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REVIEW ARTICLE

Mandala Therapy: What It is & What it offers?

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ABSTRACT

Mandala therapy, derived from ancient spiritual and cultural traditions, utilizes intricate geometric patterns known as mandalas to promote physical and mental wellness. Rooted in the Sanskrit word for "circle", mandalas symbolize unity and wholeness. This therapy encompasses mindfulness, self-expression, spiritual connection, and cognitive engagement to nurture holistic well-being. By creating and coloring mandalas, individuals enter a meditative state that induces relaxation, reduces stress, and fosters emotional release. Through this process, they gain insight into their emotions and experiences, enhancing emotional resilience and self-awareness. Moreover, mandalas symbolize unity with the universe, fostering inner peace and spiritual well-being. Additionally, mandala therapy enhances cognitive function, improving focus, concentration, and problem-solving skills. Overall, mandala therapy offers a multifaceted approach to well-being, empowering individuals to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and leading to enhanced resilience and fulfillment.

Keywords: *Mandala therapy, Mindfulness, Self-expression, Spiritual connection, Cognitive engage*

1. INTRODUCTION

Mandala therapy, derived from the ancient Sanskrit word for "circle", has roots in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, symbolizing the wholeness and harmony of the vast universe (Mansilla, 2020; Orfanidis, 2020; Xie & Wang, 2021). Originating in India, mandalas were used as spiritual and ritual symbols, aiding meditation and focusing the mind (Davis, 2016; Xie & Wang, 2021). In Tibetan Buddhism, monks created intricate sand mandalas as a form of meditation and a transient representation of the cosmos (Davis, 2016; Lopes, 2020).

In contemporary psychology, Carl Jung (b.1875-d.1961) introduced mandalas as a therapeutic tool, seeing them as representations of the self and the psyche's structure. He believed that creating or contemplating mandalas could facilitate individuation, the process of integrating one's personality (Jung, 1969, 2017). This concept gained traction in art therapy, where clients create mandalas to explore their inner thoughts and emotions. The act of coloring or drawing mandalas can promote relaxation, mindfulness, and self-awareness (Xie & Wang, 2021).

Today, mandala therapy is widely used in various therapeutic settings, including counseling, psychotherapy, and stress reduction programs (Kim et al., 2018; Liu, 2021; Xie & Wang, 2021). It is employed to address a range of mental health issues such as anxiety (Campenni & Hartman, 2020), depression (Gürçan & Turan, 2021), PTSD (Gbur, 2017; Stalin & Joy, 2018), and addiction recovery (Scott & Ross, 2006; Ziert, 2015). The repetitive patterns and symmetrical designs of mandalas can soothe the mind, reduce stress, and promote emotional healing (Xie & Wang, 2021). Moreover, the process of creating mandalas encourages self-expression, creativity, and introspection (Henderson, 2010).

In addition to traditional paper and pencil methods, digital platforms and apps offer accessible ways to engage in mandala therapy. This modern adaptation allows individuals to explore mandalas wherever they are, further democratizing its therapeutic benefits (Jones, 2018).

In essence, mandala therapy has evolved from its ancient spiritual roots to become a versatile psychological tool, offering individuals a means to explore their inner world, promote self-discovery, and foster mental well-being in today's fast-paced world.

2. SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF MANDALA THERAPY

As mentioned in the beginning, mandala therapy, rooted in ancient spiritual traditions, holds profound significance across various cultures, particularly in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American traditions (Xie & Wang, 2021). At its core, a mandala represents the universe, symbolizing wholeness, harmony, and the interconnectedness of all things. The spiritual implications of mandala therapy are deeply ingrained in its symbolism, process, and therapeutic effects (see Andrea & Neel, 2011, for detail).

To reiterate here once again, the word “mandala” originates from Sanskrit, meaning “circle” or “center” (Mansilla, 2020; Orfanidis, 2020; Xie & Wang, 2021). In therapy, creating and interacting with mandalas serves as a meditative practice, facilitating self-expression, self-discovery, and inner healing. As individuals engage in the process of designing or coloring mandalas, they embark on a journey of introspection (Liang et al., 2020), tapping into their subconscious mind (Jung, 1969, 2017; Munthe & Molino, 2015) and accessing deeper layers of self-awareness (Quinn, 2014; Wu, 2017).

