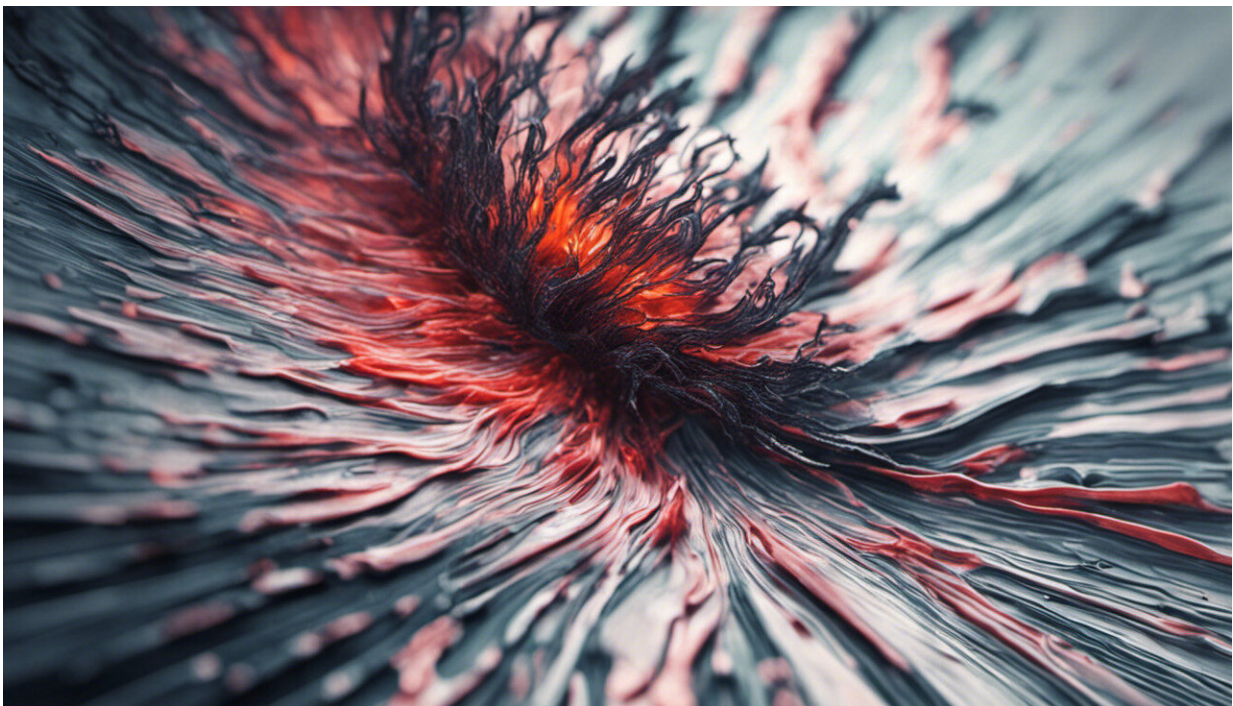


Anxiety and stress really can be lowered through coloring: Here's what research has found

September 19 2023, by Michael Mantzios and Kyriaki Giannou



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When we think of the best ways to reduce stress, we might picture activities such as exercise or meditation. But while these pursuits certainly work for some people, they aren't the only techniques you can use to reduce stress.

Over the past couple of years, adult coloring books have also become a popular hobby for people looking to relax. Although the activity might be simple, our research has shown coloring really can be an effective way of reducing stress and improving well-being. We've shown that coloring is an easy way to lower anxiety and reduce burnout—especially when combined with mindfulness practices.

[Mindfulness](#) is the deliberate [practice](#) of paying close attention to what's happening in the [present moment](#), without making judgements about any thoughts, emotions or distractions that happen.

Some people use meditation techniques during mindfulness to help them focus—such as concentrating on their breathing to help them stay in the present moment. The act of coloring can also work in a similar way by helping people stay focused on the present. So, we ran a series of studies to see if coloring mindfully could improve people's well-being.

In [one study](#), we investigated what effect coloring paired with mindfulness had on the well-being of university students. We divided 72 participants into two groups. One group received a coloring page and were told how to practice mindfulness while coloring.

Instructions included guidance on relaxing their body, focusing their attention on the task and sensation of coloring, and what to do if they found their mind was wandering. The other group simply colored without any mindfulness guidance.

After the session, the group with mindfulness instructions reported feeling less anxious and more focused after coloring. The non-mindfulness group did not experience similar benefits. This suggests that using mindfulness while coloring can help to lower anxiety. However, some people didn't like having instructions while coloring, which reduced the benefits of mindful coloring.

In another experiment, we investigated what effect using videos to [teach mindful coloring](#) had on 35 teachers from the UK. Participants were split into two groups. One group was given a daily mindful coloring activity for a total of five days. The other group continued with their working week as usual.

The teachers who practiced mindful coloring reported feeling less stressed and more mindful and resilient. Learning how to color mindfully before the activity may have helped participants to reap the best rewards from it.

But a question that still remained after our research was whether mindful coloring offers similar benefits as traditional meditation practices. This is why we conducted another experiment, which compared [coloring to meditation](#).

We looked at mindful coloring versus a specific type of meditation practice called [loving-kindness meditation](#). Typically just used during meditation, this helps cultivate benevolence by focusing on sending good wishes or thoughts to yourself and others, and is shown to improve [well-being and reduce stress](#).

We divided 180 participants into two groups. One group received a coloring page and were told how to practice loving-kindness coloring. The other group was taught how to practice loving-kindness meditation.

The results showed that coloring and meditating with loving-kindness helped people equally well to be more mindful and less anxious. This means that mindful coloring may work just as well as [meditation](#) in reducing anxiety.

Being mindful

Overall, our research shows that coloring can be a great way to relax and feel better—especially when combined with mindfulness. This may be because mindfulness reminds people to stay present in the moment and overcome feelings and thoughts that cause them stress. [Research in mindfulness](#) indicates it can also have many other [health benefits](#), including reducing pain and even insomnia.

If you want to try mindful coloring yourself, start by finding a quiet and comfortable place where you can focus without distractions. Choose your materials wisely. Having too many colors may be distracting. Abstract coloring pages can be more useful in allowing you to focus on the activity, rather than choosing logical colors for objects—such as trees or eyes.

While you're coloring, observe your thoughts. If they wander off, or any other thoughts or feelings come up, simply let them go. Refocus on the colors transferring onto the page or your hand movements. It's all about being present, so every time your mind wanders off, let it go and refocus on coloring.

If coloring isn't your thing, [research](#) shows that mindfulness can be used alongside a range of other activities and still confer well-being and mental health benefits. For example, [drawing](#) can help people to manage their anxiety, as can [knitting](#). Even mindfully doing simple chores such as [washing the dishes](#) can be effective. [Walking](#) can also help to reduce stress.

Whatever activity you choose, no matter how simple, can still have a positive effect on well-being if you focus on being in the moment.

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