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## Empowering Nurses Through Journaling: A Comprehensive Guide to Mental Wellness and Self-Care in Challenging Times

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## **Empowering Nurses Through Journaling: A Comprehensive Guide to Mental Wellness and Self-Care in Challenging Times**

### **Introduction:**

In the demanding world of nursing, where compassion is interlaced with the realities of patient care, nurses are the key to our healthcare systems (Royal College of Nursing 2022). The global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by nurses, resulting in them experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion (Galanis et al., 2021). The enduring demands of the profession, coupled with the unprecedented stressors of the pandemic, highlight the urgent need for a proactive approach to the mental health and well-being of nurses (Søvold et al., 2021).

Reflection in healthcare settings has a rich history that extends back to centuries, with roots deeply embedded in the traditions of self-awareness and professional development (Koshy et al. 2017). Throughout the past, healthcare practitioners, including nurses, have used journaling to document their experiences, thoughts, and observations to achieve personal growth and improved patient outcomes.

The concept of journaling in health care can be traced back to ancient civilisations, where healers and doctors recorded their observations, treatments and results on scrolls, papyrus, or clay tablets (Lorkowski and Pokorski 2022). These early forms of medical journals were not only a repository of medical knowledge but also a platform for reflection and learning from past experiences. Health professionals began to document their clinical cases, observations and experiments in handwritten journals, laying the groundwork for evidence-based medicine.

In the 20th century, the practice of journaling in healthcare grew significantly, influenced by advances in medical research, psychology, and education. Nursing pioneers such as Florence Nightingale recognised the value of reflective practice in nursing, advocating nurses to engage in self-reflection and critical thinking as integral to their professional development (Fidelindo and Shi 2013).

Therefore, this article explores a transformative tool – journaling – to empower nurses in navigating these difficult times. As we look into the connection of nursing, mental health, and self-care, this comprehensive guide aims to provide nurses with practical insights, step-by-step procedures, and a deeper understanding of how journaling can be a foundation in their journey toward improved mental wellness. In the face of unprecedented challenges, this guide seeks to provide nurses with an accessible and effective approach to reclaiming and fortifying their mental wellbeing (Smyth et al. 2018).

### **Navigating Nursing Challenges:**

Nursing, an already challenging profession, has transformed into an even more challenging situation in the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Davey et al. 2022). The demands of the profession, exacerbated by existing issues of burnout, stress, and workforce shortages, have been exacerbated over the past two years (Edwards and Cowper 2022). The recent report from the Care Quality Commission (CQC, 2022) highlights that rather than reducing, the pandemic has heightened the pressures on nurses, creating an urgent need for interventions to safeguard their health.

In these unprecedented times, nurses are navigating an increased workload, facing heightened demands on their time, and, perhaps most painfully, having to make the difficult decision of sacrificing precious moments with their families. At the height of the pandemic, many nurses faced the difficult decision of distancing themselves from loved ones to safeguard them from potential exposure to the virus (Jones-Berry 2020). This sacrifice, a poignant testament to their dedication, magnified the stress by eradicating crucial support systems. The impact of witnessing numerous

deaths and the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on other individuals has caused a profound emotional impact. Nurses mourned the loss of family, friends, and colleagues at an alarming rate, while grappling with a lack of accessible mental health services.

A longitudinal study (Gilleen 2021) conducted in April and May 2020, encompassing 2773 healthcare workers across the United Kingdom, revealed a staggering reality — over 21% reported high levels of depression compared to 5% before the pandemic. A report by the Samaritans in 2021 identified healthcare workers, including nurses, among the top five groups at risk of suicide, highlighting the need to prioritise nurses' mental health and well-being.