Each element within a mandala holds symbolic significance, reflecting various aspects of existence. The circular shape represents the cyclical nature of life, eternity, and the universe's endless flow. Symmetry and balance within the mandala mirror the equilibrium sought in spiritual and psychological well-being (Beaucaire, 2012; George, 1999). Mandalas often incorporate geometric patterns, sacred symbols, and vibrant colors, each carrying unique meanings and energies.

Moreover, the act of creating or coloring mandalas induces a state of mindfulness, promoting relaxation, concentration, and stress reduction (Wang & Chia, in press). By immersing oneself in the intricate details of the mandala, individuals quiet the chatter of the mind, cultivating a sense of peace and tranquility. This meditative process fosters a deeper connection with the self, allowing for emotional release, insight, and personal transformation (Quinn, 2014).

In spiritual traditions, mandalas are regarded as tools for meditation, prayer, and spiritual growth (Liu et al., 2020). They serve as visual representations of cosmic order and divine unity, guiding practitioners on a path of self-realization and enlightenment. Mandalas are often used in rituals, ceremonies, and sacred practices to invoke healing, protection, and spiritual awakening.

Overall, mandala therapy encompasses a holistic approach to healing, integrating spiritual, psychological, and creative elements (Khurana & Wadhawan, 2023; Liu et al., 2020). Through the creation and contemplation of mandalas, individuals embark on a transformative journey of self-exploration, empowerment, and spiritual awakening, aligning with the universal principles of harmony, balance, and interconnectedness.

3. TYPES OF MANDALA THERAPY

Mandala therapy encompasses various forms, each offering unique benefits for emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Below are selected six forms of mandala therapy along with their respective descriptions and purposes:

1. Coloring Mandalas:

What it is: Coloring mandalas involves filling intricate geometric patterns with colors. This form of therapy encourages mindfulness, focusing attention on the present moment. It promotes relaxation, reduces stress, and enhances creativity.

Purpose: It is to achieve a meditative state, calming the mind and relieving tension (Liu, 2021; Xie & Wang, 2021).

2. Mandala Meditation:

What it is: Mandala meditation involves gazing at a mandala image while focusing on the breath or a mantra. The practitioner allows thoughts to arise and pass without attachment, fostering a sense of inner peace and clarity.

Purpose: It is to deepen self-awareness, cultivate concentration, and connect with one's spiritual essence (Bühnemann, 2017, 2020).

3. Sand Mandala Creation:

What it is: Sand mandalas are intricate designs created by pouring colored sand onto a surface. This form of therapy is often practiced in Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The process is highly ceremonial, with each grain of sand representing impermanence.

Purpose: It is to cultivate patience, impermanence acceptance, and detachment from material possessions (Alt, 2020).

4. Mandala Dance Therapy:

What it is: Mandala dance therapy involves moving the body in circular patterns, often to rhythmic music. Participants express their emotions, release energy blockages, and connect with their inner selves through movement.

Purpose: It is to promote physical well-being, emotional expression, and spiritual integration (Pasc, 2016).

5. Mandala Art Therapy:

What it is: Mandala art therapy involves creating mandalas using various artistic mediums such as drawing, painting, or collage. Participants express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through symbolic imagery. The process encourages self-expression, self-discovery, self-healing and personal growth (Khurana & Wadhawan, 2023; Liu et al., 2020; Sampsson, 2019).

Purpose: It is to access unconscious emotions, explore inner conflicts, and foster healing and transformation.

6. Digital Mandala Therapy:

What it is: Digital mandala therapy involves creating mandalas using digital tools such as software or apps. This form of therapy combines technology with creativity, offering a modern approach to mandala creation.

Purpose: It is to engage individuals in a therapeutic artistic process, promoting relaxation, mindfulness, and stress reduction (Donahue, 2017; Kim & Choi, 2023).

Each form of mandala therapy offers a pathway to self-discovery, healing, and personal growth. Whether through coloring, meditation, dance, or art, mandalas serve as powerful tools for holistic well-being.

4. HOW MANDALA THERAPY CAN BE APPLIED IN EDUCATIONAL THERAPY

The author of this article, being a registered dialogic-diagnostic arts therapist, is also a practicing educational therapist in private practice. She firmly believes that mandala therapy and educational therapy (see Chua & Chia, 2023a, 2023b, for detail on educational therapy) for students with special needs can complement each other in several ways, offering holistic support for cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. Below are her points of contention in support of incorporating mandala therapy into educational therapy.

