GoalTodo

How to start journaling: five minutes a day, then a whole notebook

Keep a journal

8 weeks · Mon, Nov 30 → Sun, Jan 24

Week by week

Tick a box each time you do a session.

Nov 30–Dec 6
Week 1

One page, five minutes

Start small

- [ ] Pick a notebook and pen, one time of day and one place to write, and keep the notebook where you'll see it
- [ ] On your first day, write one full page about anything: your day, what's on your mind, what you're looking forward to
  1 page
- [ ] Write whatever comes to mind, without stopping to fix spelling or wording
  5 minutes ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Done when: You've written one full page, and written for five minutes on at least five days this week

Sticking point: The blank page. If nothing comes, write "I don't know what to write" and keep the pen moving until the timer goes. Whatever ends up on the page counts.

Dec 7–13
Week 2

Same time, same place

Start small

- [ ] Write straight after something you already do every day, such as your morning coffee or brushing your teeth at night
  5 minutes ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Done when: You've written for five minutes on at least five days this week, at about the same time each day

Sticking point: Forgetting. Tie your entry to a daily habit you never skip, and leave the notebook and pen right where that habit happens.

Dec 14–20
Week 3

Ten minutes

Build up

- [ ] Daily entry. Write about what happened, then about how you felt about it
  10 minutes ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐

Done when: You've written for ten minutes on at least five days this week

Sticking point: Entries that are just a list of what you did. That's a fine start. Pick one thing from the list and write about why it mattered or how it felt.

Dec 21–27
Week 4

One gratitude entry

Build up

- [ ] Daily entry
  10 minutes
- [ ] Gratitude entry: pick one good thing from the week, ideally a person or a surprise, and write about it in detail and why it mattered
  10 minutes

Done when: You've written on at least five days this week, one of them a gratitude entry, and you've written every week for four weeks

Sticking point: Turning gratitude into a long list. One thing written about in depth does more than ten things in a line each. Once a week is enough.

Dec 28–Jan 3
Week 5

Write it out: four days in a row

Go deeper

- [ ] Expressive writing: write without stopping about your deepest thoughts and feelings on something that's on your mind, or something you've been avoiding
  15 minutes
- [ ] Daily entry
  5 to 10 minutes
- [ ] Gratitude entry
  10 minutes

Done when: You've done four days of fifteen-minute writing in a row, and passed a month of writing every week

Sticking point: Feeling sad or low after writing. That's common, and it usually passes in a couple of hours. If a topic makes you very upset, stop or switch to something else. Don't use this week for a trauma from the last month or two.

Jan 4–10
Week 6

Look back

Go deeper

- [ ] Daily entry. At the end, rate your mood from 1 to 10 and note anything that affected it
  10 minutes
- [ ] Read back through your first month of entries and write down anything you notice: patterns, worries that came back, things that helped
  15 minutes

Done when: You've written on at least five days this week and written one entry about what you noticed reading back

Sticking point: Wincing at old entries. You don't have to share them with anyone, and you can keep the notebook somewhere private if you want it kept to yourself. They're a record of where you were, not something to judge.

Jan 11–17
Week 7

Try other formats

Make it yours

- [ ] Daily entry in a different form each day: a list, a letter to someone, a sketch with notes, a question you answer, or free writing
  10 minutes — ☐☐☐☐☐☐
- [ ] Gratitude entry
  10 minutes — ☐

Done when: You've written on at least five days this week and tried at least three different formats

Sticking point: Thinking there's a right way. There isn't. Keep the formats that you look forward to and drop the rest.

Jan 18–24
Week 8

Your journal, most days

Make it yours

- [ ] Daily entry at the length and in the format that suits you
  5 to 15 minutes — ☐☐☐☐☐☐
- [ ] Gratitude entry
  10 minutes — ☐
- [ ] On the inside cover, write your time, your place, your length, and your fallback for busy days, such as one line — ☐

Done when: You've written on at least five days this week and written down how you'll keep going to six months

Milestones

Mon, Nov 30	Write one page
Sun, Dec 6	Your first week of entries
Tue, Dec 29	Write every week for a month
Sun, May 30	Every week for six months
Tue, Jul 27	Fill a whole notebook (tick it when the last page is full)

How the plan works

To start journaling, pick a notebook, a time of day and a place, and write for five minutes. On your first day, fill one page. After that, aim to write every day, and count any week with five or more entries as a good one.

There are no rules about what goes in. Your journal doesn't need any structure, and nobody else has to read it. Write about your day, what's on your mind, or how you feel. Don't stop to fix spelling.

You start short and grow slowly. A few minutes a day is enough to begin. If you've never kept a journal, the plan starts you at five minutes and moves you to ten in week 3; that step is the plan's choice, so stay at five longer if ten feels like too much. Along the way you add three things that research on writing supports:

- A gratitude entry once a week. Writing about one good thing in depth, once or twice a week, works better than a daily list.

