

Kelsie Quinlan

What Can You do to Get Out of Your Own Way?

Mindfulness is a state of nonjudgmental, sustained, and alert awareness resulting from living in the moment, which improves peoples cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal functioning, and positively affects the efficacy of stress regulation (Lebuda, Zablina, & Karwowski, 2015)

Often, an individual's emotions can lead to their own negligence. Whether its writing a paper, designing an art project, or planning a presentation, constant negative emotions can get in the way of an individuals thought process and creativity. People make a habit of repetitively thinking the worst and resisting any sort of comfort or resolution our mind may come up with. However, mindfulness has been shown to be quite successful in alleviating negative thoughts and feelings, while introducing many benefits to one's personal well-being.

Recently, society has put a lot of emphasis on education and mental health, but has the importance of creativity been forgotten as a key component linking all aspects together? Schools tend to focus heavily on certain subjects at the expense of art and creativity. Ironically, researchers have determined a link between mindfulness and many forms of art, such as drawing, doodling, and colouring (Malchiodi, 2017). Some forms of creativity have even been considered to be a form of art therapy. Creativity plays a major role in mindfulness for people of all ages and can be as simple as doodling on a piece of scrap paper or colouring in a colouring book.

People who engage in creative activities tend to have more positive states of mind, increased emotional well-being, and less anxiety about death (Conner et al., 2018). The study consisted of 658 individuals who documented how much time they spent doing creative activities as well as the emotions that accompanied their endeavors (Conner et al., 2018). The study found

that the participants had an increase in mood after doing creative activities, and an increase in positive affect the following day (Conner et al., 2018). In fact, it has been proposed that engaging in a creative activity once a day can have a tremendous positive affect on the mind (Conner, DeYoung, & Silvia, 2016). Although creativity comes in many forms, sometimes people do not make the time to engage in the simplest of creative activities. Creativity in education is often put on the back burner, and often not valued as much as other strategies or subjects. The lack of creativity poses several issues since creativity is a key component in overall well-being and could really benefit an individual's education. Creative activities in classrooms make material more memorable for students and could potentially result in more positivity surrounding education. Furthermore, mindfulness tends to improve the working memory, increased an individual's ability to switch perspectives, and respond in a in a way that is non-habitual (Lebuda, Zabljina, & Karwowski, 2015). If mindfulness is such a valued skill, how can we incorporate it into our education and our daily lives?

Adult colouring books have been very popular recently. In fact, adult colouring books have been one of amazon's best sellers on several occasions (Malchiodi, 2015), and have actually created a global coloured pencil shortage (Flett et al., 2017). Colouring books are no longer a way for children to pass time, but a way for adults to entertain themselves while feeling nostalgic. The benefits of colouring have been described as therapeutic, meditative, and mindful among many other descriptors. People really seem to enjoy colouring books, and that does not seem to be a coincidence. Research suggests that coloring can increase mindfulness and an individual's overall well-being, as well as reduce stress and anxiety (Flett et al., 2017). In fact, many researchers have found a link between adult colouring books and reduced anxiety for people who coloured for only ten minutes a day (Flett et al., 2017). Colouring can be a tool for

some people to focus, or a way to gain personal satisfaction using distraction and diversion (Malchiodi, 2015). Colouring books could also serve to distract people from their busy lives and engage in mindless fun and relaxation.

Activities such as painting, drawing, and colouring are forms of art therapy aimed to improve an individual's wellbeing or help with whatever stress they may encounter in their daily lives (Flett et al., 2017). Usually, art therapy requires an art therapist to be present, but some researchers argue that colouring can be used as a form of art therapy (Flett et al., 2017). Colouring books are easily accessible, easy to transport, and a great source of entertainment for people of all ages. Furthermore, adult colouring books would be a useful tool to have in classes at school for students who may have anxiety, or have difficulty focusing. They may choose to colour between classes, or maybe even during a lecture. Colouring is quick, easy, and can be worked on over long periods of time.

Doodling is usually abstract, but can be representational, and can be described as “the unconscious or unfocused drawings made while otherwise preoccupied” (Malchiodi, 2014). Doodling Personally, doodling has always been a tool I often use to focus in class, distract myself from anxiety, or free myself of boredom. It is a quick escape from my own negative thoughts, and into a place that brings me joy and peace. Interestingly, doodling has also showed significant decreases in anxiety and depression, as well as aid in the thinking process for many individuals (Brown 2014). In a recent study, researchers discovered that doodling was a better form of mindfulness than colouring and drawing, as it involved more creativity to come up with an image, rather than just colour in a preconstructed image or draw something from memory (Kaimal et al., 2017). Sunni Brown suggests that doodling actually helps you think as “doodling is deep thinking in disguise and that it is a simple, accessible tool for problem-solving in

general” (Malchiodi, Cathy.). Doodling would be especially useful for individuals in a classroom who have to focus for long periods of time, or perhaps someone with an office job. It is an extremely easy way to get creative, while still listening or paying attention to what is happening around you.

