

How to Get Started with Creative Sketchbook Journaling, with Prompts

Creative Sketchbook Journaling for Creative Flow

So your creative flow is low. The truth is, creative energy naturally ebbs and flows with the stressors of life. Having tools and options to help us revitalize and stabilize our creativity is crucial to the longevity of our creative practice and overall sense of wellbeing.

Whenever I get a new client for Creativity Coaching or Creativity Counseling, almost always one of the first tools I teach and encourage is what I call "Creative Sketchbook Journaling." This is a guide to get you started using this wonderful tool as a way to nurture and stabilize your creative energy, every day.

Journaling vs Creative Sketchbook Journaling

You may have tried your hand at journaling for therapeutic purposes in the past. You may be familiar with the concept of Julia Cameron's "morning pages" for Creative People, to get your mind decluttered, and your creative juices flowing.

When I talk about Creative Sketchbook Journaling (or CSJ for short), I am not talking about "Dear Diary, today I..." entries. I am talking about what I commonly describe to patients as a daily emotional download- a freestyle writing session of what is on your mind, what you are feeling, or what you need to "dump" somewhere to free up some space in your brain.

Sometimes you may need to explore specific topics based on your day or you may be delving further into Creativity Coaching/Counseling session topics for deeper connections- all of these are important.

Some simple guidelines and words of caution: CSJ is a powerful creative tool that is healing when utilized in the right way. Since it is such a powerful tool, things like emotional containment are important and responsible tools for you to utilize with it. Specifics, as always, will be particular to you and your journey- but it basically means, strong emotions may be present, expect that, and prepare yourself in advance to pump the brakes at intervals.

Emotional Containment, simply put, is containing your emotions. We do this by creating parameters for how long we will expose ourselves to something emotionally triggering. For journaling in the beginning, for example, I will recommend writing one page, freestyle, then stopping. Put the journal away (have a place for it like a drawer or a shelf) and follow this with another activity that is completely different. Read a book that is not related to what you wrote about (SciFi or Fantasy anyone?) Take a warm shower, take a walk, go into a different room- do something different to "close" the journaling activity. Do not continue to write, do not sit and ruminate, do not call someone and rehash what you wrote, etc. Separate the time and space from the journaling activity with something else. Limit the amount of time spent. This is a simple, but important journaling guideline.

If you have difficulties with things like this, then I recommend starting CSJ with Creativity Counseling. The following guidelines, however, are important for your CSJ in general. Come back and review these tools as often as you need to as you write.

Why Creative Sketchbook Journaling is Powerful

First, it is important to briefly explore: why is journaling so powerful? I will give you the analogy I frequently use with kids and teens. Imagine a balloon, filled up with air. You are holding it by the end, pinching it off so no air will escape. You can at this point either add more air (balloon may explode) or release some air (to prevent this). Imagine you let go of the balloon- what does it do? Flies all over the room as it expels the air that was trapped inside (also not a good plan). In a simple analogy, journaling is powerful for one reason because it is releasing air from your balloon so it won't explode.

A second reason why CSJ is powerful: are making connections in your brain. Have you ever heard the studying recommendation: see it, say it, write it down? Our brain processes information in different ways, and by creating about things you are helping your brain make powerful connections about your experiences, both past and present, and how they impact you.

Getting Started

Creatives, I want to give you a written reference for the process of creative sketchbook journaling because it is such an important tool. With rare exceptions I recommend this to everyone. To get started, you need three key elements:

1. A blank journal

It starts with the purchase (or if you have the skill set) creation of a book that I recommend be unlined and that is aesthetically appealing to you. Otherwise, size, paper, color, textures, all of these are personal choices to intentionally make to invite you to engage with your book.

2. Creative materials

Next you need your writing/drawing/creative materials. Similarly choose materials that inspire you to use them while taking pressure off of you of perfection. For writers, for example, I might recommend pencils that match the color of your paper exactly so you purposely cannot see and edit what you write at first, if this removes an initial barrier between you and writing. You may choose to have a variety of writing materials in a case or box that excites you about engaging in the creative journaling project. Other materials you might collect (and I recommend collecting a variety!) might include collage supplies, paint and watercolor supplies, a variety of writing implements, scrapbook items, and more.

3. Dedicated time and space

Finally, and probably most importantly, you need a time and place of dedication- perhaps 15 minutes, to be alone with your CSJ every day. You will want to be undisturbed and dedicated to your thoughts, yourself and your processing of experiences for this amount of time each day. Consider a place that is “vibe-y” to you, and place items there (along with your journal and materials) that help the atmosphere, like music, a cup for tea, a candle, whatever you need. I recommend using “5 senses self soothing” (there is a blog post on that at <https://www.creativelyllc.com/blog/therapy-skills-safe-place-and-self-soothing>)

Ways you can Explore in your CSJ

And so, if you have successfully arranged your elements, here is the process I recommend to you:

Engage in the process of free response process work. In other words, we are going to have no particular goal or outcome in mind and are interested in tapping into the current of what is flowing freely through our brains. The process can include flowing freely back and forth between visual expression and written expression, or be focused on one or the other. It should have either a time or page limit- not to exceed 2 pages or 15 minutes- whichever is shorter, more or less.

