

A Year Drawing: Art-Based Approaches as Mindfulness Practices

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Between April and October (2020), I have collaborated with colleagues in the College of Education in developing mindfulness practices that initially addressed social connection in times of physical distancing. After the killings of George Floyd's, Breonna Taylor, and many others victimized by police brutality last year, we've decided to shift the focus of the sessions to create a space for conversations and mindfulness meditation centered on racial healing. The sessions were intended to promote reflection on topics, concepts and ideas that became crucial to the understanding of systemic racism and its direct impact on Black lives. In addition to expanding my knowledge of mindfulness meditation, I've also engaged in art-based activities as mindfulness practices. So, why not combining the two in a meditative drawing format?

Mindfulness Research:

Research has shown that “mindfulness practice has been increasingly incorporated across educational settings” (Ergas, 2019, p. 340). Ergas argues, mindfulness practice must include three essential facets: (1) attention, (2) attitude, and (3) intention, which can be generalized to other contexts. Mindfulness is rooted in “attending the present moment as it is, stepping away from interpretation, elaboration, and deliberate meaning-making process” (Ergas, 2019, p. 343). According to Ergas, “Practicing mindfulness of ‘something’ means invoking the attitude of curiosity and inquisitiveness, applying them to the content of experience, while being the one who ‘has’ the experience” (p. 352). Another study demonstrated meditation enhances compassionate response by comparing compassionate behaviors of participants who practiced meditation and those who remained in a waiting-list (control group). The study demonstrated that participants of the experiment who practiced meditation, demonstrated compassionate behaviors towards others’ suffering, compared to those who were in the control group (Condon, Descordes, Miller, and DeSteno, 2013). Mindfulness interventions in the context of education has demonstrated effectiveness in mental health and well-being outcomes of students in late adolescence (Carsley, Khoury, & Heath, 2018).

Content - Art-Based Approaches for Mindfulness:

I have a friend in Brazil who often expresses his enjoyment about the arts by saying “Ah! A Arte.” His statement expresses his awe about the power of the arts as venues for joy, happiness, fulfillment, and healing. Why wouldn't that be true considering our most significant experiences in life include some connection with the arts? For instance, how powerful is music in reactivating our memories? It may bring back memories of someone we left behind, or that crush we had in high school, or our first dance with our loved one, or our mother's favorite song, and many more.

It is well known that research on Alzheimer's disease and dementia suggests emotional and behavior benefits as a result of listening and singing songs ([mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org)). Studies have

demonstrated that Music Therapy (MP), as adjunct method to treat Alzheimer's Disease (AD), "can protect cognition of AD especially autobiographical and episodic memories, psychomotor speed, executive function, and global cognition" (Fang, R., Ye, S., Huangfu, J., & Calimag, D. P., 2017). The [Alzheimer's Association](#) states that "Art projects can create a sense of accomplishment and purpose. They can provide the person with dementia—as well as caregivers—an opportunity for self expression." Another study shows the potential contributions art-based activities can make to dementia patients quality of life, with impact that can be direct by bringing emotional release, or indirect as it also gives caregivers a stronger sense of purpose (Schneider J., 2018).

In the field of psychiatry, Carl Jung incorporated art-based approaches to his analytical method. According to Jung, there is empirical proof that drawing mandalas has considerable therapeutic effect on those engaged in this practice. Jung argues, mandalas "often represent very bold attempts to see and put together apparently irreconcilable opposites and bridge over apparently hopeless splits" (Jung, C. G., 1972, p. 5). Jung emphasized the power of mandalas in his "active imagination" approach and stated that "Even the mere attempt in this direction usually has a healing effect, but only when it is done spontaneously. Nothing can be expected from artificial repetition or a deliberate imitation of such images." (p. 5)

In the field of education, many programs have been exploring art-based mindfulness approaches to cultivate awareness, improve attention, self-regulation, and social-emotional learning among K-12 students ([Mindfulartssf.org](#), [theartofeducation.edu](#), [creativeresilience.org](#)). In the realm of therapy, Kuhnke (2020) in her autobiographical inquiry examined the benefits of art-based activities, such as journaling, doodling, and drawing during her own healing journey through self-engagement in art-based therapy.

