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Healing Through Art: Art Therapy for grief and loss

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Objectives:

Art therapy is a powerful tool for *healing* and *self-expression* in times of grief.

Art therapy can help with the complexity of emotions including guilt, shame, regret and anger.

- Determine how art can be helpful for clients in the grief and loss cycle
- Teach and utilize art in session to address grief
- Discuss emotional response to the art with clients





In the Midst of Sorrow: Exploring the Different Types of Grief

Understanding Grief

Grief is a multifaceted process that can manifest in various ways, including emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Grief is defined as the primarily emotional/affective process of reacting to the loss of a loved one through death. The focus is on the internal, intrapsychic process of the individual. Normal or common grief reactions may include components such as the following:

- Numbness and disbelief.
- Anxiety from the distress of separation.
- A process of mourning often accompanied by symptoms of depression.
- Eventual recovery.

“Normal” or Uncomplicated Grief

This is the most common type of grief experienced by people following a loss. It involves a range of emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt, and loneliness.

While painful, these feelings typically lessen over time as the individual adjusts to the loss and begins to rebuild their life.

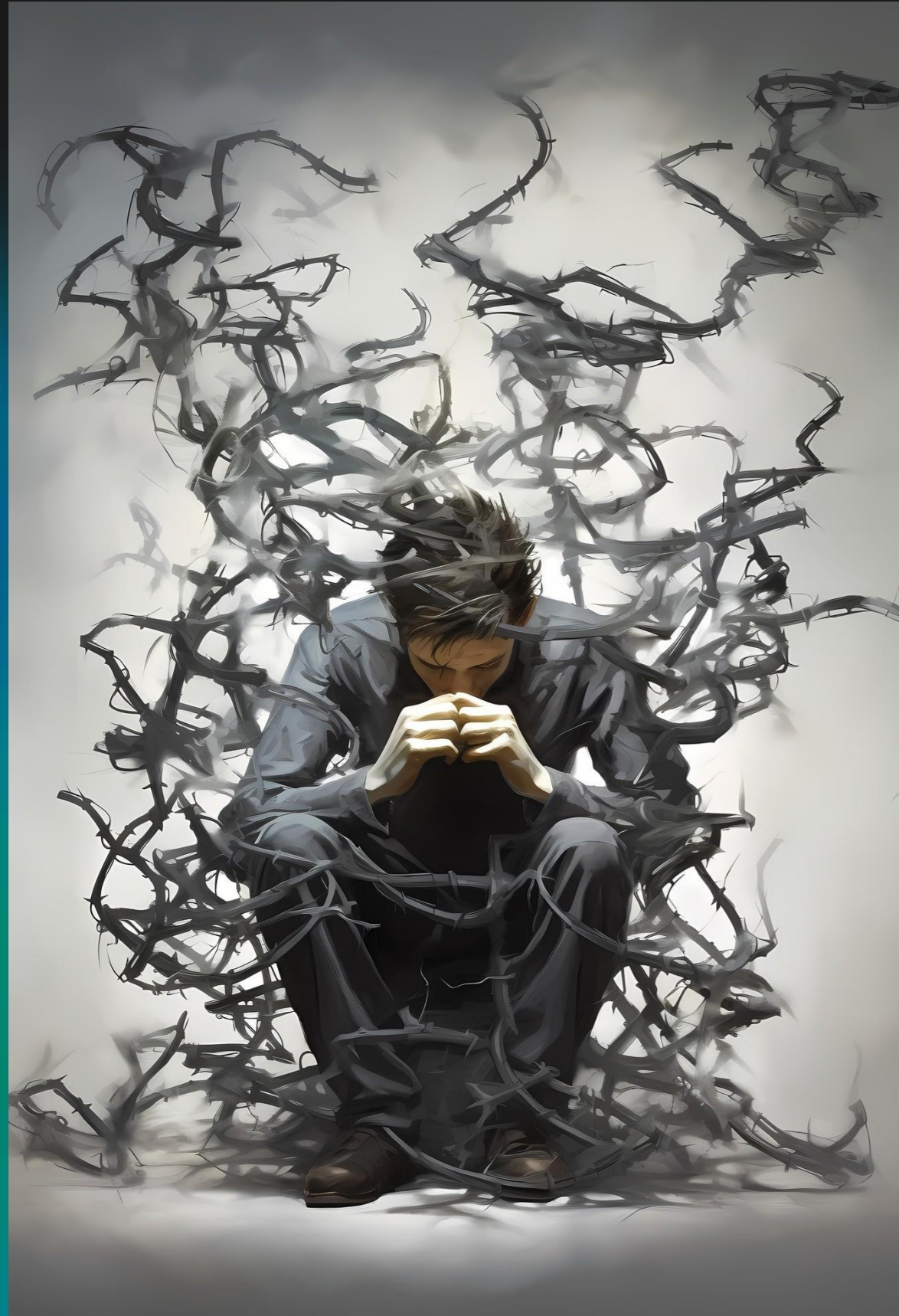




Collective Grief

Collective grief refers to the shared experience of loss within a community or society. This can occur in response to natural disasters, mass tragedies, or other events that impact a large number of people. Collective grief can unite individuals in their mourning process and foster a sense of solidarity and support, but it can also present unique challenges in terms of processing and healing from the loss on a collective level.





Complicated Grief

Complicated grief involves persistent, intense emotions and difficulty accepting the loss. Individuals may experience intrusive thoughts and struggle to move forward.

Also known as prolonged grief disorder or persistent complex bereavement disorder, complicated grief is characterized by intense and prolonged symptoms of grief that interfere with daily functioning. Individuals experiencing complicated grief may struggle to accept the loss, experience persistent feelings of yearning or longing for the deceased, and have difficulty moving forward with their lives.

Seeking professional help and support from loved ones is crucial in managing this type of grief.



Other Types of Grief:

- **Anticipatory Grief:** Anticipatory grief occurs when individuals begin to mourn a loss before it actually happens. This often occurs in situations where a loved one is terminally ill or facing a prolonged decline in health. Anticipatory grief allows individuals to begin the grieving process before the actual loss, which can help them prepare emotionally for the inevitable outcome.