Drawing is a form of creativity that can seem daunting to people who do not necessarily consider themselves to be particularly artistic. Although, like colouring and doodling, drawing has benefits and correlates with increased mindfulness. Creativity should not be limited to your ability to draw to someone else’s standards but rather a chance for you to get piece of mind. Drawing can be used to improve mindfulness and improve an individuals well being. Forkosh and Drake (2017) performed an experiment where they had participants think of their saddest memory, write it down, and focus on their feelings toward the memory. They were then tasked to either draw a design, colour a design, or draw their emotions in relation to the sad memory (Malchiodi, 2017). Drawing and colouring the design improved their emotions more than drawing their sadness. While colouring actually improved moods greater for participants who would not consider themselves particularly artistic. This suggests that being creative can improve an individual’s mood after something unfavourable happens to them (Malchiodi, 2017). Furthermore, another study by Northcott and Frein (2017) suggests that drawing can increase moods in individuals that were not upset beforehand, indicating that drawing can be useful in general, not just in times of sadness (Malchiodi, 2017). Art classes in school are extremely beneficial as it gives students the chance to become confident and find enjoyment in drawing. If students feel comfortable drawing, they will be more likely to draw on a regular basis, consequently increasing their mindfulness.

A study by Kim & Zhong, suggests that colouring, doodling, and drawing showed increased blood flow to the brain related to feeling rewarded, independent to whether the end result is considered good or bad art. The increased blood flow was to the prefrontal cortex which is also associated with regulating thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as emotional and motivational systems (Kim & Zhong, 2017). The researchers discuss how people tend to be their own worst critic in fear of their art not being up to the standards society as established to be considered artistic (Kim & Zhong, 2017). Consequently, we are missing out on simple resources that would make us feel rewarded and accomplished. In fact, the researchers found that doodling had the highest average measured blood flow increase in the reward pathway, when compared to drawing and colouring (Kim & Zhong, 2017). However, the study suggests that while doodling was the best activity for artists, free drawing was found to be the same for people who are and are not very artistic (Kim & Zhong, 2017). Surprisingly, colouring was found to result in a decrease in brain activity in participants who were artistic (Kim & Zhong, 2017). Perhaps the artists felt more constricted during the colouring activity, since they were not able to use their creativity to its full potential. People who are more naturally artistic tend to have the confidence to exercise their ideas and creativity compared to people who may lack confidence or skill.

Doodling, drawing, and colouring are all great creative activities with many benefits, including mindfulness. Whether you cannot focus through a lecture, have test anxiety, or simply want to feel more positive, these methods have proven to be beneficial and should at least be considered as resources. As said by Molly Swan (Rockman, 2016), “Creativity is an opening that allows a response. It is a practice of patience, listening and just showing up”. Creativity is not limited to artistic abilities, drawing, or colouring, likewise mindfulness is not restricted to yoga

and meditation. There are unlimited resources people can use to practice creativity, and it is important that people find what works best for them.

References:

- Brown, S. (2014). *The Doodle Revolution: Unlock the Power to Think Differently*. *Kirkus Reviews*, 82(2).
- Conner, T., DeYoung, C., & Silvia, P. (2018). Everyday creative activity as a path to flourishing. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 13(2), 181-189.
- Flett, J., Lie, C., Riordan, B., Thompson, L., Conner, T., & Hayne, H. (2017). Sharpen your pencils: Preliminary evidence that adult coloring reduces depressive symptoms and anxiety. *Creativity Research Journal*, 29(4), 409-416.
- Forkosh, J., & Drake, J. (2017). Coloring versus drawing: Effects of cognitive demand on mood repair, flow, and enjoyment. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 34(2), 75-82.
- Kim, Y., & Zhong, C. (2017). Ideas rise from chaos: Information structure and creativity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 138, 15-27.
- Kaimal, G., Ayaz, H., Herres, J., Dieterich-Hartwell, R., Makwana, B., Kaiser, D., & Nasser, J. (2017). Functional near-infrared spectroscopy assessment of reward perception based on visual self-expression: Coloring, doodling, and free drawing. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 55, 85-92.
- Lebuda, I., Zabelina, D., & Karwowski, M. (2016). Mind full of ideas: A meta-analysis of the mindfulness-creativity link. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 93, 22-26.
- Malchiodi, Cathy. "Coloring, Doodling and Drawing: Recent Research." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 29 June 2017, www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/arts-and-health/201706/coloring-doodling-and-drawing-recent-research.
- Malchiodi, Cathy. "Doodling Your Way to a More Mindful Life." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 13 January 2014, www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/arts-and-health/201401/doodling-your-way-more-mindful-life.

Northcott, J., & Frein, S. (2017). The effect of drawing exercises on mood when negative affect is not induced. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 34(2), 92-95.

Rockman, Pat. "Mindfulness and Creativity Center for Mindfulness Studies." Center for Mindfulness Studies, 7 June 2016, www.mindfulnessstudies.com/creativity-and-mindfulness/.