Firstly, mandala therapy provides a creative outlet for self-expression and emotional processing. Students with special needs may struggle with verbal communication or emotional regulation, making it difficult to express themselves effectively. Mandala therapy offers a non-verbal means of expression, allowing students to communicate their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through art. This can be particularly beneficial in educational therapy sessions where traditional verbal communication may be challenging.

Moreover, mandala therapy promotes relaxation and mindfulness, which are essential for effective learning and emotional regulation. Many students with special needs experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety, which can impede their ability to focus and engage in educational activities. Mandala therapy encourages students to focus on the present moment, reducing stress and promoting a sense of calmness that can enhance their receptiveness to educational interventions.

Additionally, mandala therapy fosters cognitive development by stimulating creativity, problem-solving skills, and spatial awareness. Engaging in the creation of mandalas requires students to make decisions about colors, patterns, and shapes, which can enhance their cognitive flexibility and executive functioning skills. These cognitive benefits can complement the goals of educational therapy by improving students' ability to process information, make connections, and solve problems in academic and social contexts.

Furthermore, mandala therapy promotes self-awareness and self-esteem, which are crucial for academic success and social integration. As students create mandalas and reflect on their meaning, they gain insights into their own thoughts, feelings, and strengths. This self-awareness can empower students to advocate for their needs, set realistic goals, and develop positive attitudes towards learning and self-improvement.

To sum up, this author reiterates that mandala therapy can be a valuable adjunct to educational therapy for students with special needs, offering a holistic approach that addresses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of development. By incorporating mandala therapy into intervention programs, educators and therapists can enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of their support services, promoting the holistic well-being and academic success of students with special needs.

5. HOW MANDALA THERAPY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO OVERALL WELL-BEING

Being rooted in ancient spiritual and cultural traditions, mandala therapy offers a holistic approach to promoting physical and mental wellness (Liu, 2021). The circle-related meaning of the Sanskrit word “mandala” refers to the symbolic representation of wholeness and unity. When utilized as a therapeutic tool, mandalas serve as intricate geometric patterns, often created and colored by individuals during meditative sessions, and using this form of meditative therapy can contribute to overall well-being of a person, be they a child, an adolescent or an adult.

Firstly, engaging in mandala creation fosters mindfulness and relaxation (Gray-Foti, 2019). The intricate designs require focus and attention to detail, drawing practitioners into a state of deep concentration akin to meditation. This meditative state induces relaxation, reduces stress, and lowers cortisol levels, promoting physical relaxation and alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression (Bühnemann, 2017, 2020).

Secondly, mandala therapy encourages self-expression and creativity (Henderson, 2010; Holbrook Jr & Comer, 2017). As individuals design and color their mandalas, they tap into their subconscious minds, allowing emotions, thoughts, and experiences to surface freely. This process facilitates emotional release, self-awareness, and self-discovery, empowering individuals to explore and express their innermost feelings and thoughts. Through creative expression, individuals gain insight into their emotions and experiences, fostering emotional resilience and promoting mental well-being (Henderson, 2010; Holbrook Jr & Comer, 2017).

Moreover, mandalas symbolize unity, harmony, and interconnectedness. As individuals immerse themselves in the creation and contemplation of mandalas, they connect with a sense of wholeness and balance within themselves and the universe. This connection cultivates a profound sense of inner peace, acceptance, and spiritual well-being, transcending the boundaries of the physical body and mind.

Furthermore, mandala therapy can enhance cognitive function and problem-solving skills. The process of designing and coloring mandalas stimulates the brain, improving focus, concentration, and cognitive flexibility. This cognitive engagement promotes mental agility, enhances memory retention, and sharpens analytical skills, contributing to overall cognitive well-being.

In summary, mandala therapy offers a multifaceted approach to promoting physical and mental wellness (Liu, 2021). Through mindfulness, self-expression, spiritual connection, and cognitive engagement, mandala therapy nurtures holistic well-being, fostering relaxation, emotional balance, and cognitive vitality. Integrating mandala therapy into daily practice can empower individuals to cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves, leading to enhanced resilience and a greater sense of fulfillment in life.

