

‘Drawing out’ your internal state

What it is

Art is often used as a way of expressing thoughts and feelings that can be difficult to capture in words¹. If nothing else, the process can offer a pleasant distraction during challenging times²; for many people, it also offers catharsis and healing³. Many forms of art can facilitate this experience, but drawing is one that is particularly no-fuss, easily incorporated into the working day. Some researchers suggest that the colours and shapes produced while drawing can be used to interpret your thoughts and feelings⁴ -- though others feel that there is more value in using the visual outputs to spark personal reflections and supportive conversation with others⁵.

Note: This activity is related to ‘[emotional vocabulary](#)’, but emphasises visual imagery and exploring transient internal states. Try them both and compare!

Testimonials

While some participants found it difficult to know quite where to start with this activity, they ultimately enjoyed the freedom it provided. People inevitably began with a deep breath (which is, itself, great for your health⁶) before spending several mindful moments doing an internal scan. They noted how calming this was, even before they began to work on their pieces. Participants enjoyed working intuitively, and giving themselves the time and space to fill an entire sheet of paper with colour – something that many of them said they had not done since they were children.

Materials needed

- Paper (loose leaf or in a notebook)
- Something to add colour – e.g., colouring pencils, pastels, markers, or crayons
- (optional) If you want some help adding various shapes (and have funds for extra supplies!), you might find it helpful to use stencils (e.g., [here](#)) or stamps (e.g., [here](#))

Suggestions

The experiences of our collaborators suggest that you might find it helpful to begin with a grounding exercise⁷ to bring you back to the present and help you connect with yourself; even just a couple of deep breaths can work wonders. Throughout, you should also try to

¹ <https://agifineart.com/advice/the-psychology-of-art-emotions-translated-into-visual-mediums/>

² <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/art-and-mental-health-catharsis-or-distraction/#:~:text=Among%20these%20is%20the%20claim,ways%20%E2%80%93%20a%20form%20of%20catharsis.>

³ <https://www.calliopeartsjournal.com/post/art-as-catharsis-then-and-now>

⁴ <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/researchers-explore-how-we-depict-and-perceive-emotions-through-colour-and-line-visual-art>

⁵ <https://thebigdraw.org/drawing-to-think-a-conversation-with-dr-curie-scott>. See also Scott, C. (2021).

Drawing. Emerald Publishing.

⁶ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>

⁷ <https://livingwell.org.au/well-being/mental-health/grounding-exercises/>

remain non-judgemental⁸ – not just of your drawing abilities, but also of whatever you observe; the point of the exercise is merely to be curious and document what you notice.

For each of the exercises below, respond to the prompts using colour, shapes, and patterns. You can select a single prompt or go through all of them; create a different output for each or join them all into a single product.

- Focus on how you *feel*. Are you calm or energetic? Are you feeling tight and achy or fluid and limber? Are you in good health overall, or under the weather? Are you warm or cold? How big or small do you feel relative to others around you, the furniture you're sitting on, or the room you're in?
- Focus on what your *emotions* are. Are they generally positive or negative? Are they strong or weak? Towards what or whom are they directed? Are they steady or are you cycling through a few?
- Focus on what is happening with your *thoughts*. Are they orderly or jumbled? Are they steady or coming and going? If you are following a few different trains of thought, how many are there – and how quickly are you shuffling from one to another? How would you classify the types of things you're thinking about – e.g., are they worries, ideas, memories...?

As you observe, reach for whatever colours feel right to you in the moment; don't overthink it. Make something big or small, quickly or slowly, simple or complicated. Try to let your instincts guide your hand, without allowing your brain to interfere!

You also don't need to worry about being 'innovative'; if it helps, start with connections and metaphors that are common in everyday communication (e.g., visualising 'cold' as blue). As you continue, you will begin to create your own visual language.

⁸ <https://mindfulambition.net/non-judgment/>