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The Gold Standard
A Trendy New Health Regimen for the New Year

Last year a friend gave me a coloring book called “Unicorns Are Jerks: A coloring book exposing the cold, hard, sparkly truth.” Featuring an amusing purple unicorn defiantly smoking a cigarette on its cover, it was clear that though it was a coloring book, it was not meant for children. Since then, I’ve noticed that coloring books made for and marketed to adults are everywhere—and most are not as irreverent as the unicorn. On a recent outing to Barnes & Noble I found not just a “Relaxation Coloring Book” and a “Seize the Day” coloring book, but even a pocket-size “Coloring on the Go” coloring book featuring floral designs for “fun and relaxation.” As of this writing, 9 of the top 20 best-selling books on Amazon are coloring books published for grown-up consumers.

Beyond nostalgia for a simpler time and pace and a longing for non-digital activity that includes an actual pen and paper, it seems that this quickly growing new industry category is heavily based on health benefits. And with many New Year’s resolutions centering on improved health in 2016, adult coloring might make for a creative new practice to try this year.

Mental health counselor and adjunct professor Miriam Prichard says she came across a study five years ago reporting that coloring lowered blood pressure. With this and Carl Jung’s use of mandalas (circular designs with concentric shapes that originated in India) as a therapeutic tool in mind, she began tasking her stressed-out college freshmen with coloring a mandala and then reflecting on the experience.

“Almost all of my students in the past four years have found this to be a wonderful alternative to the academic assignments they receive. Many share they continue to color to calm down,” says Ms. Prichard. “They report feeling less anxious after coloring. Many say they completely ‘zone out’ and forget about the other stressful things in their lives while coloring.”

Art therapy is known to reduce stress and adult color-ers report feeling relaxed during and after the activity. Many Quad Citians agree.

Brandy Walveart of East Moline enjoyed a group coloring session with her closest female friends and family members in preparation for the birth of her son and would recommend the activity to others. “We colored pages with flowers, intricate designs, and birth affirmations that I later hung in my birth space. I looked at them during early labor, remembering how each person was supporting

me. So the experience of coloring was calming and meaningful, and the resulting pieces also were therapeutic.”

Beth Johnson homeschools her four children and says that they engage in form drawing, which they then color in. Ms. Johnson says that it is (usually) a quiet time at the table with the children. “... Coloring provides a time to slow down, breathe, and for me to pray. Plus, we end up with beautiful drawings,” she says.

This meditative experience is a salve for those who feel overwhelmed by daily commitments and activity, and many psychologists recommend coloring as a relaxation technique. Doing so allows adults to focus on the act of coloring rather than on worries, to-do lists, or the pressures of an overly busy life.

Becky Langdon, a writer living in Davenport, finds coloring to be both therapeutic and clarifying. “If I tell my brain to stop swirling and stressing, it doesn’t work. But by doing something methodical and rhythmic, I can find my way into the meditative place that I’m craving. The movement and the visual nature of coloring helps me to relax my mind and, in a way, tricks it into quieting.”

Ms. Prichard, who uses a combination of play therapy and traditional talk therapy with children, adolescents, and adults in her private practice (www.miriamprichardcounseling.com), says that even though coloring is “a very trendy thing right now” it “shouldn’t dissuade people from recognizing its therapeutic value.”

As many of us anticipate the fresh start that comes with a new year and make self-improvement plans in the months to come, coloring is an interesting new activity that might benefit overall well-being. Whether adding color to quirky, legend-defying unicorns or carefully shading in a beautiful depiction of an English garden, the act of coloring may be a simple path to wistful delight and holistic health in 2016.

SIDE BAR: Interested in coloring with a community? The Rock Island Main Library (401 19th Street, Rock Island, Ill) will host Adult Coloring Nights on the last Monday of January, February, and March from 6:00 to 7:30 pm in the Main Library Community Room. Events are free and do not require registration.