



Mandala mindfulness

Drawing and colouring a mandala can help ease stress and anxiety, bring your life into balance and encourage creativity. So grab a crayon and get started, says Elli Jacobs

If you enjoyed colouring in as a child you may be wholeheartedly embracing the sudden rise in popularity of colouring-in books for grown-ups. They're taking over our bookshelves and promise a more balanced sense of self and relief from stress and anxiety.

However, using colouring and drawing as a meditation technique isn't a new concept. A specific type of drawing called a mandala has traditionally been used by Tibetan Buddhist monks and Native American Indians as a tool for meditation and healing. These days we think

of a mandala as a pattern created within a circle, with a spiritual or metaphysical representation. The word mandala comes from the classical Indian language of Sanskrit and means a 'circle'. Symbolically, circles represent eternity, unity, harmony and completeness. Flowers, the sun and moon are all examples of circles in nature.

So how can creating patterns within a circle help improve your emotional wellbeing and bring your life into balance? Here, three experts share their insights.

FINDING EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Mandalas represent and symbolise feelings that are relevant to you at the time and are perhaps difficult to put into words, says Carol Omer, life coach and author of *Big Girls Little Colouring Book: Healing Mandalas for Relaxation and Stress Relief*.

"Drawing your own mandala or just colouring in a pre-existing template allows for that expression to take shape," she explains. "Through this free-flowing creative

process you reconnect with your hands, which are an extension of your heart, your core emotional centre."

This, Omer says, allows the hands to take over creative expression from the mind, freeing emotional energy through the rhythmic movement, which colouring offers.

MINDFULNESS

Mandalas are an effective form of meditation and help focus the mind. As you sit down to create a mandala, the mind begins to slow down and when you add deep breathing your whole internal system begins to relax, which is of great benefit during times of crisis and uncertainty, says Omer.

"By adding an intention to the process, the mind finds focus on that theme and provides you with the space to observe your thoughts, as you become aware of the habitual thinking patterns that are running your life," she says.

You can create living mandalas. Drawing on nature for inspiration, Omer suggests walking a labyrinth or collecting objects from the natural environment such as feathers, shells, beads or seeds. This takes the form of an active meditation and is another way of concentrating the mind.

REDUCING STRESS AND ANXIETY

For people in an anxious state, research has shown that the act of colouring a mandala as well as focusing on the design can be useful in reducing anxiety.

"Colouring for mental health benefits us by allowing us to use both hemispheres of the

brain," says Lacy Mucklow, art therapist and author of *Color Me Stress-Free*. "It engages the analytical half by the management of colouring in the line drawings, and the creative half by making decisions about the colours and effects we want to use."

This has an overall relaxing effect, she explains, especially in the amygdala, the emotional centre of the brain that is responsible for emotion – particularly emotions related to stress and the fight or flight response. "By engaging with the colouring process the mind is able to take a break, which helps us feel calmer."

BRINGING WHOLENESS TO OUR LIVES

Mandalas help us to become aware of our character traits and so understand ourselves better. "The patterns of the mandala allow us to become aware of the patterns of our minds and how these shape our thoughts and feelings, which can be the cause of our suffering," explains Sydney-based psychotherapist Dr David Russell.

"Through the symbolic nature of the mandala we can open up to experience these mental and emotional states in a way where the rational mind

WHICH COLOURS AND PATTERNS SHOULD I CHOOSE?

The colours we use are based on individual preference. They can reflect our cultural heritage, be associated with personal memories, represent our emotional state at the time, or simply be our favourite colours.

Choosing to draw your own mandala or to colour in a pre-drawn template is intuitive, and is guided by which process you're drawn to in that specific moment, explains Omer. If you believe you are not creative and can't draw, colouring an existing pattern can help warm up your creative muscle and encourage you to go on and create your own mandala, she says.

transcends their literal meaning and how they impact our behaviour. This way, mandalas act as a guide towards deeper self-understanding and provide us with an opportunity for self-transformation and a broader experience of who we are," he says.

By engaging in the ongoing process of creating a mandala or walking a labyrinth we can attain fulfilment and freedom from suffering, receive spiritual nourishment, and feel like we are part of something bigger."



DRAWING YOUR OWN MANDALA

You can make a very simple mandala by tracing around a saucer and drawing a simple shape in the centre, such as a flower with four petals. On the top of each petal draw a circle and then between each petal, a heart shape.

Continue the pattern by drawing a diamond on top of each circle and then another circle on top of the diamond. You might like to measure the circle across the width and from top to bottom to get the exact centre or simply allow yourself to do a freehand drawing that focuses on rhythm rather than exact measurements. ◻