These challenging conditions extend beyond individual well-being, resulting in a profound impact on patient care. Extensive documentation suggests that the health and well-being of nurses contribute to patient outcomes (Dimitroff et al 2016). Despite the profession's inclination to prioritise patients' well-being over the nurses' own health, a significant number of nurses have devised strategies to attend to their personal well-being while maintaining their commitment to exceptional patient care. However, without adequate support for the well-being of the healthcare workforce, patient outcomes are likely to be affected (Dimitroff et al. 2016). Considering the need for action, the House of Commons and Social Care Committee's 2021 report highlighted additional support for healthcare workers during the pandemic and emphasised the need to continue such initiatives.

The very nature of nursing, particularly centred around caring for others, often places the wellbeing of nurses in the background. The pandemic has profoundly emphasised the need to prioritise mental health support for nurses (Davey et al., 2022). The toll on their emotional and psychological well-being not only affects them personally but also carries profound implications for the quality of patient care.

The statistics highlight a sobering picture — nurses, grappling with heightened levels of depression and stress, need more than just acknowledgment (Riedel et al. 2021). They require clear and sustained support that recognises the holistic health of the healthcare workforce as a crucial component in ensuring optimal patient outcomes.

In such challenges, a paradigm shift is imperative. The profession must move beyond the notion that self-care is a secondary component to patient care. Nurses who prioritise their well-being are better equipped to provide exceptional care to their patients. The House of Commons and Social Care Committee's recognition of the need for additional assistance during the pandemic is a step in the right direction, but it underscores the ongoing need for comprehensive, long-term strategies.

As the healthcare industry navigates the post-pandemic landscape, prioritising mental health initiatives for nurses is not just an option but an ethical imperative. Hospitals, healthcare organisations, and policymakers must collaborate to establish robust support systems that address the numerous challenges faced by nurses. Initiatives should include accessible mental health resources, counselling services, and proactive strategies to prevent burnout.

The journey of nursing has become an even more formidable task due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones-Berry 2020). The mental health and well-being of nurses, crucial to their personal fulfilment and the quality of patient care, require urgent attention. It is time to recognise that supporting nurses' mental health is not just a moral duty but a strategic imperative for the healthcare industry's resilience and sustainability. Without prioritising the well-being of those who dedicate their lives to caring for others, we cannot truly establish a healthcare system that thrives in the face of adversity (Dewa et al 2020).

### **Journaling as a Beacon of Support:**

In the demanding environment of nursing, where the pursuit of compassionate patient care converges with the harsh realities of the profession, the mental well-being of nurses emerges as a crucial consideration. Among the numerous strategies available, journaling is a beacon of support, providing a transformative and empowering tool for growth and development (Dimitroff et al. 2016).

The positive impact of journaling on mental health and well-being is widely regarded. A study involving 70 adults with elevated anxiety revealed a significant reduction in anxiety levels after 12 weeks of continuous online journaling (Smyth et al., 2018). It concluded that extended periods of journaling, spanning three months or more, were associated with greater resilience. This underscores journaling's potential to reshape anxious thoughts, particularly for individuals with heightened anxiety levels.

Dimitroff et al. (2016) emphasise the complex link between writing and wellness when approached with purpose. A wealth of literature (Brady & Sky 2002; Hiemstra, 2001 Parr, 2000) further attests to the numerous benefits of journaling on mental well-being, including the promotion of increased self-awareness and the release of emotions that might otherwise remain dormant. The practice of keeping emotions private, unspoken, and unexplored is considered potentially harmful, and journaling serves as a bridge between these emotions and thoughtful reflection. It facilitates emotional recovery and provides clarity in navigating complex or stressful situations.

For nurses seeking to incorporate journaling into their routine, the potential benefits are numerous. Besides its therapeutic aspects, journaling can lead to increased self-awareness, a greater sense of relaxation, and improved focus. These individual transformations have a positive impact, potentially affecting both patient care and staff development (Pennebaker 1990; Bolton 2006).