I am neither a medical doctor nor a psychiatrist. I am an artist, who have always found in arts-based activities, a way out of emotional distress. I am a "retired" set designer, special education teacher, and currently higher education administrator working in the areas of assessment and diversity. As everyone else in the world, I have also experienced 2020 with high levels of anxiety. To address my personal unrest, I have engaged in mindfulness practices as tools for healing. In addition to mindfulness meditation, I have also developed a routine of drawing daily to the point I realized that I have been using art-based activities as mindfulness practice since I was very young. I remember locking myself into hours devoted to some sort of art-based project. Painting, drawing, Paper Mache art, photography, learning an instrument, jewelry, and dancing were some examples of everything I had done in my life in times of crisis.

In 2017, when I was finishing my doctoral dissertation, I engaged in 3D artwork and experimented with concrete for the first time. I used pretty much everything I had in the house to cast concrete, plastic containers, bottles, toilette paper rolls, milk jugs, and anything else with a form that called my attention. Years later I had the realization that the concrete was such a powerful metaphor that illustrated my desire to make my graduation literally "concrete," which I did.

Between April and October of 2020, I have collaborated with two faculty members in my college in developing online mindfulness practices that initially focused on social connection in times of physical distancing. However, after the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others victimized by police brutality last year, we've decided to shift the focus of the sessions to create a space for conversations and mindfulness meditation centered on racial healing. The sessions were intended to promote reflection on topics, concepts and ideas that became crucial in developing an understanding of systemic racism and its direct impact on Black lives. This evolving work was founded on Ruth King's Mindful of Race. King's work is centered on racial trauma and healing through mindfulness meditation focusing on kindness as a "weapon of mass healing."

While I have been developing new skills in the area of mindfulness, I've also continuously used drawing as a meditative activity throughout the year of 2020. So, why not combining the two? I recently engaged in preliminary research on Art-based mindfulness. Through this work, I hope to share my own practices in combination with other artists' that have been exploring multiple techniques with the same purposes (i.e., releasing creativity in multiple forms - writing, drawing, painting, and more). I am currently researching art-based methods as venues for mindfulness practices with the intent to extend my personal quest to others, while improving my own practice. I hope to share the benefits I have been experiencing as I progress throughout my journey for healing and self-discovery.

Purpose:

The purpose of this workshop is offering participants the opportunity to make time and space to reflect on professional goals and aspirations through the use of mindfulness drawing as a tool to develop awareness and sense of purpose within a diverse workspace.

Outcomes:

At the conclusion of this activity, participants will be able to:

- Identify road blocks on professional development through intentional reflection.
- Perform mindfulness drawing activities as tools to improve awareness (of self and others) and develop a sense of purpose.
- Practice compassion with themselves and others through accepting vulnerability and avoiding judgement.

Material:

Participants should have a white paper notepad (any size) and a micron pen or sharpie (or any other pen available to use), Color pencils are optional.

Level of Difficulty:

Beginner – HR, general, leadership

Introduction:

Script:

Hello, my name is Maria Leite. I am currently researching Arts-based mindfulness practices to support mental health. When I was in the process of finishing my dissertation, I remember spending a whole weekend drawing freehand mandalas. It was a totally meditative intuitive work. Once I finished them, I felt the need to develop a further understanding of what “drawing mandalas” meant. So, I got Carl Jung’s book, *Mandala Symbolism* (1972) to deep my understanding on the meaning of the activity I had immersed myself. In this book, Jung mainly analyzes drawings from his patients and reflects on symbolisms emerging from this spontaneous process.

Some things I found in the initial readings:

- Mandala means “circle” in Sanskrit
- For Tibetan Buddhism, “the [mandala] figure has the significance of a ritual instrument (*yantra*), whose purpose is to assist meditation and concentration.” (p. 3)
- According to Jung, there is empirical proof that drawing mandalas has considerable therapeutic effect on those engaged in this practice. Jung argues, mandalas “often represent very bold attempts to see and put together apparently irreconcilable opposites and bridge over apparently hopeless splits.” (p. 5)
- “Even the mere attempt in this direction usually has a healing effect, but only when it is done spontaneously. Nothing can be expected from artificial repetition or a deliberate imitation of such images.” (p. 5)

I thought about *transitions* as a prompt for this session, considering a focus on mindful working practices. However, you may want to focus on any type of transition you judge relevant to you at this moment.

