Keeping a COPD Journal

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Could Keeping a Journal Help With Symptoms?

Keeping a journal seems like a simple, benign activity, but it's actually more powerful than you might imagine. In fact, experts from different medical fields agree that expressing your thoughts and feelings on paper (or a screen) can help with everything from chronic stress to arthritis, and that means that COPD patients could find value in journaling, too.

How Journaling Could Extend Your Life

When you live with COPD, you're always suspicious of your environment. Irritants and pollutants can come out of nowhere, and they can lead you right into a respiratory emergency.

However, as you begin to record your daily actions and reactions you will begin to notice patterns, and then you can avoid triggers more easily. In the end, journaling will help you solve problems before they start.

Although it seems like a purely intellectual hobby, keeping a diary can bring some surprising physical benefits, too. In fact, you may notice improvement in some of your COPD symptoms, since regular journaling has been shown to:

- **Strengthen immunity**. Evidence suggests that journaling helps to build T-lymphocytes, the cells responsible for fighting off infection and disease. Since COPD weakens the immune system, anything you can do to build up your natural defences will be advantageous.

- **Help relieve asthma symptoms**. A 2008 study revealed that writing about stressful life events significantly reduced asthma symptoms in many patients. Those who used "expressive writing" regularly showed a 19% improvement in certain lung function tests. It's possible that you could benefit from the potential relaxing effects on your airways, too.
- **Reduce the consequences of stress**. Unloading psychological stress is undoubtedly good for your mind, but since mental stress translates to physical stress, writing about your troubles can also ease the pain and fatigue that comes with the flood of stress hormones. Less fatigue and a better emotional state means you can't handle exacerbations quickly and efficiently.

Even if you don't see any sweeping physical changes right away, keeping records of your thoughts and feelings on your illness will help you feel in control, and maintaining a sense of control is vital for better disease management. In the least, you will reduce the weight of stress and worry, plus you will free up time and brainpower to enjoy the better parts of your days.

Next page: tips for more productive journaling.

Tips for More Productive Journaling

Your COPD journal is a great tool for educating yourself, but it can be used in a variety of other ways. For instance, the more medical details you record, the better it will serve as a record for your doctor and pharmacist when it comes to adjusting your treatment plan.

The more time you devote to writing and building on ideas, the more you will tap into your creative energy and explore your poetic power. In any case, there are a few things to keep in mind if you want to make the most out of your journaling time:

Set Aside Time Each and Every Day

You've likely learned the value of a good medication and treatment routine as you work to reduce your COPD symptoms. Well, the same goes for your writing: if you schedule in your writing time, you're far more likely to stick to it, and soon enough it won't feel like a chore.

Start small with 10 or 20 minute stretches, and try to write around the same time each day. Many people find that the evening is a good time to take up a pen – it will help you clear your head before sleep, and focus your perspective for the next day.

Focus on the Right Details

The idea is to develop and understand your thoughts, not write a prize-winning novel. Be less critical of technicalities like punctuation, and instead favor details about your day, your feelings, your reactions, and your symptoms.

Sometimes what seems insignificant at the time becomes an important detail later on. Get used to recording these things in every entry, so you can trace and treat future COPD exacerbations more easily:

- The weather, including air quality. Color coding can be helpful here!
- Your level of breathing discomfort. Is it a good or bad breathing day?
- Which medications you took that day (and how much)
- Any irritants in the air or your surroundings
- Your level of activity, amount of exercise, and degree of fatigue
- Your honest feelings about your COPD at that particular moment

The Fewer Rules, the Better

Your notebook is your blank slate, your opportunity to create, decipher, or confess anything that comes to mind. The less structure you give yourself, the more space your mind and imagination have to stretch out, and the more cathartic your journal session will be. Remember that this journal is for you and you alone – you have no reason to fear any criticism or shame, because nobody will read it (unless you ask them to).

If you find the prospect of complete freedom a bit intimidating, you're not alone. Many writers have a difficult time marking up a blank page at first, and some find it helpful to give themselves a word or theme as a jumping-off point. Take a simple idea like "change", "strength", or "peace" and see where it leads you.

There's a certain degree of trial and error involved in treating a chronic disease, especially one as volatile as COPD. Fortunately, journaling is a bit of a shortcut to a better COPD management plan. After all, the closer you monitor your symptoms, and how they intersect with other aspects of your routine, the more control you have over your lung health and quality of life.