Written Expression

If you are writing, the simplest way to begin is by writing anything- something- maybe “blah blah blah” until you have tapped into the flow of thoughts- then continue to write with them- sloppy script, incomplete sentences and words, free flow of thoughts just to release into content, until you run out of content or choose to stop. If the content is short you can return to your repeat word “blah blah” or whatever word you chose, until you tap into the next current, or you can choose to be done or change to drawing. You can also choose a variety of prompts to explore, and I have included 1 month of these at the end of this guide.

Visual Expression

If you are drawing, collaging, painting, etc, the simplest way to begin is by making anything- try to stay away from forms that are too informative and directional like icons (hearts, stars etc) as they can keep you rutted rather than flowing- scribble or doodling are pretty good- until you are into a flow of work. If you are a 2D artist you might go back to some of your sketching/drawing techniques like hatching, contour with continuous line drawing, stippling, and so on. You can also choose from a variety of prompts to explore, and I have included 1 month of these at the end of this guide.

Why CSJ?

Ok so let's say you do this. You spend 2 pages or 15 minutes drawing/writing in your sketchbook journal, organically recording images and thoughts, every day. Why do I tell you to do this? The frustrating answer is the more you do it the more you will answer this question for yourself. The more immediate and satisfying answer is both a creative and wellness one: creatively you are generating creative energy by regular creative output and a daily creative journal is an important part of this, and from a wellness perspective you are downloading thought clutter from your brain (scientific terms) which will aid you in being more mindful and decrease symptoms fed by thinking problems like depression and anxiety.

The Impact

Those who regularly use a CSJ experience greater benefits of increased creative flow, including

- clarity in their personal search for meaning
- strengthened authenticity individually and in their lives overall
- a release in built up emotions
- a decrease in emotional overwhelm
- an increase in self esteem
- an increase in self knowledge
- a development of creative identity
- a more regular creative practice
- ability to practice their art form with more ease
- clarity and ease when setting goals for self, both personally and creatively

I believe these are enough reasons to give this simple life change a dedicated try! I recommend seriously committing to daily use of your CSJ for 15 min per day, daily, for two consecutive weeks to start seeing the impact and changes in your life. I also encourage you to

give yourself the patience of learning and adapting to a new skill. Remember, learning and change takes time, multiple attempts, and effort. Make friends with the process, and allow yourself the space for it, because you value the outcome and the impact it will make on your future.

Prompts:

1. Open a book to any page and point to a phrase. Start creating based upon this phrase.
2. Create using only one color/hue/shade as inspiration.
3. Create using free association writing.
4. Create based upon one word as inspiration.
5. Choose a musical playlist and play it as inspiration while you work today.
6. Pull a label off of something from your day today and create around it.
7. Think of a person you interacted with, saw, or in some way experienced today and create based using that person as inspiration.
8. Select an emotion and use it as the inspiration today.
9. Focus on a part of the body and respond to it with your CSJ today.
10. Your inspiration for today is "fingerprint."
11. Choose something ordinary from your day and explore it in your CSJ.
12. Elaborate on a random thought extensively in your CSJ.
13. Give yourself permission to go down a rabbit hole for one page.
14. Spend time with the concept of "ugliness."
15. Spend time with the concept of "beauty."
16. Explore the past- your past, the greater past, connections you can make between them.
17. Explore the future- your future, the greater future, connections between them.
18. Spend today calling yourself an artist- owning this identity fully.
19. I dare you to brag about yourself in your CSJ. Go over the top and be elaborate.
20. Make a container or a place where your emotions live. Develop a landscape for them, how they come and go, interact, build, etc.
21. Explore the idea that your emotions hold intellectual value as messengers from your body to your brain.
22. Vent about something.
23. Answer: "When do you feel most alive?"
24. Answer: "What would happen if you faced your fears?"
25. Explore- what does the most authentic version of you, look like?
26. Answer- what was the most meaningful thing you did: today, this month, and this year?
27. Answer- what is something you can release, that is no longer serving you?
28. Develop: how do you experience love?
29. What does it mean to you to be creative?
30. What do you contribute? What must you contribute? How will you accomplish this?

Good luck, Creative, and remember, I am always here and eager to help you on your journey.

Sincerely,

Cindy

CINDY CISNEROS, LCPC-S, LPC, CREATIVITY COACH

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