- **Disenfranchised Grief:** Disenfranchised grief refers to grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported. This can occur when the loss is not recognized as legitimate by others, such as the death of a pet, a miscarriage, or the loss of a relationship that was not widely known. Individuals experiencing disenfranchised grief may feel isolated and invalidated in their mourning process
- **Ambiguous Loss:** Ambiguous loss occurs when there is uncertainty or lack of closure surrounding the loss. This can occur in situations such as missing persons cases, unresolved conflicts, or situations where the individual is physically present but psychologically absent (e.g., due to dementia or severe mental illness). Ambiguous loss can complicate the grieving process as individuals grapple with conflicting emotions and uncertainty about the status of their relationship with the person they have lost.



Art as a Therapeutic Tool

Art serves as a powerful medium for *expression* and *communication* when words fall short. Through painting, drawing, and sculpting, individuals can externalize their internal struggles, fostering a sense of *release* and *relief*.

Art therapy normally starts with a directive- a guide as to what and how to create.

Therapists usually create alongside the client.

Therapy ends with a discussion of the art, the process and the emotional experiences of creating.

Therapists can delve deeper into any of these to help “flush out” the meanings in the art and processes.





Types of Therapeutic Art Activities:

- Visual Art
- Journaling and Writing
- Symbolism and Metaphor
- Memory Boxes or Altars
- Grief Mandalas
- Group Art Activities
- Therapeutic Rituals
- Sensory and Expressive Techniques
- Resilience-Building Activities
- Dance Therapy
- Drama Therapy
- Music Therapy
- 2 modes- art as expression and art as mindfulness

Applicability of Art Therapy for Grief

Grief can manifest in various forms and can affect each individual differently. The use of art therapy offers a personal and unique approach to coping with these feelings. It invites an individual to create and reflect on the artwork as a means to explore their emotions, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster self-awareness, manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, reduce anxiety, and increase self-esteem.

- **Self-Expression:** Art provides a safe space for the expression of suppressed emotions and thoughts.
- **Reflection:** Art-making encourages a moment of mindfulness, compelling individuals to reflect on their inner state.
- **Communication:** For those who find verbal expression difficult, art becomes a language without words.
- **Catharsis:** The act of creating art can be cathartic, helping to release intense or pent-up emotions.



