

IBS Relief Now! Personal Reflections Journal

A Guided Path to Mind-Brain-Body Health

The ***Personal Reflections Journal*** component of the IBS Relief Now! Program uses a small set of questions developed specifically for each of the program's Sessions to stimulate your thinking about how IBS impacts you and your life. The best available research shows that when it comes to successful long-term management of IBS, simultaneous attention to mental, emotional, and physical aspects of the condition work best.

Since IBS is a “habit pattern” developed by your body, it reflects acquired learning. As strange as that sounds, your body had to “learn” how to express IBS in the specific way that you do. That does not mean it is your fault: It is not an expression of blame. Rather, it is an essential key for training your mind and body to “unlearn” old IBS habits and patterns, and to instead learn newer and healthier ways for your digestive system to carry on its primary mission: Keeping your body and brain healthy, while providing you the raw material for living an enriched and meaningful life.

I encourage you to take 10-15 minutes each day to work with each week's Session. Learn to notice. Learn to observe without judging or over-analyzing what you find. Learn to be patient, open-minded, and even open-hearted as, day-by-day, you learn to rewire your mind-brain-body connections to generate the healthier you that you are fully capable of being.

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Session One: *How and when did IBS become a “thing” in my life*

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1. What was going on in your life around the time that your symptoms first began to develop?
 2. What emotional and physical reaction(s) did you have to the circumstances you were facing at that time in your life?
 3. How was the situation you faced resolved? If it was not resolved, what are the lingering physical (bodily sensations), emotional (feel angry, sad, worried, ruminate, etc.), and behavioral (social withdrawal, loss of sleep, over-indulging with food, drinking, working, or some other behavioral excess) signs of how your past situation(s) are still being carried forward into your present-day life?
 4. After completing today’s guided practice session, use this space to reflect further upon any other issues that this week’s practice brings to mind for you.

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From a holistic health perspective, this exercise in calm, non-judging awareness, allows your brain to consolidate new learning, to make new connections and associations between thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Learning to change involves engaging two brain attention systems: one is narrow and sharply focused, useful for acquiring the basic elements of a new habit. The second, which you are practicing here, involves a broad and general focus, which works to link together and strengthen your brain’s memory for the new habit. Therefore, when repeated over time, this practice becomes a powerful exercise in re-establishing and re-regulating your mind-brain-gut connection while improving overall mind-brain-body health.

To help reinforce the new learning that is underway, take a few minutes to jot down what you noticed or observed during this exercise. Pay specific attention to any changes you recognize related to “how” your mind and body “do” your IBS pattern.

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Session Two: *Getting acquainted with my body's "second brain"*

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1. If I tracked the number of thoughts I have that are hopeful, joyful, and positive compared with thoughts that are fearful, worry-filled, or focused on past losses or struggles, what would the ratio of positive to negative be?
 2. If I were to record my mind's thoughts, what would I discover are the thoughts that are most often on my mind?
 3. Sit silently for one minute. Allow yourself to review the main thoughts that are on your mind. Then, take another minute to notice the various ways in which your physical body is responding. Write down what you notice.
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Session 3: *Learning how I nourish myself*

1. Eating and drinking are rarely just about satisfying hunger and thirst. The next time you eat a meal or a snack, direct your attention, without necessarily changing *anything* about your routine, to the following aspects of your eating/drinking habits.
 - a. What signals you that it is time to eat?
 - b. When do you eat?
 - c. What do you eat?
 - d. Where do you eat?
 - e. How quickly do you eat?
 - f. What else you do while you eat?
 - g. What signals you that you are done eating?

2. Since eating and drinking are two of our most fundamental forms of self-care, it is not surprising that other legitimate needs get linked to our eating and drinking habits (e.g., “stuffing” uncomfortable feelings with foods, seeking jolts of energy through caffeine to offset feeling de-energized, or alcohol to give us “liquid courage,” or using food to create feelings of comfort when loving affection is absent). Learning to recognize the complex impulses driving our eating and drinking can position us to become better at truly nourishing ourselves at the physical and emotional level.

