

Strategic Empowerment Pain Journaling Made Easy

By: Dr. Stephen F. Grinstead, LMFT, ACRPS

I would like to share with you a valuable tool that I have developed and used with many of my chronic pain patients, as well as using it myself, over the past several decades. In the remainder of this article I'm presenting the same education information and actual worksheets that I use with my patients.

Purpose Of Journaling About Pain

When I explain this process to my patients I start with the following directions: You are about to embark on a very personal and exciting journey. The Following information contains guidance for completing your personalized empowerment pain journal which will give you the power to begin making peace with your pain, allowing you to come to understand yourself on an intimate and powerful level. Believe that you have the ability to make your pain your friend! You have the power to utilize your pain as a loving guide that will direct you on your path of happiness and peace.

Your pain wants to teach and guide you! Your pain can show you how to nurture yourself, how to recognize unhealthy situations, to give you the insight to create a life of love and meaning. This journal will allow you the means to gain awareness and insights into the hidden messages your pain wants to communicate. As you uncover the hidden communication within your own personal pain cycles, you will gain a new sense of freedom and empowerment.

Goal Of Journaling About Pain

Uncovering your pain's secret communication is of great importance. You will identify and personally connect with your pain's triggers, patterns, and themes. You will discover your pain has a personality. You will learn it may like certain people better than others. It may prefer special foods, liquids, and exercise. It may like specific weather conditions, hot and dry or yearn for cold and damp. It might be a big fan of acupuncture or massage. It may lead you into a great relationship with people of similar struggles.

Your pain may be a morning person or an evening person or one that likes to chat all through the night. It might have a favorite season of the year, a favorite holiday! Your pain is the first warning sign that lets you know when your negative thinking has gone too far. It may do many obnoxious things to get your attention. It may even put you on bed rest! Your pain is always the first one to let you know when it does not prefer something as well as when it is happy and at peace with your choices. When you choose to listen and communicate with your pain it will direct you on your path towards success and healing.

What Is Your Pain Telling You?

This question often puzzles and at times frustrates many of my patients. This is where I need to do a little education about pain and the difference between acute and chronic pain. I believe that whenever you experience pain, it's helpful to ask: What is my pain trying to tell me? Pain is the signal that says something is wrong and you need to find out what is it; you then need to learn how to manage it. Sometimes it can be difficult if not impossible to pinpoint the pain generator, and as human beings we want to know why something is happening and we want to know "right now." But when we are in pain the more important question is: ***What can I do right now to manage my pain in a healthy way that supports me physically, emotionally and spiritually?*** ***The answer will be different for each person.***

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Exploring the Difference Between Pain and Suffering

But what if you can't answer that question because your chronic pain has become unmanageable, no matter what you try? This brings us to a discussion of pain versus suffering. The psychological meaning that you assign to a physical pain signal will determine whether you simply feel pain (Ouch, this hurts!) or experience suffering (This pain is awful and will just keep getting worse; this is terrible and why is it happening to me!). Although pain and suffering are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction that needs to be made. Pain is a physical sensation, a warning signal telling you that something is going on in your body. Suffering results from the meaning or interpretation your brain assigns to the pain signal.

Many people believe that: ***I shouldn't have pain! Or because I have pain and I'm having trouble managing my pain, there must be something wrong with me.*** A big step toward effective chronic pain management occurs when you can reduce your level of suffering by identifying and changing your thinking and beliefs about your pain, which in turn can decrease your stress and overall suffering. Because of the two parts—pain and suffering—chronic pain management must also have two components: physical and psychological. The way you sense or experience pain—its intensity and duration—will affect how well you are able to manage it. Thus the need to learn what your pain is telling you!

Welcome to Learning From Your Pain

Your *Empowerment Pain Journal* is meant to be completed daily. At the end of one week (7 days) the seventh day is your special reflection day. The reflection day is a special time set aside for your one on one communication with your pain. This is when you honor the messages and guidance your pain has been communicating. This is the day set aside to begin to understand the language and meaning of your pain.

It is normal to struggle at the beginning—just like you would if you were learning a foreign language. Be patient and gentle with yourself. Let the questions guide you. It is also a great idea to have someone you trust to share the communication with. Sometimes others can see messages we do not. Make sure it is someone that is trustworthy and supports your goals and growth with your pain management.

Pain Journal Instructions

In the next section you will find a worksheet that you need to make photo copies of. You will need seven copies to start with for your first week of journaling. On the page after this next exercise you will find a summary page (***Special Reflections Day***) to use to consolidate what you learned during the seven-day period.

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Utilizing Daily Pain Journals

Date: _____ Day of the Week: _____ Day # ____ of 7

1. Today my pain levels (on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest) were:

Morning ____ **Afternoon** ____ **Night** ____ **Weather today was** _____

2. Today my stress levels (on a scale of 1-10, 10 with 10 being the highest) were:

Morning ____ **Afternoon** ____ **Night** ____ **Weather today was** _____

3. My activity level today _____ (1 low -10 high)

I noticed this _____ **increased my pain** or **I noticed this** _____ **relieved my pain**

4. My exercise level today _____ (1= low – 10 = high)

I noticed this _____ **increased my pain** or **I noticed this** _____ **decreased my pain**

5. My hours of sleep last night were _____

6. My emotional levels today were

(1 = peaceful, vacation mode – 5= slightly disturbing – 10 = volatile, totally stressed out)

Morning _____ **Afternoon** _____ **Night** _____

7. My health care consisted of: (list activities you do to assist your pain, i.e. walking, Self-Hypnotic CD/MP3, pain flare up worksheet, sharing with others, meditation, yoga, etc)

8. My socialization today (include interacting with peers or phone connect with family/friends) consisted of (please list activities/meetings/family interactions). Please rate the effect each specific event or interaction had on your pain (on scale of 1-10 = highest).

9. What lessons did your pain teach you today?

10. What is one thing that you will do different or continue to enhance to support your pain management as a result of what you learned today?

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Special Reflection Day - Learning From Your Pain

Day Seven Date: _____

It's time to go back through your week and look over the information from each day's journal that your pain has communicated to you. As you answer the questions below do not filter or judge your answers. It is important to allow the first communication you experience to be perfect just the way it is. If you find yourself struggling just know that over time and repetition this process will become easier for you.

1. What is the most important you learned about yourself by doing this daily journaling?

2. What are the primary feelings that are coming to you? e.g., happy, glad, sad, mad etc.

3. What does your pain want you to understand?

4. Who or what is your pain telling you that is toxic for your happiness?

5. What are your strengths from this week that your pain has pointed out to you?

6. What suggestions for change does your pain want you to be aware of?

7. Rate your week (on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being problematic and 10 being great!) _____
and why did you rate it that way?

8. What's one thing you can do to improve your quality of life and better manage your pain from what you learned from your pain journaling this week?