Why Use art Therapy for Grief?

- **Emotional Expression:** Art therapy allows individuals to express complex emotions that may be difficult to verbalize. Through creating art, individuals can externalize their feelings of grief, sadness, anger, or confusion, which can be therapeutic.
- **Coping Mechanism:** Engaging in art-making can serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with the intense emotions associated with grief and loss. It provides a constructive way to channel feelings and explore personal experiences related to the loss.
- **Meaning-Making:** Art therapy supports the process of making meaning out of the loss. Creating art can help individuals explore their memories of the deceased, reflect on their relationship, and find symbolic representations of their emotions and experiences.
- **Self-Exploration:** Art therapy encourages self-exploration and introspection. Through the creative process, individuals may gain insights into their own emotions, thoughts, and coping strategies, which can promote self-awareness and personal growth.



Why Use art Therapy for Grief?

- **Sense of Control:** Art-making empowers individuals by giving them a sense of control over their creative expression. This sense of agency can be particularly valuable in the face of loss, where individuals may feel a lack of control over their circumstances.
- **Social Support:** Group art therapy sessions can provide a supportive environment where individuals can connect with others who are also experiencing grief and loss. Sharing artwork and stories within a group setting can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Reduction of Symptoms:** Some studies have indicated that participation in art therapy may lead to a reduction in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among individuals grieving a loss.
- **Long-Term Benefits:** Art therapy interventions have been associated with long-term benefits, including improved psychological well-being, increased resilience, and enhanced coping skills that can continue to support individuals in their grief journey.





Specific Art Activities



Letting Go Jars



Supplies:

- Small Jars
- Colored sand
- Funnel
- Paper and pens
- Small strips of paper
- Toothpicks



Start with a Review of Radical Acceptance

What is radical acceptance?

- The art of radical acceptance is the ability to understand what is outside of our control, accept that it is out of our control and let go of the hinderance that the desire to control has in our life...
- All while taking care of ourselves in this moment.

Then explore through writing

- ❖ What are some things that you are holding on to that are no longer serving you?
 - ❖ Thoughts? Feelings? Habits? Behaviors? People? Places?
- ❖ How did this thing originate in your life? When did it become needed/wanted in your life?
- ❖ How has it served you in the past?
- ❖ Who has control? You or the thing?
- ❖ Why are you holding on to these things?
- ❖ What are the impacts of holding on? (both good and bad)
- ❖ What are the impacts of letting go? (both good and bad)

Now, let us honor and release:

- ❖ Dear—-“ (filling in the blank with this particular thing you are letting go of.)
- ❖ Take a moment to honor and/or thank this thing for what it provided in the past. (Why was it needed?)
- ❖ Say why it is time to say goodbye (why it is no longer needed) and discuss how your life will be changed without its presence.
- ❖ Say goodbye and wish it well.