In addition to meeting your body’s metabolic needs for nutrients, pay careful attention to what other “needs” are being nourished? Rather than simply calorically paint over the feelings and sensations that are present when you are eating or drinking, pause, take a breath between swallows, and notice what else is present. Record your observations.

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3. If you were to make changes in your current relationship to food, drink, medicine, supplements, or other eating habits, what would they be? What would you start with first? Would it involve adding to, subtracting from, or in some other way modifying your current eating behavior?
4. After completing today's guided practice session, use this space to reflect further upon any other issues that this week's practice brings to mind for you.

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Session 4: *How emotional & digestive health support each other*

The digestive system is operated by the *enteric nervous system* to communicate. Our emotional system uses the branches of our *autonomic nervous system*. And, the messages from them are ultimately processed in, and sent out to the body from, our brain. The ultra-complex and highly interconnected nature of our multiple nervous systems gives rise to our intuition, and is the scientific basis of our “gut feelings.” Learning to integrate our various nervous systems is like fine-tuning the links between our internet access point, our cable, our phone line, and our various electronic devices. They all carry information, but, to talk to each other effectively, they need to be coordinated and integrated.

1. For several minutes, focus on memories and/or images of people and places you love, that bring joy, that arouse feelings of safety and security but also bring to mind strong positive emotional associations you have to these people and/or places. Activate sense memories of them (i.e., sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or touch). Hold those treasured memories in mind for several minutes, allowing yourself to imagine you are right there all over again. Then, turn your attention to the sensations in your digestive tract, your breathing, your muscle tension level, or other bodily sensations. Jot down what you noticed? Recognize that your ability to create a positive body state can be accessed by creating a positive emotional memory state.
2. For several minutes, focus on memories and/or images of people or places you associate with something unpleasant, tense, sad, or even scary. **Only do this when you have practiced gaining a strong connection to what feels positive, safe and secure. That way, if you need to disconnect from something unpleasant, you will have a pre-established way to connect to something that helps you to feel better.** Once again, activate sense memories (i.e., sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or touch) you associate with these unpleasant people or places. Next, turn again to the sensations in your digestive tract and the rest of your physical body. Take note of what you experience. Jot it down. Recognize that negative emotional memories invariably create negative body states. They play a major role in activating and intensifying IBS symptoms. Now, before you

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finish this practice, return again to the positive memories, allow them to wash over you, and then bring this reflective exercise to a close.

3. After completing today's guided practice session, use this space to reflect further upon any other issues that this week's practice brings to mind for you.

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Session 5: *How resilience rests on counter-intuitive coping*

1. Fear, and its many faces, is a common undercurrent to many physical health challenges. We have discussed how often worry, perfectionism, muscle tightening, accelerations in breathing patterns, and sleep disturbances are powerful activators and maintainers of IBS patterns. Desire, on the other hand, is the counter-point to fear. Fearless-realism is the courageous and counter-intuitive antidote to uprooting fear so it can't keep fueling your IBS symptoms. When you orient toward your deeper, most authentic desires, you have taken an important first step toward reducing fear, expressing courage, and becoming more resilient. Ask yourself: When have I shown courage? When have I been willing to stand up for something that really mattered to me or that I believed in deeply, even when others disagreed with me or attempted to block me. Jot down what you discover.
2. Desire involves “leaning in” to our days, while fear usually invites the leaning or pulling away. Leaning in involves confronting doubts with courage but not certainty, ambiguity with curiosity but not prejudice, and wonder with acceptance but non-attachment to a specific result or outcome. Ironically, when we cultivate these skills in our daily lives, our “gut sense” recognizes the fearless realism with which we are operating and tends to quiet down. This is one reason that IBS is so sensitive to stressful life circumstances. Take a few minutes to preview events coming up tomorrow or this week. Rehearse leaning into what makes you uncomfortable. Picture yourself showing courage, curiosity, wonder and acceptance as you walk through the event in your mind's eye. Notice any changes you feel in your body. Then, again, jot down what you find.
3. Resilience is not about controlling events in your life. Resilience is a powerful way of responding with self-control to the uncontrollable or unforeseeable events in your life. Cultivating resilient attitudes and practices is good medicine for IBS. Imagine a