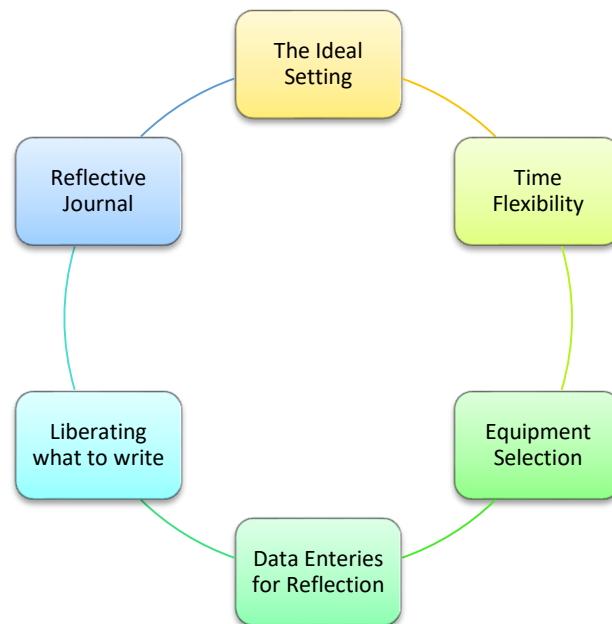
Beyond the therapeutic aspects, journaling serves as a practical coping strategy for the challenges of everyday nursing life. Recording thoughts and feelings is inherently healing, and the tangible documentation gives individuals a voice and sense of empowerment. By providing life to these thoughts and feelings on paper, individuals may find that these emotions are less powerful than them. Journaling provides a deeper understanding of life experiences within a safe environment without judgment or criticism (Dimitroff et al. 2016).

In the context of nursing, where emotional resilience and well-being are essential for delivering optimal patient care, journaling provides a structured yet flexible approach to self-reflection and expression. Nurses can use this transformative tool to navigate their roles' complexities, process challenging experiences, and cultivate a resilient mindset.

As nursing education and support programs evolve, incorporating journaling into the curriculum and ongoing professional development initiatives can enable nurses to embrace this powerful self-care device. Observing the potential impact of journaling on mental well-being not only highlights its significance in the nursing profession but also enhances the importance of prioritising nurses' holistic health. In the face of ongoing challenges, journaling is a beacon of support, guiding nurses toward enhanced well-being, personal growth, and a sustainable and fulfilling career in healthcare.

### **Step-by-Step Guide to Journaling Success: Cultivating a Meaningful and Transformative Practice**

In the realms of self-discovery and personal growth, journaling serves as a powerful tool, providing individuals with a unique space to observe their thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Moon 2014). Whether you are a seasoned journaler or a novice seeking to embark on this enriching journey, this step-by-step guide aims to provide a systematic process to kickstart your journaling practice (figure 1), ensuring that each entry becomes a meaningful and easily accessible record of your life.



*Figure 1 Step by step guide*

### **The ideal setting:**

While journaling is often seen as a solitary activity best undertaken in a serene and relaxing environment (Pennebaker 2014), its adaptability extends anywhere. The key is to prioritise comfort, transforming the process of journaling into a therapeutic escape. Whether you find solace in a cosy spot at home, a tranquil park bench, or the bustling atmosphere of a coffee shop, choose a space where you feel relaxed and free to explore the depths of your inner thoughts.

### **Time flexibility:**

One of the benefits of journaling is its inherent flexibility – there is no predetermined timeframe for this introspective practice. Some days, a few minutes may suffice to capture lingering thoughts, while on others, a more extended session may be recommended to explore deeper emotions. Your journaling session's duration depends on factors such as your mood, preferred journaling techniques, and the type of journaling you choose (Smyth and Pennebaker 2008). Embrace this variability, allowing your journaling practice to adapt to your life's ebb and flow.

### **Equipment selection:**

Choosing the right tools is crucial to a satisfying journaling experience. The preferred medium could be the tactile sensation of a traditional notebook paired with a pen or pencil, or the convenience of a digital platform such as a laptop or phone device. For those with a creative desire, a bullet journal offers an additional benefit by providing a structured space not only for thoughts, but also for daily routines and habit trackers (Carroll 2013). The selection of your journaling equipment is a personal choice, setting the stage for your unique journey of self-expression and self-expression.