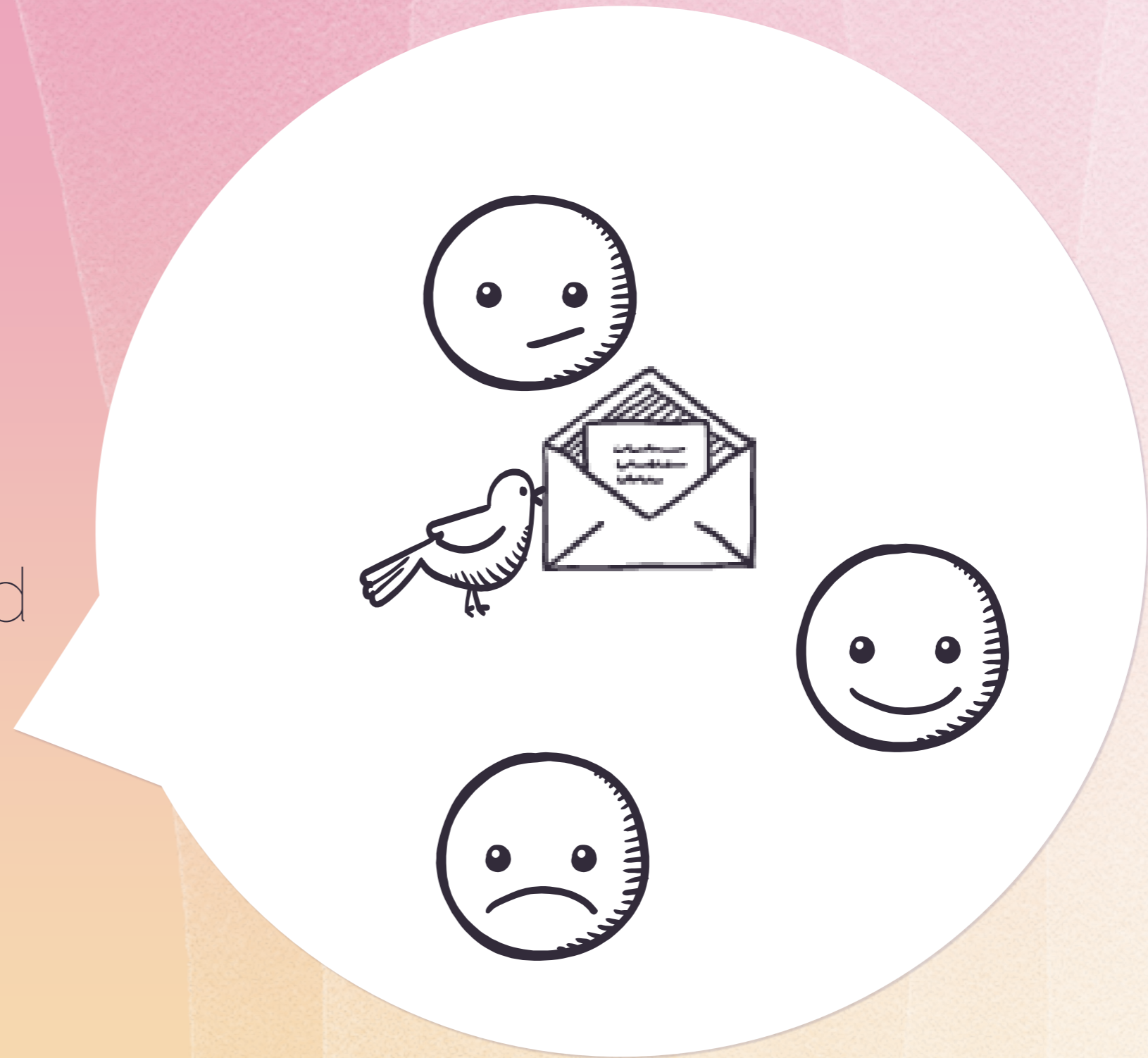
Put it in the jar:

Write it on the small strip of paper and
roll it around the toothpick

Put it in the jar



Fill with sand



So...Now What?

What are you going to do with your jar? How are you going to remember that you said goodbye? What would be helpful to have in its place?

“

To let go is to release the images and emotions, the grudges and fears, the clingings and disappointments of the past that bind our spirit.

JACK KORNFIELD

”

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Memory Tree/Tree of Life

Brief Grief Activity



Creating Flowers

This activity could use various art techniques, such as *collage*, *sculpting*, and *mixed media*, music, construction paper etc.

Prompt

Start with writing:

Things I wish I said- Missed opportunities

Times I said I love you-

Opportunities taken

Times I showed you I loved you-
actions



More Flowers!

Flowers out of coffee filters, markers, and water.

Begin by writing whatever you wanted onto the coffee filters. Examples- the persons name, poems, a memory, or even drawing a picture. Then water down the filters and the colors begin to bleed. Some people cried during this part. They could resonate with the symbolism. The water like tears. The bleeding of the colors representing pain, fuzzy memories, and a distant grasp on the person. When the coffee filters had dried turn them into flowers. The transformation of taking what we lost and carrying it forward in a new way is very powerful.



From: <https://www.griefstories.org/there-one-day-and-gone-the-next-art-therapy-and-grief/>

Constructing Hope: Memory Boxes and Assemblage Art



Memory boxes and assemblage art offer a three-dimensional canvas for individuals to honor memories and navigate their grief journey. It has the ability to physically manifest emotions and cherished moments within a sacred container.

