

# 10 Minute Journaling Exercise For Overcoming Fear

by Sagesse Deane | Feb 19, 2019 | Mental Health, Overcoming Fear

This is designed to be as intensive or as quick as you would like. It can be added to your self-help toolbox when you are feeling down or it could possibly be your jumping off point to facing your fears or at least being less afraid of them. There are five easy steps that you can take that will help you to understand your fears, find ways to stop listening to them, and if you are feeling extra courageous, maybe face one or two! So let's dive in!

## 1. Getting it all out

Write down your fears! Just make a big list (or small list if this is going to be more of a quick exercise for you). Don't hold back, they can be as silly or irrational as they come, no one is judging you!

## 2. Gaining awareness of your cognitive distortions and automatic negative thoughts

Sometimes, we put mental filters on information that we take in and we distort it or generalize it. This can cause us to perceive something as more of a threat than it is. These types of mental filters are called cognitive distortions. 3 main types of cognitive distortions that you might have surrounding your fears are:

**Catastrophizing.** You assume the absolute worst-case scenario. This is a common distortion humans have and it is a big contributor to irrational fear. But remember: worst-case scenarios almost never come true!

**Overgeneralization.** You think that because something happened once that it will happen again, especially if you are in the same situation as the first time this happened. This causes you to believe that something bad will happen if you enter that situation again. This could also happen even if you didn't have the experience yourself, it could have been something that you saw in the news or on tv.

**Magical Thinking.** This is where you think something bad might happen if you do a certain thing, even though the two situations are not even related. This is very common with people who have irrational fears.

Take a look at your fears that you have written down and then try to see if they might be a result of any of the three cognitive distortions above. If they are, that is a good sign that you do not have as much reason to fear them. There are more types of cognitive distortions, but for now, the three above are a good starting point, especially for fears.

In your journal, ask yourself if you are putting any of these three mental filters on your situation? If so, what do you think is the most likely and logical outcome of the feared situation?

### 3. Fear Sorting Exercise

A lot of your ongoing fears are most likely irrational. However, it can be very difficult to know if a fear is rational or irrational when you are in a state of fear. It can be a good idea to classify your fears according to their likelihood. This will give you another good way to tell if your fears are worth fearing. (Hint: almost no fears are worth fearing, only ones that are immediately life-threatening are worth fearing). Mark down next to your fears the likelihood of them happening as one of three categories: most likely not going to happen, low-medium chance of happening, could actually happen. I would like to take a guess and say that most of your fears will probably be marked as very low.

**\*\*Be Aware of your “what if” fears\*\*** If any of your fears are “what if” scenarios you have made up in your head, you can mark them down as most likely not going to happen. These “what if” scenarios are your very creative but *delusional* fear brain that is **tricking you into thinking that these things are possible**. And yes, they are possible, but that does not mean that they are probable.

These “what if” fears are very useless to be afraid of because they aren’t actually within your control, the only reason that they have any likelihood of occurring is mainly due to random chance. These are the fears you can probably categorize as IRRATIONAL. This might come across as a bit tough, but it’s tough love. It’s good to have someone tell you that these fears are not worth fearing, but **you still need to have compassion for yourself and realize that it is hard to get over these fears**. However, don’t let that be an excuse to not challenge your fears - it is possible for you to overcome your fears and develop courage in the face of them.

If your fear actually does happen to have a high-risk of happening, then step 4 can be very helpful. Step 4 will also help you if you are the type of person (like myself) who still can’t stop thinking about the fear even though it is classified as very low.

### 4. Risk Reducing and Fail-safes

Basically, for each fear, you can write down things you could do to prevent your fear, what you can do to make your fear have less impact, and have a backup plan for the worst case scenario.

When you do this exercise, you will start to understand that there are maybe some things that you are in control of that could help prevent your fear from coming true (but this does not include avoiding the thing you fear or the activity that could cause your fear). You will also start to understand that even if your fear does happen, there are ways that you can make the consequences less severe and that you will be able to recover from such an event happening.

Like we did in step 3, you can also rate your fears in terms of severity. You can write out how severe your fear would be if it actually happened. You should also write down the severity of the fear if you were to also implement your risk reduction techniques.

First you will realize that your fears may not be as severe as you thought they would be and that even if they happen, you can handle them. You are strong enough to handle it, and if you fear that you are not - then you can ask for help, access various sources of support and information, and can learn new strategies.

## 5. Writing down your strengths and resources

This step is going to piggyback a bit onto the last point, but it is an important thing to do. A lot of the time when we have fears, they are because we don't think we can handle them. This is, I think, why we are so much more anxious when we are already stressed. We are already so stressed that we couldn't even imagine dealing with anything else. But, if you remember your strengths, you will realize that even if something bad does happen (which it probably won't), you can handle it. If you do not feel capable of handling it on your own, write down a list of resources and people that can help support and assist you.

## 6. Thought firewall

Once you have analyzed and hopefully rationalized your fears in steps 1-5, it is time to start training yourself to start thinking a bit less fearfully. You essentially need to train your mind to think more positive thoughts and less of the negative thoughts. This will eventually help you to create a "thought firewall", which will essentially block out unhelpful, fearful thoughts.

Basically, you classify the types of thoughts you have into 3 categories: not allowed, sometimes allowed (if they are constructive and helpful), and encouraged (to encourage you to create safety for yourself, think more positively, and reframe your thoughts).

Here are some examples of thoughts that would go in these categories.

### Not allowed:

- negative self talk - criticism, judgment, shaming, self-loathing, put-downs
- anxious "what if scenarios" and catastrophic thinking without a rational framework

### Sometimes Allowed:

- ideas offered by others about your fears (they could either make you feel better or worse about your fears, so listen with caution)
- simple distractions

### Encouraged:

- positive self talk - confident thoughts in your abilities (i.e. "I can handle this") and strengths
- aspirations and goals
- a plan of action - how to create safe, how to develop strength and conquer fears
- gratitude

Now something to remember is that it is a very difficult thing to not let yourself dwell on thoughts, especially dramatic negative thoughts, but if you decide that these thoughts are unhelpful and that you will try your best not to give them power, then you can slowly train yourself to not let them into your mind as much.

**Bonus tip:**

One huge thing that can help to overcome your fears is deciding that if continuing to run from your fears will cause more damage than the possible fearful event that you are afraid of. In other words, continuing to live life being horribly afraid might not be much of a life at all. The risk of possibly dying, becoming ill, or simply just feeling embarrassed or being judged - may actually be worth it when compared to the alternative, which is constant anxiety and compulsive avoidance. So just take a minute once you are done the exercises to decide if these fears are worth it. **Are you missing out on better things in life by being scared and avoiding facing your fears?**