### **Date entries for reflection:**

Incorporating dates into your journal entries adds a layer of depth and perspective to your reflective experience (Smyth and Pennebaker 2008). This chronological organisation allows you to examine your past entries, allowing you to trace the evolution of your emotions and identify patterns over time. This is particularly valuable during challenging periods, providing a tangible record of your journey. For individuals experiencing anxiety or depression, the ability to examine past entries provides a documented narrative of progress and growth over time.

**Liberating what to write:**

The question of what to write is deeply personal, and in journaling, there are no rules or constraints. Your journal is a canvas for your thoughts and feelings, free of structure, grammar, or spelling concerns (Pennebaker, 2004). Perfection is not the goal; instead, embrace the creative process of journaling. Avoid the temptation of overthinking; take a deep breath and let the words flow naturally. Initial entries may seem disjointed, but consider describing your feelings, allowing exploration and understanding to unfold. Remember, this is a personal endeavour, not an educational endeavour, intended to assist and enhance your wellbeing and mental health. Think as your journal as a trusted companion on the path of self-reflection and well-being, providing solace, clarity, and a nurturing space for your thoughts to thrive.

**Reflective journal:**

For those seeking a structured approach to introspection, the reflective journal is a great companion. The Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1988) which can be seen in figure 2, is a model widely embraced by healthcare professionals, unfolds in six stages. It begins with describing the situation, progresses to examining the situation, analysing the circumstances, drawing conclusions, and culminating in creating an action plan for future improvement. This method provides a comprehensive framework for individuals, particularly those in healthcare, to explore their experiences and foster personal and professional development (Gibbs 1988). Figure three highlights three different types of journals you could consider.



Figure 2 Adapted from Gibbs (1998)

**Bullet journal:**

In the digital age, Carroll (2013) introduced the Bullet Journal, a modern approach that has gained immense popularity on social media platforms like Instagram. What sets the Bullet Journal apart is its lack of regulations, allowing individuals to log anything from calendars and future dates to to-do lists, habit trackers, reflections, or daily diary entries. This form of journaling encourages creativity and provides a flexible space where thoughts can flow organically without traditional journaling constraints (Carroll 2013).

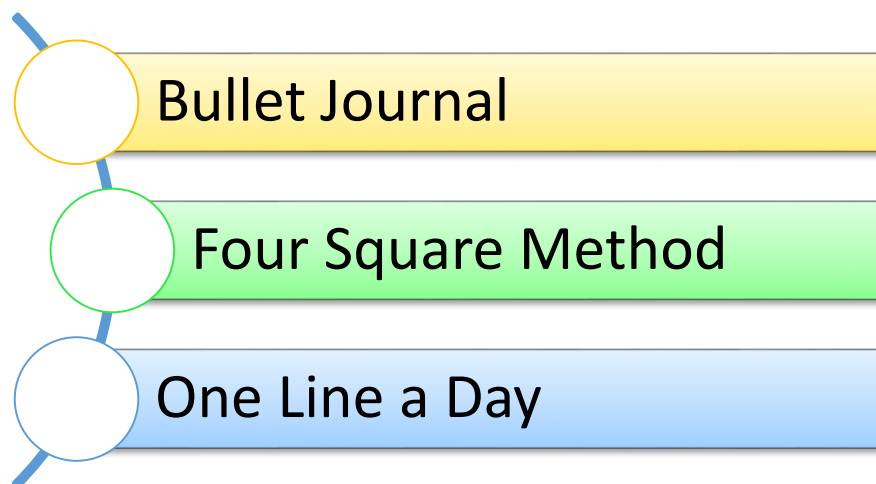
**Four square method:**

Ideal for those who tend to a list-based approach rather than conventional diary entries, the Four-Square Method offers a unique perspective on daily experiences. Krishna (2020) developed this method to document seven things observed, seven activities undertaken, one thing heard, and a simple drawing each day. By participating in this type of journaling, individuals aim to enhance their observational and listening abilities, fostering a deeper connection with the nuances of their daily lives (Craig De Pietro 2021).