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challenging situation you are facing. Imagine you are surrounded by a protective bubble that allows you to see and hear what is happening, and to fully interact with those around you. Imagine leaning into the challenging situation while functioning safely within the protective bubble surrounding you. Imagine what you'd like to say. Imagine how you'd like to act. Imagine the honest but open-hearted characteristics you'd like to express. In short, picture being your most authentic and "best self" as you rehearse leaning into this challenge. When you have completed this, write down what you noticed and felt.

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Session Six: *Sleep – Our Natural Restorative and Laxative*

1. All creatures sleep. We sometimes forget that, believing instead that sleep is a useless time-waster. Sleep is a mirror image of our days. Sleep is when the day's activities, frantic pace, concerns, worries, and triumphs are all replayed, filtered, strengthened, or flushed away, like a powerful electrochemical "laxative." Sleep is when energetic depletion resulting from our day's activities gets replenished. In many ways, sleep is a master masseuse, massaging away the tensions of the day to restore our mind and soul while reinvigorating our body. Thinking clarity, memory efficiency, and improved regulation of our physical and emotional rhythms depends upon a good night's sleep. How do you sleep? What are your sleep habits? What do you do to support restorative sleep? Take a few minutes to really look at the role that sleep plays in how your 24-hour day unfolds. Write down what you find.
2. For many people, sleep difficulties are a companion to IBS. Difficulty falling asleep and/or difficulties staying asleep are frequently reported. Sleep is both a biological function and a learned behavior or habit. We knew how to sleep as infants and had to learn how to struggle with sleep as we grew older. Re-learning to obtain restorative sleep is central to re-regulating GI functioning. When our days are filled with challenges, as is frequently the case for people with IBS, we easily carry the worries of the day, regardless of whether they are directly related to managing IBS symptoms, into our sleep routines. Take time to reflect on the following: What is on your mind as you prepare for bed? How do you relate to what is on your mind as you end your day (e.g., do you get swept up by your thoughts, know how to set them aside, replace negative concerns with calming, comforting images, etc.)? What finally brings on sleep?
3. To cultivate sound, restorative sleep habits and healthy bodily rhythms, we require a period of transition from wakefulness into sleep. A 3-hour transition is ideal, but not necessarily achievable for many. Still, for sleep to achieve its biological and

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psychological function, we need to develop routines to transition to sleep. That invariably requires intentional attention to winding down, a physical and mental relaxation to release of stressors that accumulated during the day. How do you wind down? What methods or practices do you use to close off your day? Using what you have learned in prior sessions, what could a more soothing – to mind and to body – routine look like from the time you finish your dinner until you drift off into sleep? What would be necessary for you to begin constructing that routine beginning tonight?

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Session 7: *Clearing out the past to free you up in the present*

Our personal history shapes our experience of the present. The past is never really, fully, totally in the past nor is it ever completely forgotten. But, the specific way in which our history influences our present and our future is up to us. Learning how to cultivate a freer, more supportive, less oppressive, and healthier relationship to our past can liberate us to become our best selves. This journey of coming to terms with our personal history, along with clearing the path to a more fulfilling future, can also result in minimization of IBS symptom burdens. Since anywhere from 30-50% of IBS sufferers have been found to have significant histories of trauma, learning to put the “past in the past” is very important. This is particularly true since lack of effective resolution of the past is strongly correlated with IBS symptom severity. What follows are several accessible practices to help you let go and transform the past, along with reflective questions to guide you along the way.