There is no right or wrong in this activity. We all have our inner-critics, which mostly contribute in feeding our impostor syndrome, our insecurities. Let’s face our inner critic and accept it is okay to be vulnerable in this space. To be vulnerable as we learn about ourselves, about what we know and what we are still learning. This is also an exercise on compassion with ourselves and with others.

Let’s look at the paper and before we start let’s work on a brief body scan. We want to find our center.

Let’s find a comfortable seat on a chair preferably. Close your eyes (you may turn off your camera). If you are on a chair, adjust your back, be aware of you body, your movements, your hands, you breath. Breathe in and breathe out.

Focus on your feet on the floor, moving up to your legs, how your knees are bent and how the

back of your thighs touch the chair. Adjust your lower back, your spine, your belly, your arms and hands. Rest your hands on your thighs. Breathe in and breathe out. Gently move your head from one side to the other or in circles to massage the neck. Roll your shoulders to front and to the back. Gently, open your eyes as you continue to breathe.

Now get your pen, pencil, marker and look at your paper. Think about you positioned at the center of this mandala. Draw a small circle that represents you, or where you are at the moment, at the center of your paper.

We will work on this mandala from inside out as a way to understand each circle as a transition within this cycle. As you draw the center of your mandala, you will start drawing other circles that expand this center. Think about each concentric circle as a step in transitioning to another stage. Do it intuitively, try to avoid rationalizing. Take a deep breath. Breathe in and breathe out.

Try to focus your attention to the drawing and be aware to what is around you. Perceive sounds, light, temperature as you add circles to the paper. If you feel your mind is wondering, just bring it back. This is part of the exercise. If you want to set an intention for this mandala, feel free to incorporate words to your drawing. These words may reflect the way you feel, your emotions, your intentions for today, or for the next couple of days. Do these emotions have a shape? A color? A pattern? You decide and you are free to represent them the way you want within your mandala.

Remember to breathe intentionally as you draw. You may want to draw some of the movement of your breath in your mandala. These representations of your breathing may be presented as lines, circles, curves, waves that go up as you inhale and down as you exhale.

Gently breathe in and breathe out and look at your art. Ask yourself what does it tell you? Does it reflect your feelings, emotions at the present moment?

You may want to take some time and revisit this mandala to make some notes about the process. The mandala activity may serve as a good prompt for journaling. Once you collect some mandalas, you may compare them and develop some understanding of your emotions when you were working on each mandala. This is a great activity that you may perform using various prompts as you judge appropriate.

Resources:

UF Mindfulness: <https://mindfulness.ufl.edu/index.php/resources/mindfulness-in-education/>

Research:

Condon, P., Desbordes, G., Miller, W. B., & DeSteno, D. (2013). Meditation increases compassionate responses to suffering. *Psychological Science*, 24(10), 2125–2127.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797613485603>

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- King, R. (2018). *Mindful of race: Transforming racism from the inside out*.
- Kuhnke, J. L. (2020). Art-based activities and adverse events: An autobiographical inquiry. *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*, 10, 82-92. Retrieved from <http://www.ejgrp.org/index.php/ejgrp/article/view/98>
- Schneider J. (2018). The Arts as a Medium for Care and Self-Care in Dementia: Arguments and Evidence. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 15(6), 1151. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15061151>

Activities:

Mindful Creative Muse Website: <https://mindfulcreativemuse.com/>

Mindful Creative Muse YouTube Channel:

https://www.youtube.com/c/MindfulCreativeMuse?sub_confirmation=1

Self-Compassion Exercises: <https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>

The Nap Ministry: <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/about/>

Books:

CG Jung – Mandala Symbolism (1972)

Ruth King – Mindful of Race: <https://ruthking.net>

Blog:

Jung Society of Utah: <https://jungutah.com/blog/mandalas-symbols-of-the-self-2/>

Additional Resources:

UF Arts in Medicine Resources: <https://arts.ufl.edu/academics/center-for-arts-in-medicine/research-database/>

Journal of Korean Medical Science: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5852419/>