▪ Four days of expressive writing, 15 minutes a day, in a row, about your deepest thoughts and feelings on something that's on your mind.

▪ Looking back over what you've written, to spot patterns in your mood and what affects it.

The milestones follow your writing, not the calendar of the plan. Day 1 is your first page. A month of writing every week lands in week 5. Six months, and a whole notebook, come after the plan ends. The notebook date is a rough planning estimate: if you write about a page on most days, a 200-page notebook takes around eight months, but you reach that milestone when the last page is full, sooner or later. After the last week there are no new tasks: you keep writing.

Which level to pick

▪ I've never kept a journal: you've never written regularly, or only for a few days at a time. You start at five minutes, with 8 weeks to make it yours.

▪ I've kept one on and off: you've journaled for weeks at a time before and want it to stick. You start at ten minutes, with 6 weeks.

If you're not sure, pick the first level. Five minutes is easier to keep than ten while the habit is new.

Before you start

Journaling is a simple, low-cost way to sort out your thoughts and handle stress, and many people find it helps with anxiety and low mood. But it isn't a cure-all, it won't work for everyone, and it isn't a replacement for care.

Writing about hard things can make you feel worse at first. After deep writing, many people feel somewhat sad for a while. That usually passes within a couple of hours. If a topic makes you very upset, stop writing or change the topic. You don't have to write about anything you're not ready for.

Before the expressive writing week, take care if:

▪ you live with an ongoing or severe mental health condition, such as major depression or PTSD. Expressive writing seems to help less in these cases. You might find it helpful to talk to a mental health professional about whether it suits you.

▪ something traumatic happened in the last month or two. Wait at least that long before writing about it in depth, or write about other things that week.

▪ you're grieving a recent loss, or you survived abuse as a child. Writing about positive experiences may suit you better for now, and talking to a mental health professional first may help.

See a doctor if your mood has been low for more than two weeks, if it isn't lifting, or if what you're trying yourself isn't helping. Low mood that lasts two weeks or more can be a sign of depression.

If you're having thoughts of suicide or of harming yourself, get help now. A journal is not the right tool for that moment.

▪ UK: call 111 and choose the mental health option, or call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000 in Northern Ireland. Call 999 or go to A&E if a life is at risk. You can talk to Samaritans on 116 123.

▪ US: call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Call 911 if a life is in danger.

▪ Australia: call Lifeline on 13 11 14, or 000 in an emergency.

▪ Anywhere else: call your local emergency number.

How to write an entry

1. Sit down at your set time and place. Open to the next blank page and write the date.

2. Start the timer and start writing. Write about whatever is in your head. If nothing comes, write that nothing is coming. Keep the pen moving.

3. Write how you feel, not just what happened. "Had a meeting" is a diary. "The meeting left me worried about the deadline" is a journal.

4. Be specific. "My sister called to check on me" means more than "I'm grateful for family".

5. Don't edit. Spelling, grammar and neat handwriting don't matter. You can draw, list or doodle if that's what feels right.

6. Stop when the timer goes. If you want to keep going, keep going. If you've written one line on a bad day, that counts.

Morning or evening both work. There's no evidence one is better, so choose the time you can keep.

What you need

- A notebook and a pen. Nothing fancy. A notebook you're not afraid to write badly in is better than a beautiful one you don't want to spoil. A notes app on your phone works too, if you'll use it more.
- A timer, so you're not checking the clock.
- A fixed spot for the notebook, where your daily habit happens: by the kettle, on your bedside table, in your bag.
- Somewhere private, or a way to keep the notebook private, so you can write honestly.

Common mistakes

- Waiting until you have something worth writing. You won't feel ready. Write anyway: the ideas come from writing, not before it.
- Writing for someone else. It's yours. You don't have to share it, and it doesn't have to be good.
- Starting with long entries. Keep the first entries short, so they're easy to fit in, and grow the length slowly.
- Only listing events. Add how you felt about one of them.
- Daily gratitude lists. They go stale fast. One detailed entry a week does more.
- Giving up after a missed day. A missed day isn't a broken habit. Write the next day.
- Pushing through distress. Feeling low for an hour or two after deep writing is common. Feeling much worse, or for days, is a reason to stop and talk to your doctor.

Keeping it up to a full notebook

After the last week there are no more weekly tasks. Keep three things going:

- Your daily entry, at the length and time you chose.
- A fallback for busy days. One line, or a mood score and a word about why, keeps the habit alive.
- A look back once a month. Read the last few weeks and write a short entry about what you notice. If the time or length isn't working, change one thing.

Six months of writing every week is a milestone. Filling a whole notebook is another: number the pages if you want to watch it fill. When it's full, start the next one the same day.

