

Keeping a Thought Journal ^[1]

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Why Should You Do It?

Journals are extremely adaptable. We can use them to record memories, impressions, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, physical reactions or any other relevant piece of information. That is why it is one of the best tools, which you can use without the help of a therapist, to gain some insight into your anxiety.

A journal is also something very personal. A place where you can freely express your deepest thoughts and concerns. Furthermore, it's a great way to collect data and plan ahead. This tool is highly recommended for a wide variety of problems, including social anxiety. In this article, we're going to focus on the 4 biggest advantages of keeping a journal.

It's a Safe Space

Those of us who experience social anxiety tend to be 'people pleasers'. We don't always stand up for what we believe in and we keep our mouths shut because we're afraid that others will humiliate us. This creates a lot of frustration and repressed feelings. Fortunately, the journal can have a cathartic effect on your emotions. In other words, the intimacy of your journal allows you to unwind and express your feelings in a free manner. Writing about your personal fears and worries can be extremely therapeutic.

You Can Record Past Events

Today, the world is moving so fast that we barely have time to think about ourselves. No one likes to linger in the past for too long but sometimes it's important to take a step back and evaluate our progress. A journal allows you to reflect on what you did in the last days.

Find Out What You Avoid

People who struggle with social anxiety experience what experts call, vigilance-avoidance patterns. This means that they consistently avoid certain situations. By using a journal, you can easily keep track of your avoidance patterns. In other words, you can pinpoint the exact situations when you use avoidance as a coping strategy. Those situations will become suitable candidates for exposure exercises.

You Can Plan Your Future

Oftentimes, anxiety is 'projected' into the future. People are not worried about what happens 'here and now', they're worried about what might happen in the near future. It's called anticipatory anxiety and those who find it difficult to perform in social contexts are extremely familiar with it. Anticipatory anxiety is usually triggered by a mix of poor planning and irrational assumptions.

Learn to Anticipate Success

Some of us are so terrified by our irrational beliefs and negative thoughts, that we don't even make it to the bar/party/presentation. Instead of anticipating failure, a journal can help you anticipate success. Use it to plan your activities and avoid potential setbacks. Just think about an upcoming event, identify potential setbacks and find solutions. Having a game plan takes away some of the anticipatory anxiety.

You Can Collect Data

This entire social anxiety tool relies on your ability to collect data about your issues. You simply can't work on your social anxiety if you don't have a clear understanding of its inner workings. Collecting data should be the ultimate purpose of your journal.

What To Include in the Journal?

As a recap, here's what you should write down in your thoughts journal:

- All those social contexts in which you feel worried or anxious. Remember to include your emotions. Example: 'When I walked into the bar, I felt ...' or 'I felt ... because I couldn't ...'
- Automatic negative thoughts associated with each situation. We'll use them later when we learn how to challenge negative thinking.
- You can also use the examples from Application 1.

How to Structure the Information?

This blank journal should make it easier for you to collect data about your social anxiety. Although this is your journal and you can put down whatever you like in it, here is a suggestion on the questions to use:

1. Where were you?
2. How did you feel? What did you do?

3. Negative automatic thoughts
4. Evidence that does not support the thought
5. Alternative thought
6. Alternative reaction (emotions, behaviors)

For now, focus only on the FIRST THREE questions. Keep the journal handy, because you'll need the information from it soon.

Don't Forget to Personalize Your Journal!

We encourage you to use handwriting because it's more personal. Your thoughts and emotions will have more impact once you see them handwritten, right in front of your eyes. In addition, whenever you feel down in the dumps, just take a look at your thoughts journal and amaze yourself at the progress you have made.

Also, consider having a second journal, in case you want to plan something or simply write down a few thoughts and impressions.

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