



## Using Diary-Writing as a Power Tool to Reveal Fresh Perspectives and Achieve Shared Goals

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### INTRODUCTION

The diary is considered a deeply personal and private document in which one keeps a record of meaningful events and experiences. For centuries it has been widely relied upon as a safe place in which to sort and refine one's thoughts. It may be seen as a friend, a tool with which to cultivate and strengthen connection between mind and body, and a means for continual striving to improve one's overall sense of self.

The diary can be and do all of these things. However, when a person develops an eating disorder, the diary can become an unwitting accomplice of the illness, aligning with and intensifying its traits, and exacerbating separation of mind from body.

Clinical and personal experience confirm that diary-writing can intensify ruminative anxiety and despair, encourage secret-keeping, and heighten other problematic thoughts and behaviours (e.g., obsessive focus on dietary rules) involved in the development and maintenance of an eating disorder. This is illustrated by the 70 people with experience of an eating disorder who share raw excerpts from their private diaries in the published creative work of my PhD: *Using Writing as a Therapy for Eating Disorders – The Diary Healer*.

Nevertheless, my research demonstrates that diary-writing can be a powerful addition to the therapeutic toolbox for healing and strengthening one's relationship with food, activity, self, and others. Diary-writing can move from being a coping and survival tool to a healing and self-growth tool.

While acknowledging the possible hazardous aspects of a diary, I will proceed to briefly describe how the risks of diary-keeping can be mitigated, and illustrate the distinctive beneficial and diverse uses of diary-writing in the eating disorder field.

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One way to understand the diary's value in eating disorder treatment and recovery is to explore its use within the framework of the widely used Transtheoretical stages of change model characterized by the six 'stages of change' described below. In attempting to reconnect with their true self after developing an eating disorder, a person moves through these stages.

**STAGE 1: Pre-contemplation** – the person does not perceive their behaviour as a problem

**STAGE 2: Contemplation** – the person is conscious of having a problem but is doing nothing to solve it

**STAGE 3: Preparation** – the person is fully conscious or aware of having a problem and are looking for some kind of solution

**STAGE 4: Action** – the person is taking specific action to change their behaviour and be free of their problem

**STAGE 5: Maintenance** – the person has managed to stop the problem behaviours and is succeeding in carrying through the necessary changes

**STAGE 6: Termination**

One clinical application in which this model serves as the foundation is the motivational interview, which integrates the six stages with concepts that centre intervention in the patient – the person with the eating disorder – and their readiness for change. The general aim is to encourage more active participation in intervention, while the therapist assumes a more passive or witness role and becomes a companion who avoids confrontation with them.

One possible problem with the '*Pre-contemplation*' concept is that it does not describe a state of mind or activity in the patient but emphasizes the lack of cognitive activity which 'should be there', reflecting a contradiction between the perspective of the patient and that of the clinician. Basically, the patient fails to notice they have a problem, which, from a certain perspective, they could possibly notice.

One possibility is *in retrospect*, and, with assistance from a trusted life-writing mentor, the diary can assist in challenging illness-driven thoughts and behaviours, both in the present moment and during later stages of recovery. Another possibility is for *somebody else* to see the problem in the patient, while the patient ignores it. Again, the diary or other narrative forms can assist.

## COLLABORATION

Diary-writing can provide a means with which to observe and study the personal stages of change in a patient-centred narrative structure. With guidance from a trusted writing mentor, and working in collaboration with their therapy team, the patient can progress from using the diary as a deeply secretive survival and coping tool to one which enables their reflection on past and current events and experiences. Narrative guidance also can assist the patient in using their diary to explore relationships and identify patterns of behaviour; their diary can become a practice ground for retraining thoughts and developing new thoughts, and for confronting and addressing painful emotions. These ways of understanding change offer an avenue for fresh insight and new perspectives in supporting recovery from an eating disorder.

## THE DIARY'S SIGNIFICANCE AS A HELPER

With guidance, the diary can document the patient's transition from determination to action. In the *Contemplation* stage, the illness may appear as a chronic, permanent dependency. The diary clearly reveals that

recovery involves far more than simply change in the patient as defined by a clinical diagnosis. Looking at a person with an eating disorder diagnosis, the problem may appear to be maladaptive eating behaviour, and the solution may appear to be restoration of eating to a healthy pattern.

But the *diary* of a person with an eating disorder diagnosis, when shared with a writing mentor or trusted therapist, reveals other issues which demand legitimate attention, such as a need to gain autonomy from the family, problematic relationships, or the use of dietary restrictions to alter body shape. To understand processes of change, we need to attend without making judgments to these issues, as well as recognize that they structure the lives and concerns of patients.

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## UNTAPPED POTENTIAL AS A DISCLOSER OF INFORMATION

Increasingly this century, autobiographies of people with eating disorders have been a common resource for elaborating upon personal experience, for helping other sufferers confront the problem, and for informing and educating the public. First-person accounts provide opportunities to learn about the illness from those who have lived, or live, with it 24/7. Such accounts can take the observer inside and give them an insight and understanding of what it is like living with the illness. Such accounts also can assist the person with an eating disorder, by encouraging them to adopt fresh perspectives and to move from a position of being a participant to one outside their self, becoming an observer in reflecting on and telling their own story.

These benefits include strengthening motivation for change, building therapeutic relationships, consolidating progress, and dealing with relapse.

When the patient tells their own story, this has many advantages over the open-ended questionnaires often used to gather research data, giving us the chance to understand this experience with rigour, in its human contexts and in the language of people living with the illness. Diary-based data can help educate medical and psychological professionals and the diary makes an ideal tool for gathering data for research.

Just as the diary can promote communication between patient and therapist, the sharing and analysis of diary experiences can foster much-needed trust between those with lived experiences of eating disorders and those involved in research, prevention, treatment and care-giving.

Diary tools have multiplied greatly in recent years, especially due to the Internet enabling new methods of communication via digital gateways. The diary's potential is untapped in its ability to provide a deeper knowledge of eating disorders, grounded in patients' perspectives. More accurate assessment methods are called for to make better use of the narrative in our typically verbal interaction environments. The diary offers a base from which to implement prevention and intervention, improve professional training, and conduct research in line with the concerns and needs of patients.

## About The Diary Healer in my PhD

My book "Using Writing as a Therapy for Eating Disorders – The Diary Healer", the creative work in my PhD, seeds discussion and provides guidance on how the diary can be integrated into treatment and recovery. For details, see [www.thediaryhealer.com](http://www.thediaryhealer.com). To learn more about and acquire the creative work go to <https://www.routledge.com/Using-Writing-as-a-Therapy-for-Eating-Disorders-The-diary-healer/Alexander/p/book/9781138788374>; to read the exegesis go to <http://acquire.cqu.edu.au:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/cqu:13833>.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Alexander, J. (2016). *Using writing as a resource to treat eating disorders*: The diary healer. Hove: Routledge.

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