If you miss a week, start again with a short entry. Your notebook is still there, and so is everything you've written.

If you fall behind

Missed 1 week: Missed a week, or most of one? Repeat that week at the same length. Don't write extra entries to catch up. Your count of weeks in a row starts again from your next entry, but your notebook doesn't.

Missed 2 weeks: Go back one week and drop to a shorter entry, for example from ten minutes to five, then build up again from there.

Missed 3 weeks: Start again at week 1 of your level. Look at what got in the way, the time, the place, the length or the format, and change it before you start.

Missed 4 or more weeks: Start again at week 1 of "I've never kept a journal", with five minutes a day. If you stopped because writing made you feel worse, or your mood has been low for more than two weeks, talk to your doctor before you start again.

Sources

University of Rochester Medical Center
https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=4552
“Set aside a few minutes every day to write.”

University of Rochester Medical Center
https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=4552
“Your journal doesn't need to follow any certain structure.”

University of Rochester Medical Center
https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=4552
“Don't worry about spelling mistakes or what other people might think.”

Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips_for_keeping_a_gratitude_journal
“Writing occasionally (once or twice per week) is more beneficial than daily journaling.”

Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips_for_keeping_a_gratitude_journal
“Elaborating in detail about a particular thing for which you’re grateful carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.”

Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/tips_for_keeping_a_gratitude_journal
“There’s no evidence that journaling at the start of the day is any more effective than journaling before you go to bed, for instance.”

Flinders University
https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2025/11/27/four-writing-exercises-that-might-improve-your-health/
“Promise yourself that you will write for a minimum of 15 minutes a day for at least 3 or 4 consecutive days.”

Flinders University
https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2025/11/27/four-writing-exercises-that-might-improve-your-health/
“Like seeing a sad movie, this typically goes away in a couple of hours.”

Flinders University
https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2025/11/27/four-writing-exercises-that-might-improve-your-health/
“If you find that you are getting extremely upset about a writing topic, simply stop writing or change topics.”

Harvard Health Publishing
https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/writing-about-emotions-may-ease-stress-and-trauma
“But it's not a cure-all, and it won't work for everyone.”

Harvard Health Publishing
https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/writing-about-emotions-may-ease-stress-and-trauma

“Expressive writing appears to be more effective for people who are not also struggling with ongoing or severe mental health challenges, such as major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.”

Harvard Health Publishing
`https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/writing-about-emotions-may-ease-stress-and-trauma`
“As such, Dr. Pennebaker advises clinicians and patients to wait at least one or two months after a traumatic event before trying this technique.”

Cleveland Clinic
`https://health.clevelandclinic.org/tips-for-keeping-a-gratitude-journal`
“What’s most important is choosing something you’re likely to continue.”

Cleveland Clinic
`https://health.clevelandclinic.org/tips-for-keeping-a-gratitude-journal`
“Pair journaling with something you already do, like making coffee or brushing your teeth.”

Cleveland Clinic
`https://health.clevelandclinic.org/tips-for-keeping-a-gratitude-journal`
“Specific memories have bigger emotional impact than vague ones.”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/low-mood-sadness-depression/`
“If you have a low mood that lasts 2 weeks or more, it could be a sign of depression.”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/low-mood-sadness-depression/`
“If your low mood does not go away and the things you’re doing are not helping, then you may need medical help.”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/low-mood-sadness-depression/`
“Support is available if you or someone you know is having a mental health crisis or emergency, no matter what you're going through.”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/`
“Get help from 111 online or call 111 and select the mental health option.”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/`
“Call 999 or go to A&E now if:”

NHS
`https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/`
“call 116 123 to talk to Samaritans”

Minding Your Head (Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland)
`https://www.mindingyourhead.info/lifeline`
“Lifeline is Northern Ireland’s crisis response helpline for people experiencing distress or despair.”

Minding Your Head (Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland)
`https://www.mindingyourhead.info/lifeline`
“If you need support now phone Lifeline on 0808 808 8000”

National Institute of Mental Health (NIH)
`https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression`
“If you or someone you know is struggling or having thoughts of suicide, call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.”

National Institute of Mental Health (NIH)
`https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression`
“In life-threatening situations, call 911.”

healthdirect Australia
`https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-helplines`
“If you need urgent medical help, call triple zero (000) immediately.”

healthdirect Australia
`https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/mental-health-helplines`
“You can also call Lifeline on 13 11 14 — 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.”

This plan online	`https://goaltodo.com/keep-a-journal`
Reach it with others on Welang	`https://welang.com/goals/keep-a-journal`
Reach it on your own in HourLife	`https://www.hourlife.com`

This plan is a guide, not medical advice. See a doctor before starting if you have a health condition, are pregnant, or haven't exercised in a long time.