Creating a Memory Box

The process begins with choosing a box that resonates with you—perhaps it's one you already own or one you create. This box will serve as a repository for items that hold significant emotional value; tokens, trinkets, photos, or letters that are evocative of the person or experience being mourned.

Decorate and personalize the exterior to reflect the essence of what's inside. The act of assembling and arranging these items in your memory box can be a deliberate, mindful practice, offering solace and a tangible presence during times of reflection.



From: <https://scholistico.com/8-best-art-therapy-exercises-for-grief-recovery/>



Relaxation/Mindfulness art activities

Relaxing art therapy activities can help individuals unwind, reduce stress, and promote a sense of calm and well-being. Here are some examples of such activities:

Coloring: Coloring can be a soothing and meditative activity for people of all ages. Using coloring books or printable pages with intricate designs can help individuals focus their attention and relax their mind.

Mandala Drawing: Creating mandalas can be a calming and centering practice. Individuals can draw their own mandalas using paper and colored pencils or explore digital mandala-making apps.

Nature Art: Collecting natural materials such as leaves, flowers, and stones from outdoors and using them to create artwork can foster a sense of connection with nature and promote relaxation.

Breathwork Art: Combining art-making with mindful breathing techniques can help individuals relax and reduce anxiety. For example, individuals can create art while focusing on their breath and allowing their movements to flow with each inhale and exhale.

Watercolor Washes: Experimenting with watercolor paints and creating washes of color can be a soothing and therapeutic activity. Watching the colors blend and flow across the paper can be mesmerizing and calming.



Relaxation/Mindfulness art activities

Guided Imagery Art: Guided imagery exercises combined with art-making can help individuals relax and tap into their imagination. A therapist or facilitator can guide participants through a visualization exercise, followed by creating artwork inspired by their mental imagery.

Texture Exploration: Exploring different textures and tactile materials can be a sensory-rich experience that promotes relaxation. Individuals can create collages or mixed media artwork using a variety of textured materials such as fabric scraps, yarn, or textured papers.

Mindful Doodling: Doodling mindfully involves drawing simple shapes, lines, and patterns without judgment or expectation. Focusing on the act of doodling can help individuals quiet their mind and enter a state of relaxation.