1. David Richo, PhD, therapist and author of *When the Past is Present*, invites us to ask four questions that help us see how our past continues to influence our present and limit our future. Reflect on these four questions.
 - a. What am I afraid of?
 - b. What am I attached to getting or proving?
 - c. What am I trying to control?
 - d. What do I think I am entitled to?
2. In my work with clients, I ask them to imagine they can respond to the challenges in their lives the same way that every cell in our body already knows how to respond. If our own cells know how to do this, we can learn the same skill set. Reflect on these four questions.
 - a. What do I require from my environment that I absolutely need?
 - b. What have I been carrying around inside of me that I no longer need and can release?
 - c. What do I need to keep out – with strong boundaries – because it is toxic to me?
 - d. What do I pledge to keep within my strong boundaries because it is a valuable and precious part of who I am?

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3. Physical symptoms can often draw our attention to what is missing in our lives that is necessary to address for resilient health to grow. Here are four practices David Richo, PhD suggests that help us discover what is missing.
 - a. When we know something is missing and know what it is our practice is to remain open to opportunities that support its fulfillment. Since we can't force it or make it happen through will power, we must remain watchful and open to opportunities that support it.
 - b. When we know something is missing but don't know what it is, we can ask ourselves the following questions (modified from When Past is Present):
 - i. Do I have a relationship that nurtures me and gives me joy?
 - ii. Is my sex life rewarding?
 - iii. Is the work of my days fulfilling and aligned with my values?
 - iv. Is my lifestyle mentally challenging and exposing me to novel experience?
 - v. Do I have a healthy lifestyle free of addictions that control me?
 - vi. Are my connections to family and friends safe and emotionally intimate?
 - vii. Do I have energizing hobbies or outlets aside from my obligations?
 - viii. Can I honestly say I live authentically, with honesty and integrity?
 - ix. Can I identify what I do that gives back to others?
 - x. Do I have a spiritual practice that connects me to a world greater than my own needs?
 - c. When we know something that was missing is finally being satisfied, do we regularly practice gratitude?
 - d. When we feel and believe that nothing is missing in our lives, do we practice gratitude for where we are right now while remaining open and receptive to what may arise next in our lives? In short, can we practice being flexible in the face of our inability to control or even fully predict what will happen next in our lives?

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Session 8: *Designing Your Personalized IBS Self-Management Plan*

We have covered a lot of ground together. I have learned by talking to people with IBS about how to create this program. I trust you have benefited by participating in the program. Now is the time to put all this collaboration in a plan of action that will help you sustain better IBS control. Now is also the time to be bold and think big. Let's look beyond IBS at what will help you expand your health and enlarge your life.

1. I was first exposed to Wayne Muller's work in the late 90's. To this day, I return over and over again to the four questions he asked that I have found to be like a vital compass that helps me regain my bearings and reorient me when I am off track. I invite you to reflect on each of these questions. Answering them can help you to re-align your dreams with your actions, your values with your choices, and your desires with patient, authentic living. Here they are:
 - a. Who am I?
 - b. What do I love?
 - c. How shall I live, knowing I will die?
 - d. What is my gift to the family of the earth?
2. Of all the strategies, medicines, procedures, and regimens that IBS sufferers seek and endure, what is rarely highlighted is the most fundamental healing resource of all. Wayne Muller's second question states it most plainly: What do I love? I would add the question of How do we express that love. There are many dimensions to love, among them love of self, love of life, or love with a partner, child, parent, or friend. For the purposes of managing IBS, the love to which I refer involves love of our own "imperfections and imbalances" and acceptance of the "fragilities and sorrows" shown to us by others. Our willingness to be our best, authentic self, knowing that this will not eliminate our faults and shortcomings, can help transform them into a capacity to live

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courageously with full-throated vulnerability. And, to live boldly while accepting our mortal limitations lets to live with less fear, less worry, and less