Color Yourself Happy and Healthy

by Andrea Raischel

If you have read my articles in the past, you know I am a big fan of incorporating creative endeavors in your life to enhance health and wellbeing. When I first saw adult coloring books, however, my reaction was one of hesitation and apprehension. The designs seemed too busy, too controlling and not conducive for authentic creative expression. Recently, however, my original assessment was challenged. As full-time caregiver for my elderly mother with dementia, I have gained a new appreciation for the benefits of the adult coloring craze.

At first my mother wanted nothing to do with adult coloring books, thinking them too complicated. Over time, as she and I began painting figurines, molding clay and coloring in children’s books, her interest in the more complex designs grew. She will now sit quietly for hours filling in intricate mandalas, curved flowers, runaway stems and animal designs. For someone who claimed her hands “don’t work anymore,” gave up painting years ago, and no longer crochets, this activity has resurrected her creative passion. I have also joined in on the fun as I relax with her coloring my own creations. Coloring has taken the place of jigsaw puzzles as our new family favorite.

What I recognize from this experience, is that coloring actually has numerous physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual benefits. But the question is, why? What is happening in our brain and body that makes coloring so beneficial?

According to clinical psychologist [Scott M. Bea, Psy.D.](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/staff_directory/staff_display?doctorid=2070), it has everything to do with refocusing our attention. “Adult coloring requires modest attention focused outside of self-awareness. It is a simple activity that takes us outside ourselves. In the same way, cutting the lawn, knitting, or taking a Sunday drive can all be relaxing.”

It might seem crazy that something as simple as coloring could actually be beneficial for your health. But before you dismiss this craze as silly, ‘just another fad' or for people with too much time on their hands, check out what researchers are saying about its powerful benefits:

**Relieve Stress -** Coloring activities help relax the amygdala – the section of the brain that is activated in situations where you feel stressed or scared, and responsible for your fight or flight response. For those who experience continual stress, this part of their brain never shuts down causing numerous health problems.

Simultaneously, coloring activates the parts of the brain that support creativity. A [study](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ688443.pdf) conducted in 2005 by Nancy Curry and Tim Kasser found those who colored mandalas (circular designs with geometric patterns) reported drastically decreased anxiety levels. Coloring is especially useful for those who suffer from constant anxiety or experience anxiety as a side effect of disorders like PTSD or depression.

### Exercise the Mind - Coloring is considered a good ‘mind exercise’ because it utilizes both sides of the brain’s cerebral cortex– an important system of control as it promotes motor skills and coordination. When you color, you utilize the logic-based part of the brain through the choice of color or pattern. When you choose to pair or blend colors, you utilize the creative part of your brain.

### A Creative Meditation – Recent research has shown coloring quiets the chatter of the mind in much the same way as meditation. Psychologist Carl Jung believed coloring mandalas helped patients experience many of the benefits of meditation, like inner calm and self-realization. He used the practice of coloring to promote wellness among his patients, [noting that](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/arts-and-health/201003/cool-art-therapy-intervention-6-mandala-drawing) creating and coloring mandalas symbolized “a safe refuge of inner reconciliation and wholeness.”

### Thought Swapping – Plagued by worries about your bills, your health, your family, your future? Coloring requires focus that makes concentrating on other issues very difficult. When people color, negative thought patterns abate. Those thoughts are replaced with more positive thoughts when ‘colorists’ react favorably to the pairing of colors and the creative pattern.

### Make New Friends, Reduce Social Anxiety - Coloring has become so popular that coloring chapters are forming in some neighborhoods and cities. These clubs are particularly helpful for those who suffer from social anxiety, as they are able to interact meaningfully with new people without the pressure that often accompanies social gatherings. (Interested in joining one? Call me.)

### Walk the Middle Road for a While - Life today is a rat race of accomplishments, stress and competitions. Coloring is a refreshingly low-pressure activity. There is no way to win, lose or even play the game. Having an activity that takes the ‘middle road' -- that is not reliant on a time limit, a ‘correct’ answer or a competition -- is freeing. It can be incredibly restorative after a long day of work or stress.

### Build Mental Strength - Coloring can also [train our brains](https://www.pocketmindfulness.com/mindfulness-meditation-through-binaural-beats/) to be more efficient, logical and mentally strong. Leslie Marshall, a clinical counselor, says coloring “opens up the frontal lobe of the brain -- the home of organizing and problem solving – and focuses the mind.” Psychologist Gloria Martinez Ayala notes coloring is so efficient in activating the cerebral cortex that the pastime can delay or prevent illnesses associated with aging, like dementia.

### When is the last time you sat down and did something just for the fun of it? Coloring, like many other creative outlets, is just plain good for you. So, go ahead and grab a coloring book. Tap that inner child once again, and color yourself happy and healthy!

*The internet has numerous resources for adult coloring books and even free* ***downloadable pages. Check out a****mazon.com and Dover Publications for some great choices.*

 *Andrea Raischel, RN and Whole Self Wellness Coach, is now offering services at Pathways to Healing, including Stress Management, Body Talk – Symptom Analysis, Wellness Strategies and Prescription Arts. You can reach her at 970-903-6047 or by email at* *andrea.raischel@gmail.com**.*