



**‘There is a child in all of us, whatever our age. Colouring is relaxing and you can thoroughly lose yourself in it’**

Cathy Acres, Bognor Regis WI, West Sussex Federation

# Colour therapy

Why not sharpen your pencils and try your hand at the colouring-in craze?

Words HATTIE PARISH Illustration SUZY ROSS



Works of art by (from left): Julie Clay, Cookridge Crumpets WI, West Yorkshire Federation; Pam Bugler, Elburton WI, Devon Federation; Gillian Mills, Onslow Village WI, Surrey Federation

**T**o some, a row of colouring pencils is perfection. The array of hues lined up in their reassuringly strict fashion brings a sense of calm and eager anticipation. I am not one of those people. As I stare down at my box-fresh set I can't help but feel rather juvenile.

I select a dark violet. Maybe this will do it. Cautiously, I shade in a flower petal amid the intricate pattern on the page. Nothing. I finish the flower, adding yellow to the centre and varying tones of green to the leaves. Has it happened yet? Am I there? Am I, the over-thinker of champions, mindful? If anything, I'm feeling anxious – I've got a to-do list as long as the *Harry Potter* saga and this really isn't helping. But it seems I'm in a minority.

Unless you've avoided all stationery shops for the past few years, you've probably heard of adult colouring. Kick-started by illustrators such as Johanna Basford and Millie Marotta, the craze has flourished as the quest to achieve mindfulness occupies the nation's headspace.

Mindfulness is a mental state, achieved by focusing the mind on the present moment, rather than letting it wander to your fantasy holiday or what you might have for dinner tonight – or your ever-pressing-to-do list. The idea is that by acknowledging feelings and thoughts moment by moment, rather than hiding from them, we have space to consider and act upon them calmly. Mindfulness is an ancient form of meditation, but colouring has come to the rescue for those of us lacking in Zen.

'Being creative means I can give full rein to my imagination, shutting out any distractions,' says Carole Harradence, Box Hill Evening WI, Surrey Federation. 'It's almost like meditating – you clear your mind of everything around you and focus on making a connection with your creative side.'

The concentration required to stay within the lines and select complementary colours is important. 'Focusing on an activity can be a great way to calm the mind, occupying it in the moment where it can't dwell on the past or worry about the future,' says Cal Strode, spokesperson for the Mental Health Foundation. 'Absorbing activities such as colouring can be a good route into accessing

a mindful state, but it is important to distinguish between activities that cultivate a mindful state and mindfulness as a practice, which has been proven to provide long-term benefits.'

## Stress relief

The success of adult colouring is also put down to its place in the so-called 'Peter Pan market'. As we hurry about our stressful, increasingly digital lives, we search for nostalgia: for a time when things were simpler and firmly paper-based.

Cal adds: 'Given that 59% of adults in Britain say they are more stressed today than they were five years ago, it's no wonder we're looking for new ways to feel calm and reduce stress. Adult colouring books have been reported to be selling faster than cookbooks in France.'

Pam Stathers, Bridgwater Firecrackers WI, Somerset Federation, colours because 'it can take you back to a place where time was very different – innocent and child-like.'

We're not talking fluffy bunnies and a house with a smoking chimney. Books boast sophisticated patterns, complex geometric structures and minuscule details. Popular designs include mandalas, botanic

**‘As an ex-smoker, I find it a great help in overcoming my cravings’**

Susan Williams, Nantygroes WI, Sir Gâr – Carmarthenshire Federation

illustrations and labyrinthine landscapes. 'It's not just for kids,' says Steph Edwards, Kineton WI, Warwickshire Federation, 'it's therapeutic and a good stress buster.'

Colouring can even help you to kick bad habits. Susan Williams,

Nantygroes WI, Sir Gâr – Carmarthenshire Federation, took it up after quitting smoking. 'I find it a great help in overcoming cravings and it distracts me in the evenings when I seem to be at my weakest point.'

Gill Bridge, Marina WI, Avon Federation, stumbled across colouring: 'A Guiding friend and I have an annual weekend trying out craft ideas to do with the girls in our Brownie and Guide Units. Suffering from a hangover on the Sunday morning I couldn't face anything requiring too much brain power or dexterity so picked up an adult colouring book and became addicted.'

However, there are some sceptics. Vivien Rawlinson, Warlingham Evening WI,

**Below, from left: Rhoda Crickmay and Betty Warner, both of Slapton WI, and Chris Evans of Flackwell Heath Evening WI, all Buckinghamshire Federation, try their hand at the new artform at the High Wycombe HQ**



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Surrey Federation, 'got bored with it very quickly,' and Dawn Haley, Minster Lovell WI, Oxfordshire Federation, experienced the opposite of the intended effect: 'I did not feel relaxed while doing it – I was anxious to get on with something else. I am a busy person and I felt it was a time waster.'

