Art Journaling to Help Cope With Fibromyalgia

by NANCY HANNAY

Art Journal Your Fibromyalgia Journey

Chronic illness took over my life five years ago. I had once been vibrant, busy, working and full of life. In 2010, I suffered a mini-stoke due to birth control pills and have dealt with chronic illness since then.

After my initial years of devastating illness, I began searching for a way to chronicle my journey through illness. It was so hard to describe to doctors, friends and family how I was feeling — physically and emotionally.

Coupled with brain fog, I began to search out a way to express myself — a way for me to remember, to cope and deal with my physical limitations.

Using Art as Therapy

I stumbled across art journaling posts on Pinterest. I was captivated by how people were using art journaling to express themselves.

The images, paint and assortments of mixed media in the form of magazine cut-out collages, ephemera, textiles and inks all peaked my interest. Since that time I have broadened my search to YouTube videos, Facebook groups, Instagram and Twitter.

There is a wealth of great, free information at your fingertips online. Social media has taught me many art journaling tips, tricks and techniques. If I'm not well enough to sit up at my table and journal myself, I lay with my iPad and browse my accounts.

I find watching art journaling step-by-step videos and learning various techniques to be relaxing and enjoyable.

When you allow yourself the freedom to play with mixed media in art journaling, it can become very healing. I have even brought my journal with me to medical appointments and shared it with doctors — I felt the art journal spoke louder than I ever could have.

It tends to make a busy doctor stop the regular protocol checklist and really pause, listen and ask questions about me and my illness. It's very validating when you suffer with an invisible illness.

I won't ever forget my doctor running her hands over the page, staring down at my journal, and telling me she wished there was more she could do for me. It helped us reach an understanding about my illness. It is at this moment we solidified our trust in each other.

My love for being creative and designing has acted as a type of physical therapy as well. Intricate work has helped bring back mobility and dexterity in my arms, hands and fingers.

Art journaling forced me to use my hands when nerve pain would have otherwise stopped me. This conditioning aspect helps build up tolerance.

I never know how my art journal entry will turn out. The end result is usually a surprise to me too! I just clear my mind of aches, pains, responsibilities, and focus on one element.

I might start with a magazine or an online image that I related to that day. Sometimes it is a thought or quote I keep thinking about over a few days.

Whatever it is, I just let the process unfold in front of me. I remind myself that it is *my* expression and *my* time away from my illness. I hope it tells the story for me rather than me dwelling on chronic pain and symptoms.

After I'm finished with the entry it serves as my documented truth and I relinquish thinking about it anymore. Art journaling has become my therapy, my counselor, and my friend.

Next page: what do you need to start an art journal?

What Do You Need to Journal?

I started art journaling with a small, leather-bound notebook. I have also used drawing pads and canvases.

I use items purchased from art stores, dollar stores and my local hardware store. Most of my supplies include:

- Acrylic paints
- Stamps
- Bakers twine
- Jute string
- Burlap pieces
- Foam brushes
- Paint brushes
- Label maker
- Tissue paper
- Stickers
- Bubble wrap
- Stencils
- Markers
- Tin cans
- Old books
- Cereal boxes

I use anything I think I can repurpose as an "objet d'art." I'm not fussy or a snob about my art. Free, recycled or purchased — I like it all.

Finding Inspiration is Easy

Use Google or social media to help guide you. Look under keywords and hashtags that include:

- Creative journal
- Art journal
- Bullet journal
- Daily planner
- Fauxbonichi
- Bible journal

All Journaling Uses Prompts

Prompts are a list of topics you can choose to follow daily, weekly, monthly or at your leisure. Inspiration topics can also come from photo challenges, bucket lists or anything that's on your mind.

My favorite group is called The Reset Girl's Listers Gotta List Challenge. A list of topics are issued monthly; I pick and choose from the list and tweak topics however I like.

The Facebook group provides inspiration with other members sharing stories and entries. Find a style of journaling that suits you!

I did invest in a few items that make art journaling easier and fun. A good glue gun will save you lots of headaches trying to adhere heavier media.

I enjoy being able to download and print images or quotes and create text on my PC and printer. Once the text or image is printed I either cut it out by hand or use my cutting machine.

Chronic illness tip: I use a Silhouette Cameo cutting machine and it saves your hands when trying to cut images or stickers. Trust me on this one!

Art journaling can help fibro sufferers. Get online, join a few groups, and play with paint — it beats isolation and gives you a mental break from your illness.

It leaves you feeling like a weight has been lifted and frees you from your burdening thoughts. It helps you feel like you have accomplished something in a day when maybe that's all you could accomplish.

There are no rules and you can work at your own pace. Be creative and enjoy the journey!