6. LIMITATIONS OF MANDALA THERAPY AND HOW TO CIRCUMVENT THEM

Mandala therapy, while effective for many individuals, does have its limitations, too (see Zhang, , Liu, & Huang, 2024, for detail). According to the recent study done by Zhang, Liu and Huang, 2024), “the therapeutic benefits of using mandalas for improving the psychological well-being of patients are uncertain” (p. 25). The authors went on to argue that “[M]ore well-designed and high-quality studies in the field of MA are needed in the future” (Zhang, Liu, & Huang, 2024, p. 25).

One obvious limitation that the author of this paper has noted is the accessibility of mandala therapy. Not everyone finds drawing or creating mandalas enjoyable or therapeutic. Additionally, for those with limited artistic skills or physical disabilities, the process of creating intricate designs may be frustrating rather than therapeutic. Another limitation is that mandala therapy may not be suitable for individuals who struggle with abstract thinking or who have difficulty expressing themselves visually. Furthermore, some people may find it challenging to connect with the symbolism of mandalas, hindering their ability to derive therapeutic benefits.

To circumvent these limitations, this author suggested that several strategies can be employed. Firstly, offering alternative forms of expression, such as coloring pre-designed mandalas or engaging in other creative activities like journaling or collage-making, can provide therapeutic benefits to individuals who may struggle with drawing or creating mandalas from scratch. Additionally, providing guidance and support in understanding the symbolism of mandalas can help individuals better connect with the therapeutic process. This may involve explaining the meaning behind different colors, shapes, and patterns commonly found in mandalas, as well as encouraging self-reflection and exploration of personal symbolism.

Moreover, integrating technology can enhance accessibility and customization in mandala therapy (Donahue, 2017). Digital tools and applications can allow individuals to create mandalas using templates or even generate personalized mandalas based on their preferences and emotions. These digital platforms can also offer features such as color selection, resizing, and editing, catering to diverse needs and abilities. Additionally, incorporating mindfulness techniques alongside mandala therapy can help individuals focus on the present moment and cultivate a deeper sense of self-awareness and relaxation (Donahue & Dykeman, 2021).

In summary, while mandala therapy has its limitations, adapting the therapeutic approach to accommodate individual needs and preferences, providing alternative forms of expression, offering guidance in understanding symbolism, and leveraging technology and mindfulness techniques can help overcome these limitations and enhance the effectiveness of mandala therapy as a healing modality.

7. CONCLUSION

Mandala therapy, a practice deeply rooted in ancient traditions, offers a multifaceted approach to holistic wellness, blending art therapy, spirituality, and self-reflection (Foster, 2017; Lear, 2018; Marshall, 2003). As explored, mandalas serve as powerful creative tools for introspection, relaxation, and healing across various dimensions of human experience (Marshall, 2003).

Firstly, the diverse types of mandala therapy, ranging from coloring mandalas to creating personalized mandalas, provide individuals with a spectrum of options to engage with this therapeutic modality. Whether using pre-designed mandala templates or crafting original designs, individuals can tailor their practice to suit their unique needs and preferences, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment in their healing journey.

Moreover, the spiritual implications of mandala therapy cannot be understated (Sari Ozturk & Kilicarslan Toruner, 2022; Ziert, 2015). Rooted in spiritual traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American cultures, mandalas symbolize unity, harmony, and the interconnectedness of all existence. By engaging with mandalas, individuals can tap into this profound symbolism, transcending the ego and connecting with deeper aspects of the self and the universe.

Furthermore, the promotion of wellness through mandala therapy is evident in its ability to reduce stress, enhance mindfulness, and promote emotional expression. By immersing oneself in the creative process of mandala-making, individuals can enter a state of flow, where worries dissipate, and inner peace is cultivated. This meditative experience not only calms the mind but also nurtures emotional resilience, empowering individuals to navigate life's challenges with greater ease.

However, despite its numerous benefits, mandala therapy also has its limitations. Not everyone may resonate with this form of therapy, and some individuals may find it challenging to engage in the creative process or connect with the spiritual symbolism of mandalas. Additionally, while mandala therapy can complement traditional therapeutic approaches, it may not be a standalone solution for complex mental health issues.

In conclusion, mandala therapy offers a rich tapestry of therapeutic benefits, encompassing creativity, spirituality, and mindfulness. By incorporating mandalas into their self-care practices, individuals can embark on a journey of self-discovery, healing, and holistic wellness, embracing the transformative power of art and symbolism in their lives.

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