Pam Bugler, Elburton WI, Devon Federation, says people can be embarrassed to admit their hobby. When it was discussed at a committee meeting 'it was met with quite a bit of amazement as some of those present considered it immature.'

'Obviously it's not for everyone, but it's surprising just how many people do colour but don't let on to others about it. When I defended it, a couple of other ladies admitted that they also colour. It's almost like a naughty little secret.'

Secret or not, adult colouring is something of a hit. The idea has been used for WI competitions and sub-groups are popping up across the country.

For some it's more than a relaxing pastime. 'I had breast cancer 22 years ago and suffered from depression after my operations,' says Alison Williams of Lacock WI, Wiltshire Federation. 'Then a few years ago, I was diagnosed with ME. This has not stopped me living to the full but occasionally I need a quiet time, so I sharpen my pencils and sit in total peace to empty my head. Colouring is the best therapy.'

### Healing powers

Christine Quayle of Bradda Head WI, Isle of Man Federation, says it acts as 'a supplementary kind of pain relief' for her Parkinson's disease.

Victoria Burton of Great Bookham Belles WI, Surrey Federation, was thrilled when adult colouring came on the scene, as she'd been making do with children's books as a way to help with mental health difficulties: 'It is now recognised how therapeutic art can be,' she says. 'It's such a healthy hobby.'

Other members have found solace.

Karen O'Sullivan of Tea and Tarts WI, West Yorkshire Federation, says: 'I started using colouring books as a way to try and de-stress at the start of this year, not long before I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety.'

'I'm having treatment to help with this, but even my therapist agrees that these are excellent forms of therapy in their own right. While it might not help with your issues, it does occupy your mind and blocks out the negative thoughts for a while – and at the end of it you have a pretty cool picture.'

The restorative effects of colouring have also offered a degree of relief during

**'I suffer with anxiety, and part of this condition is being unable to stop repetitive thoughts and over-analysing. When I'm like this I need something intricate to distract my mind, and colouring helps me to focus and calm down'**

Helen Grant of West End Girls WI, Cheshire Federation

bereavement. Paula Milton, Sawbridgeworth Evening WI, Hertfordshire Federation, lost her younger sister in February from cancer.

'Apart from her husband, I had been her main carer,' she says. 'Her death has left me absolutely bereft and so full of sorrow and sadness. As each day passed I missed her more. The evenings were the worst time as I live alone. I could not focus and was not interested in watching the TV or reading.'

'My daughter bought me a colouring book and pencils and I have found this to be so therapeutic. I have always been creative and this activity required no effort – yet with each little bit I did, I was watching something grow. I could pick it up and put it down, my concentration increased, and my evenings passed with fewer bouts of tears.'

Two years ago, the husband of Fiona Ritchie of Grindleton WI, Lancashire Federation, was diagnosed with stage three bowel cancer. 'I was introduced to adult colouring books by my daughter. She had rushed home from university to be with us after the final scan. We sat for hours together at the hospital, our stress levels sky high, but she had a little butterfly colouring pad and started passing me pages to do, sharing her pens. When she returned to university, she handed me the pad and pens and said "You need this more than me".'

'With colouring, I could be still and calm, rather than bustling about unhelpfully, so as not to disturb the patient. I could be fully present, but mindful. I am quite sure that colouring those butterflies helped me steady my blood pressure and be fully there for my husband over the remaining six weeks. He passed away just before Christmas last year.'

'About a month later, I found those pages of coloured butterflies and I stored them safely with my other mementoes. Friends have since given me colouring books, which provide comfort on wakeful nights. I will



**'It brings out the inner creative flair of our long-passed childhoods'**

Rhona Liddle, Baldock & Clothall WI, Hertfordshire Federation

always be grateful for them as they offered such an oasis of calm.'

Illustrator Johanna Basford, whose books helped to spark the craze, says she's 'on a mission to make the world a happier and more creative place through colouring.'

It clearly works for some, particularly those who suffer from anxiety or illness, or merely need a little light relief. **WI**



## Celebrate the WI's diversity by colouring in our picture

Suzy Ross (left) is an illustrator who lives and works in Reigate, Surrey; she is a member of Reigate Evening WI, Surrey Federation. She has loved art ever since she was a child and went on to study it at the University of Roehampton. With two 'gloriously active boys' to look after, she now works from home as a freelance illustrator. Please tweet your efforts to @wilifemagazine

