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By **Mitra Malek** | July 31, 2019

One of the best ways to get to know yourself — and become a better version of yourself — is to keep a journal.

Think of journaling as becoming your own confidante — the most private confidante you'll ever have, and one with all the answers. Sound dubious?

It's not. The trick is being quiet and curious enough to let this receptive, omniscient being — aka you — emerge, and then to trust yourself.

Not sure how to start journaling and keep it up? Follow these 4 tips.

1. Write when it feels right.

Journaling is not daily homework (unless that concept gets you psyched on it). It's something you do when you feel you need to. The urge can strike when you're on top of the world. Or it can strike when you're miserable. Or angry. Or confused. You get the point. But that urge might not always broadcast as "write in a journal." It might mask itself as overwhelming emotion that needs release. Your journal is ready to receive. By the way, your journal should be bound pages (loose pages get lost), and not on a computer or other electronic gadget. Writing by hand lets you better connect with yourself.

2. Be the raw you.

You're writing for you and only you. This doesn't mean you can never share

what's in your journals — it means you're not trying to accomplish anything in particular or impress anyone. If you find you're writing to impress yourself, you just learned something about yourself (I'll let you tease that out on your own). If you resist writing everything you feel or think, that too tells you something about yourself (most likely, it reveals insecurities).

3. Check back on yourself.

Read over your old pages ... at some point. It might be a week after you've written. It might be months. It could be years, even decades. Don't berate yourself for what you've expressed in your journals. Remember: You're learning about yourself, and you get to use what you learn to grow into a better version of yourself. Everything in those pages counts as positive, something you can use as a launching pad or as intel you'll unspool to understand why things have turned out for you the way they have. Hunt for patterns, and then decide whether they've served you well.

4. Keep those bound books.

You might be tempted to throw out old journals wherein you wrote unbecoming entries. Don't. That's akin to denying your life. Even if you haven't always loved how things have gone, you won't grow or achieve what you want to, in any authentic way, if you ignore who you've been. That's not to say you should wallow in your sad, sad, sad entries. Rather, learning about yourself means accepting the yuck and using it to build something better. On the other hand, if your journals are filled with gratitude and good measure, you have a trove of instructive experience and thoughts to review should your entries take a turn for the worse in the future.

Mitra Malek's reporting and writing have appeared in The Washington Post and USA Today, and she is a contributing editor for Yoga Journal. She has kept journals since 1991. Connect at www.mitramalek.com.

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