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## Therapeutic journaling promotes healing

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By **Michael J. Cain**

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*Soldiers keep a battlefield journal, based on mental snapshots.*

The following commentary was written by Michael J. Cain, a freelance writer and volunteer at Fort Bragg, N.C., who teaches therapeutic journaling to Soldiers suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

Soldiers at Ft. Bragg's Warrior Transition Battalion are working hard to make good their escape from the battalion. Whether they're going back to active duty, or planning a return to civilian life, the first order of business is to get well. Among the tools being offered to assist them is a class in therapeutic journaling.

"The feedback I've gotten from our social workers is saying, in some cases, it is helpful for Soldiers suffering from PTSD or post-combat stress," says Maj. Christopher Blais, executive officer of the WTB.

In a journal, Soldiers can vent without fear of retribution, and clear their minds of stressful thoughts and memories. Journaling gives the ability to see one's thoughts from a new perspective. Once those thoughts appear on paper, they can be observed with a certain detachment, as if they belonged to another. Frequently, this new perspective helps to identify solutions that might not have been so obvious when they were just thoughts. Whether the issues involve anger, guilt, fear or other points of discomfort, one of the things that cause those feelings to swell and fester is that they are kept private.

Loreley Taylor, a clinical psychologist who works with members of the WTB, is a strong advocate of journaling. "I do risk assessment with new members of the WTB. When Soldiers come in, I encourage them to journal, to write about happy things, about their goals, about bereavement."

Many people think their private thoughts will shock people or lead them to judge, but keeping thoughts too "close to the vest" can lead to an explosive outburst at a later date, which can be regrettable at best and dangerous at worst. Journaling allows one to get deep into the core of an issue, without straining relationships or revealing oneself beyond a certain level of comfort.

People who keep journals develop an enhanced ability to deal with difficult issues. Journaling reduces stress, which helps to improve sleep and strengthen relationships. The journaling experience can be as unique as the person doing it. It can also be adapted to suit individual needs. There are no rules about the proper way to keep a journal; it's different for every writer. Finding what works for you is a matter of experimenting. Narrative story telling, or dialogue, perhaps interlaced with newspaper or magazine clippings or illustrations, all are tools that can be used.

Buying an expensive journal is not necessary. In fact, many people report better results when they use an ordinary spiral notebook or legal pad, at least in the beginning. This reduces potential anxiety about feeling the need to write something profound.

Another reason to start out with something that has removable pages is that it makes it easier to throw away anything you've written that you're uncomfortable with. The act of writing about a difficult subject has value, even if you don't keep it. Knowing that it's OK to throw it out means you really can write about anything, and if you choose to toss it out, you can always come back to the topic later. The goal of journaling ought to be exploring thoughts and feelings, not beauty and profundity. That may come later, but the first goal is healing.

New Soldiers know, intellectually, there are risks associated with military life, but most don't consider the risk of the psychological impact of combat. Some develop post traumatic stress disorder, but not everyone does and we don't know why. Combat stress is unavoidable; there is nothing routine about facing the harshness of a violent attack. A Soldier may be trained to kill, but they're not bred to kill; training prepares a Soldier to do the job, but can't always prepare one for the aftermath of that job. It's how we deal with the aftermath that defines the impact.

All members of the WTB visit regularly with psychiatrists and therapists, where they are encouraged to talk about the things that cause them stress. Not surprisingly, many have a hard time opening up, and frequently talk only about things they believe the doctors want to hear.

A journal can be a place to vent, but more importantly, it is a place where complicated issues can be broken down to component parts. These parts can then be viewed and dealt with individually. Issues can be overwhelming when approached all at once, but little pieces of big issues can frequently be sorted through almost painlessly and before you know it, the big issues have been resolved as well. All of which helps to make molehills out of mountains.

Try it. Take 20 minutes, once a week. Make a list of the things that cause you the most stress. Take an item from that list and see how many elements you can find which contribute to it. After you've broken your issue down as far as possible, try to find solutions to the individual elements, rather than the issue itself, and you'll soon find that what was once overwhelming is now manageable; what was once part of a wall is now a stepping-stone.

Journaling won't cure PTSD, or resolve all the issues you'll face when you return from a deployment, but it can help break down the barriers to talking about serious issues. If there is a cure, it's in the talking.

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