#### **One line a day:**

For individuals grappling with time constraints but wanting a meaningful way to document their daily experiences, the "One Line a Day" journal is appealing. This minimalistic journaling technique involves recording a brief line each day, capturing expressions of gratitude, memories, quotes, or emotions. Blue and Hasel (2020) created this approach, which provides a quick and effective way of reflection, allowing individuals to transform the essence of their day into one line.

As you embark on journaling, be aware that these diverse approaches are not mutually exclusive. You can experiment, combine elements, or switch between methods based on the ever-changing nature of your journey. Your journal, a canvas for self-expression, is uniquely yours, providing endless opportunities for growth, introspection, and well-being. Allow the pages to become a mirror reflecting the tapestry of your thoughts, emotions, and experiences, embracing the fluidity that journaling implies.



*Figure 3 Types of Journals*

#### **Next steps:**

##### **Embracing Reflection for Personal and Professional Growth**

In the demanding environment of nursing, where compassionate patient care and the complexity of the profession creates a unique environment, journaling emerges as a powerful tool for nurses to navigate the complexities of their day-to-day role (Bulman and Schuts, 2017). Reflective journaling allows you to explore their experiences, emotions, and challenges, fostering personal and professional growth.

##### **Cultivating Self-Awareness and Emotional Resilience**

Journaling facilitates increased self-awareness, enabling nurses to recognise their emotions, reactions, and thoughts in various situations. By consistently documenting their experiences, you can identify recurring themes, triggers, and areas for growth. This increased self-awareness can serve as a foundation for developing your emotional resilience, empowering you to navigate stressful situations with greater ease and composure (Epp 2008).



### **Processing Challenging Experiences**

The nature of nursing often exposes professionals to emotionally charged and challenging situations (Maben et al 2022). Journaling provides a safe and non-judgmental environment for you to process these experiences, explore your emotions, and gain perspective. Through introspective writing, you can unpack complex emotions, gain clarity, and develop a sense of closure or resolution, ultimately promoting emotional well-being and preventing burnout (Sirois and Kitner 2015).

### **Enhancing Critical Thinking and Decision-Making Skills**

Reflective journaling encourages you to consider your actions, decisions, and interactions with patients and colleagues. By analysing past experiences and outcomes, strengths, areas for improvement, and alternative approaches to patient care can be identified (Gibbs 1998). This reflective practice promotes continuous learning, enhances critical thinking skills, and ultimately contributes to improved decision-making in clinical settings.

### **Fostering a Culture of Learning and Collaboration**

Journaling can be integrated into collaborative learning environments, like peer support groups or professional development sessions (Moon 2006). You can choose to share excerpts from your journals, engage in reflections, and provide insights and support to your colleagues. This collaborative approach strengthens interpersonal connections and promotes a culture of learning, empathy, and mutual support within the nursing community.

### **Incorporating Journaling into Continuing Education and Training**

As nursing education and professional development evolve, incorporating journaling into continuing education programs could be beneficial. Workshops or training sessions can introduce nurses to different journaling techniques, guide effective reflective practices, and encourage regular journaling habits. By incorporating journaling into formal education and training initiatives, nurses can enhance their clinical skills and competencies while advancing their clinical skills and abilities.

### **Conclusion:**

In navigating the challenges of nursing, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses' well-being is a pivotal consideration. The profession's demands, coupled with the pandemic's unprecedented circumstances, underscore the urgency of supporting nurses' mental health. Journaling is not merely a form of self-expression, but it is a powerful tool for nurses to regain control over their mental health. As the nursing community faces heightened risks of depression and suicide, accessible and personal strategies become paramount. Journaling, based on a rich tradition of fostering growth and development, provides a tangible and empowering approach.



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