations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, images, creative ideas, and messages of wisdom from your mind and body as you become mindful of them. When you write, be mindful of simply noting what you've experienced and why you might have experienced it.

Here are Some Tips on How to Work with a Mindfulness Journal

- Schedule your time to write when you sit quietly in a peaceful, restful place, perhaps in a room surrounded by books and pictures that inspire you. You may also want to sit on a meditation chair or cushion with peaceful music playing, wrap yourself in a meditation shawl or blanket, and light a candle or incense.
- Categorize what your mind churns up. Our minds create a mix of emotions, thoughts, and sensations, all of which influence each other. The thought, "My boss is so insensitive; I can't believe he was so abrupt with me today," might not surface in your mind until you sit and begin meditating, and might appear not as a fully formed thought but as a headache or an overall sense of vulnerability and defensiveness.
- In meditation, it's important not to go wherever those sensations and feelings take you but to simply sit with them, allowing them to reveal themselves. Afterward, as you write in your journal about your experience, work with a therapist, or ponder where that feeling or sensation came from, you might discover that it has deeper roots.
- Recognizing that your experience bears a powerful emotional resemblance to a past experience can be a helpful and freeing insight, but in the end, the story of its origin is just a story that can distract you from healing. If you come to realize that your defensiveness around your gruff boss reminds you

- of the way you reacted to your highly critical father, the value in that insight is acknowledging how deeply your mind has been programmed to respond to criticism or abruptness with fear and defensiveness. It's easier to be patient with yourself when you recognize that your mind has actually created an elaborate neural network to support this reaction, because clearly, it will take time, patience, and repetition to change that instantaneous response.
- Don't give too much weight to such a revelation as you can reinforce that reality. You reinforce your habitual thinking and feeling patterns when you subscribe to a narrative of suffering such as, "I can't help being the way I am. My defensiveness goes way back to my childhood." I call this the "big story." It has the potential to shut you off from the art of creative transformation.
 - Once you've identified the big story, categorize it as "old stuff" and set it aside whenever it comes up. The major healing work most people need to do is to transform and move beyond their "big story" whether it deals with their parents, lack of abundance, insecurities or fears. There's no benefit in retelling it to yourself over and over again.
 - It's also important to let go of the "new stuff": each "small story," or rationalization for why your present life is the way it is. The small stories are worth examining to discover what lessons they hold, but if you hang on to them, repeating them to yourself, they become "old stuff" and part of the big story as well.

As long as you remain in these stories, you create suffering for yourself. To change your life, you have to see the story for what it is: a way of framing events that doesn't contribute to your happiness and holds you back from positive change. Holding on to your story, big or small, giving it life in retelling and embellishing it endlessly, will cause you pain. The point isn't whether or not you're justified in telling that particular story, or its veracity, but whether you're suffering because of it. This takes practice but the more you meditate the more it will feel as if you're simply sorting the laundry as you observe what your mind generates.

Ronald Alexander, Ph.D. is the author of the just released book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change*. He is the director of the OpenMind Training® Institute, practices mindfulness-based mind-body psychotherapy and leadership coaching in Santa Monica, CA, for individuals and corporate clients. He has taught personal and clinical training groups for professionals in Integral Psychotherapy, Ericksonian mind-body healing therapies,

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