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Why I . . . keep a diary

Aberdeenshire GP Catriona Lawson talks to **Tom Moberly** about how keeping a diary has helped her to reflect and keep things in perspective, especially during the pandemic.

Tom Moberly

Catriona Lawson has kept a diary on and off since she was a child. “It was the traditional childhood thing of writing down your thoughts because they seemed really important and because it gave you a chance to think things through.”

Since then, she has put her thoughts and feelings down on paper when she wants to reflect. “I can be mulling something over, and chewing it over and ruminating on it,” she says. “But if I write it down—and write down a few things that aren’t really related to it—suddenly it looks quite small.”

She says that the role of her diary has been different at different times in her life but that she tends to return to it when she has had a lot to think about. “When I do write something down, it usually has all the factual ‘this happened, that happened’ stuff but it also includes the thoughts and feelings and hopes that come out of that. And that’s where the value lies.”

Since the start of the pandemic, Lawson has found herself turning to her diary more regularly, and at the moment she writes in it every day, usually in the evening.

“It’s been more of a discipline and an opportunity to reflect while things have been busy and there’s been such a lot of change,” she says. “There have been stressful times in the past when I’ve kept a diary—partly as a way of putting things in perspective and getting them out of my head and being able to go off and do something else.”

Lawson is careful to ensure that any people mentioned in the diary, especially patients, are not identifiable. “Nobody’s going to want to read it, but if anybody was to pick it up, I would want it to be something that could be read.”

She says she would absolutely recommend to others the practice of keeping a diary, but that everyone should find what suits them in terms of how and when they write. “If it suits somebody just to write down a few details so that they can refer back and say, ‘Oh that was when I did that,’ then that’s fine. If they want to do something much more reflective, great. There are lots of different ways. Do what fits you.”

How to make the change

- Treat yourself to nice stationery. “Have something that you’re happy to sit down with—maybe a nice notebook or maybe a file on your iPad,” Lawson says.
- Leave the boring bits in as they can be interesting to come back to
- Consider writing daily to get the details right—and try to include the small things
- Don’t make it a chore “It’s something to enjoy, so think about why you want to do it,” Lawson says
- Diary writing helps train the “writing muscle” and is good practice for anybody who wants to do more writing