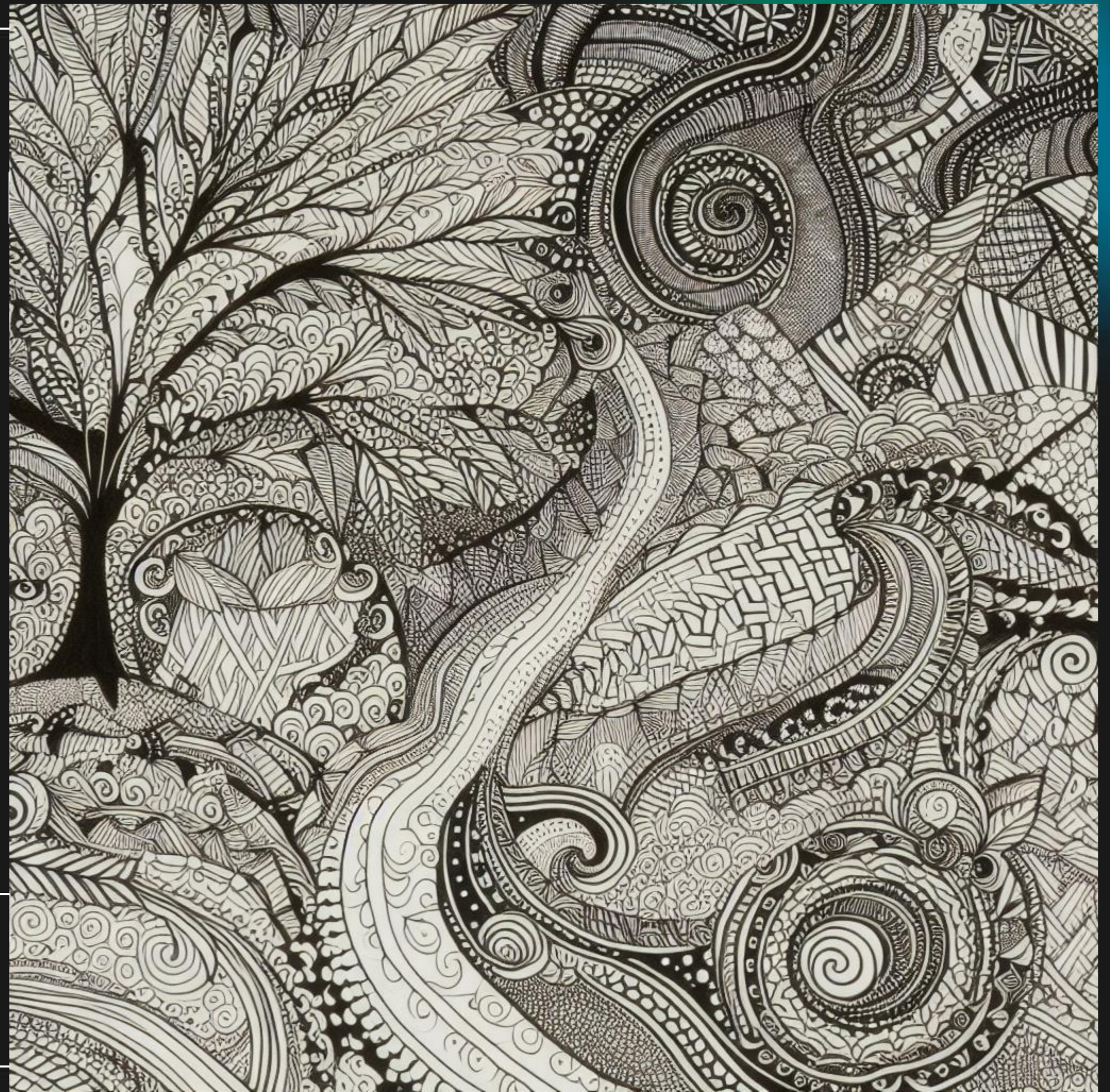
Guided Relaxation Art: Combining guided relaxation techniques with art-making can help individuals unwind and reduce stress. For example, individuals can listen to a guided relaxation recording while engaging in a calming art activity such as painting or drawing.



Let's try one:
Zentangle

You will need a pen and paper-

That's it!



Questions to ask after session:

- What emotions did I experience during the art-making process?
- Did any particular colors, shapes, or symbols stand out to me in my artwork? What do they represent or signify?
- How did I feel before, during, and after the art therapy session?
- What thoughts or memories came to mind while I was creating art?
- Did I notice any patterns or themes in my artwork or creative process?
- How did engaging in art therapy affect my mood or overall well-being?
- What insights or discoveries did I gain about myself or my situation through the art-making process?



Questions to ask after session:

- Did I encounter any challenges or obstacles while creating art?
How did I navigate them?
- Did I feel supported and understood by my therapist during the session?
- What strategies or coping mechanisms did I use to manage any difficult emotions that arose during the session?
- What would I like to explore or focus on in future art therapy sessions?
- How can I integrate the insights and experiences from this session into my daily life or ongoing therapy process?



Any Questions?



Resources



Weiskittle RE, Gramling SE. The therapeutic effectiveness of using visual art modalities with the bereaved: a systematic review. *Psychol Res Behav Manag*. 2018 Feb 1;11:9-24. doi: 10.2147/PRBM.S131993. PMID: 29440940; PMCID: PMC5798551.

PDQ Supportive and Palliative Care Editorial Board. Grief, Bereavement, and Coping With Loss (PDQ®): Health Professional Version. 2022 Oct 18. In: PDQ Cancer Information Summaries [Internet]. Bethesda (MD): National Cancer Institute (US); 2002-.

<https://scholistico.com/8-best-art-therapy-exercises-for-grief-recovery/>

<https://arttherapyresources.com.au/welcome-art-therapy-resources/>

<https://www.griefstories.org/there-one-day-and-gone-the-next-art-therapy-and-grief/>

