

The Art of Mindful Drawing



When we were children, we'd be so captivated by the process of exploring our imagination on paper that self-critical thoughts probably never entered our minds. Yet as we grew older, and faced the sometimes harsh opinions of others, this creative confidence might have been chipped away. We became fearful of making mistakes, of being laughed at or criticised, or of not being 'good enough' at what we were doing.

However, with a little mindfulness and self-compassion, we can regain the creative freedom of our childhood and once again experience the joy of exploring our artistic side! Whether doodling freely, or drawing from real life, we can use these different methods of drawing as a way to reconnect with ourselves and the world around us.

Creativity Hasn't Left Us

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - **Pablo Picasso**

The reason it becomes more difficult to remain artistic as we grow up is not because we lose creativity; it's because we lose our confidence in it. Beneath all of the internalised criticism and limiting beliefs, our creativity is still there.

In a fascinating study conducted by Darya Zabelina and Michael Robinson of North Dakota State University, it was found that undergraduates showed higher levels of creative thinking when prompted to imagine that they were 7 years old. In the study, the undergraduates were split into two groups. One group was instructed: *"You are 7 years old. School is cancelled, and you have the entire day to yourself. What would you do? Where would you go? Who would you see?"* The second group were given the same instruction, all but for the first sentence. After taking a variety of tests to measure creative thinking, the first group showed increased creative originality when compared to the second group.

So we still have access to our creativity; we just need to be reminded that we never lost it.

Doodling (or Going With the Flow!)

Our society is a little obsessed with outcomes. We like to know the results of what we're going to do before we start doing it. Yet, as children, we probably just put coloured pencil to paper and started drawing, maybe with a rough idea of what we were trying to create, but perfectly willing to draw whatever we felt moved to draw at the time. Nothing seemed too fanciful, nothing too abstract or weird. It was just fun!

Doodling without a plan or purpose can feel very therapeutic, and is a great way of practicing being in the moment. Through drawing, shading or colouring, in whatever ways feel pleasant or interesting, we can get to know ourselves better. Which colours make us feel happy? Or sad? What kind of shapes are we drawn to? Do these things change depending on our mood? What kind of movement of the pen or pencil feels good to us? Can we allow ourselves to draw without form, and if not, why might that be? Remember, there's no right or wrong way to doodle, just like there's no right or wrong way to dance! It's all about drawing what we feel to draw, just exploring what comes through us with openness and curiosity.

Attention to Detail

Unlike doodling, drawing from real life requires more conscious concentration. This makes it the perfect tool for training our eyes and minds to really see what we're looking at. Forget all ideas of what you think a face, a flower or a piece of fruit looks like, and really pay attention to it before making a mark on the paper. Have you ever seen this particular object, from this particular angle, in this particular light before this moment? It's unlikely, so notice every detail about it: shape, texture, colour, light and shade, any perception or depth or distance.

By letting go of pre-conceived ideas, we can start to see things as they truly are. Draw what you see, not what you think you see. Some artists say that you never really see a person until you draw them. It's certainly true that drawing from real life can open our eyes to a whole world of detail that we never noticed before.

Self-Criticism and Self-Compassion

There is of course room for healthy, constructive self-criticism. In fact, learning how to do things better can be part of the joy of drawing. Over time, it's natural to want to see some sort of progress in our creative endeavours; objectively analysing our artistic work and trying to improve can help us find this. However, if this self-critique becomes excessive, unkind, or if we become trapped in restrictive perfectionism, we are more likely to give up trying, rather than advance as artists. This is where self-compassion becomes really important.

Whether we just want to draw something every now and then for the fun of it, or whether we want to become skilful artists, self-compassion is equally important. Rather than always finding fault in our creations, we can try to focus on what we have achieved. Being mindful of our self-talk can help us determine which criticism is worth taking note of, and which is coming from a self-diminishing place. If we adopt an encouraging attitude towards ourselves, we can give ourselves back that creative confidence we lost as we were growing up.

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