

SELF-ESTEEM & SELF-COMPASSION · PRINTABLE GUIDE

Journaling Prompts

A library of journaling prompts by theme: anxiety, self-discovery, self-compassion, healing, and gratitude. Pick one that fits your day and start writing.

Reviewed by **Michael Callans, MSW** · Published June 27, 2026

What this tool does

Journaling is one of the simplest and most accessible mental-health practices, and the research behind it is surprisingly strong. James Pennebaker's studies on expressive writing found that writing honestly about difficult experiences for short, focused sessions can improve mood and well-being over time, partly by helping people make sense of what happened rather than just looping over it.

Different kinds of journaling serve different goals. Expressive writing helps process hard emotions and events. Gratitude journaling, studied by Robert Emmons and others, is linked with higher positive emotion and life satisfaction. Self-compassion and self-discovery prompts build a kinder, clearer

relationship with yourself. Reflective prompts can reveal patterns and triggers you would otherwise miss.

Prompts help because the blank page can be the hardest part. A good question gives your mind a starting point and a direction, which makes it easier to begin and easier to go somewhere useful. The themes below group prompts by what you might need on a given day.

Keep it low-pressure. You do not need to write every day, fill a page, or write well. A few honest sentences in response to a prompt that fits your mood is enough to get the benefit.

How to use it

- 1 **Pick the theme that matches your day**, from anxiety and stress through self-discovery, self-compassion, healing, and gratitude.
- 2 **Choose one prompt from that list**, and write freely for five to ten minutes without editing or judging what comes out.
- 3 **Write by hand if you can**, since it tends to slow the mind in a helpful way.
- 4 **If a prompt brings up too much**, set it aside and pick a gentler one, especially from the healing list.
- 5 **Return whenever you need a fresh prompt**, a few honest sentences at a time. Consistency beats length, and nothing here has to be well written.

How to use these prompts

Pick a theme that matches how you feel, choose one prompt, and write freely for five to ten minutes. Do not censor or edit. If a prompt brings up too much, set it aside and choose a gentler one. The goal is honesty, not polish.

For anxiety and stress

- What is worrying me right now, and what part of it is actually within my control?
- What is the worst that could happen, what is most likely to happen, and how would I cope with each?
- When have I gotten through something hard before, and what helped?
- What does my body feel like right now, and what might it be telling me?
- If a calm, wise friend were here, what would they say about this worry?

For self-discovery

- What matters most to me, and am I living in line with it?
- When do I feel most like myself?
- What would I do if I knew no one would judge me?
- What am I pretending not to know about my life right now?
- Who am I beyond my job and my achievements?

For self-compassion

- What would I say to a friend going through exactly what I am going through?
- Where am I being harder on myself than I would be on anyone else?
- What do I need right now, and how could I give a little of it to myself?
- What is one kind thing I can acknowledge about how I handled today?
- What am I ready to forgive myself for?

For healing and processing

- What happened, and how did it really make me feel?
- What am I still carrying that I would like to set down?
- What did this experience teach me about myself?
- Write a letter you will never send to someone you have unfinished feelings about.
- What does moving forward look like, and what would the first small step be?

For gratitude and well-being

- What are three things, large or small, that went well today?
- Who am I grateful for, and why?
- What is something my body or mind did for me today that I usually overlook?
- What is a small pleasure I can look forward to tomorrow?
- What is something I have that I once hoped for?

A few tips

Write by hand if you can, since it tends to slow the mind in a helpful way. Pick a regular time, even just a few minutes before bed. And remember that no one else has to read this, so you can be completely honest.

Sources

- Pennebaker JW, Smyth JM. Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain. 3rd ed. Guilford Press; 2016.
- Emmons RA, McCullough ME. Counting blessings versus burdens: an experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. J Pers Soc Psychol. 2003;84(2):377-389.

Journaling stirring things up?

A therapist can help you work through what surfaces on the page. Free to search our directory. Start at psychology.com/therapist.

These prompts are an educational self-help tool, not therapy or a diagnosis. If writing brings up distressing emotions that persist, please consider working with a licensed mental-health professional. In an emergency, call your local emergency number or, in the US, call or text 988.

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