



**Rebecca Wilkinson**

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# The Benefits of Coloring

## Why Adult Coloring Is So Popular



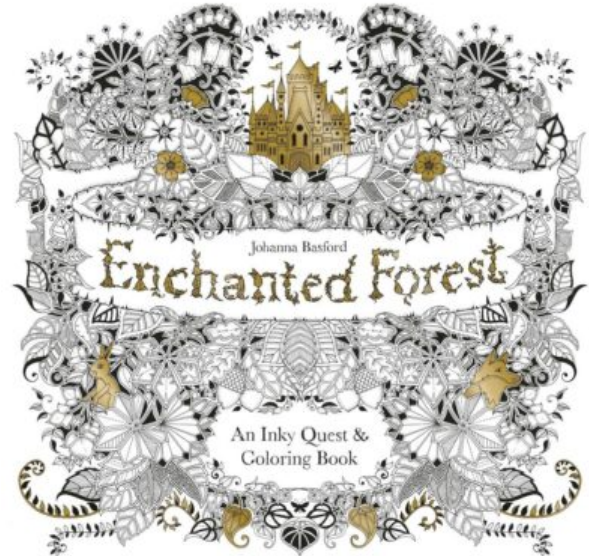
### Coloring For Adults?!

When most of us were growing up, coloring books were for children. The pictures in them were usually of playful scenes with recognizable people, places, and animals that would appeal to kids. The pictures were deliberately simple and straightforward to match children's intellectual and physical development.

### The Adult Coloring Phenomena

Enter the adult coloring phenomena in 2015. During that year, the sale of coloring books jumped from one million to over 12 million

almost overnight. This dramatic rise has been attributed to an interview with Johanna Basford, illustrator of *The Enchanted Forest* and *The Secret Garden* coloring books, on NPR's All Things Considered in April of 2015 that synchronized with two trends –the growing wellness movement and social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook which were inviting people to explore and share their creativity with each other. During Basford's interview, she promoted coloring for adults as a way to get a break from our high stress lives and 'detox' from our digital devices.



*Basford The Enchanted Forest Coloring Book*

### **Convergence of Factors that Made Coloring Take Off**

Bassford tapped into a zeitgeist that was on the cusp of emerging—a synchronistic realization that:

1. We needed to focus more seriously on managing stress;
2. Coloring was a fun, practical, creative, and rewarding way to do that;
3. This pastime could be joyfully celebrated with others.

It seemed like simultaneously across the globe, people discovered that coloring, which before had been relegated to children, was not only enjoyable and relaxing, but it was a legitimate tool for reducing



stress, for successfully exploring their creativity, and for finding community.

### Were Coloring Books Just a Fad?

Despite these benefits, it initially appeared like the coloring book craze might just be a passing fad. Although sales of coloring

books did taper off after the first couple of years, the appeal of coloring persists. For example, as of August 2020 Facebook has dozens of coloring groups some of which have 30,000 members from across the world. Generally these groups encourage people to share their favorite coloring books, offer suggestions for drawings supplies and techniques that they are enjoying, and upload photos of their coloring projects (they usually insist that the original illustrator is credited). Perhaps not surprisingly, since the outbreak of the COVID virus with stress levels high and people forced to isolate from one another, coloring sales have begun to shoot up again.

### Why Coloring Books Are Still So Popular?

The adult coloring book phenomena exploded so quickly because it seemed to make perfect sense that coloring was an easy and accessible way for people who are stressed out to channel that tension.

For example, coloring can be especially useful for folks who have trouble meditating or doing yoga—it effectively yields many of the same results. For people who aren't 'crafty' but know that having a hobby or doing crafts helps manage stress, it is a way to cultivate a

creative outlet. The pre-existing images gives people a place to start, some structure if drawing free-hand makes them anxious. It gives people a way to be express themselves artistically without needing any training or skill.

### **Coloring is Portable and Compact**

It's easy to jump in and out of coloring. When you need to get to other tasks, you can quickly put what you're working on to the side and then come back to it. It's also portable so you can travel with it. In fact, many people use coloring to make their travel time pass more quickly and enjoyably.

Along the same lines, coloring is an effective way to help you stay present and engaged during meetings and lectures. Although it might seem like it would be a distraction, it actually helps people be more attentive and focused.

### **Adult Coloring Books on Almost Any Theme You Can Imagine**

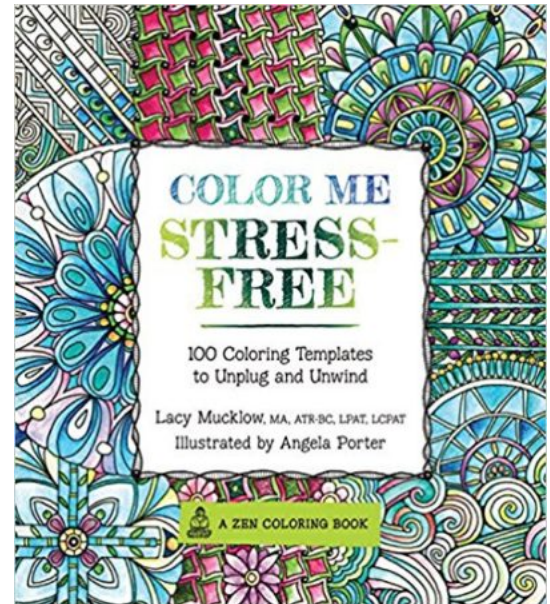
The variety of coloring books now available cater to almost every imaginable demographic.

You can find adult coloring books of grumpy cats, swear words, fat ladies in space, the Civil Rights movement, serial killers, Megan and Harry's wedding, and holiday sweaters, just to name a few. Many are geared to special audiences such as coloring books for "real men", surfers, moms, veterans, the OB coloring book for gynecologists, and even raised-line coloring books for the visually impaired. Some of the most popular include Basford's books as well as the *Color Me Stress Free* series by Art Therapist Lacy Mucklow and artist Angela Porter.

## So Why Is Coloring So Helpful?

Perhaps the most compelling benefit of coloring is that it is relaxing. This is not only subjective—people report feeling calmer after coloring; but also objective—they undergo constructive physiological changes. For example, they experience the *relaxation response* which includes a range of biological markers from lowered blood pressure and heart rate to shifts in brain wave activity.

These combine to not only improve physical health and immune functioning but to counteract the negative effects of stress.



*Color Me Stress Free-Mucklow and Porter*

## What Other Benefits Does Coloring Hold?

Research is revealing other benefits that coloring promotes (\*see the reference list below for many of these studies). Because the benefits of coloring are truly multifold, we list them below in bullets:

### **Coloring is meditative and helps us focus:**

- It quiets the ‘monkey mind’ and stills the steady stream of racing thoughts that can dominate our attention and keep us from truly being in the moment.
- It provides a positive distraction.
- It puts us in a meditative state and makes us more mindful.
- It induces the relaxation response.
- It counters the damaging effects of stress.
- It helps us focus and concentrate.

- It gets us into being fully engaged and in flow.
- It makes us more alert, aware, and present.

### **Coloring stimulates whole brain thinking:**

- It stimulates right brain expansive and creative thinking.
- It involves left brain thinking through organization and planning.
- It improves hand/eye coordination and hones fine motor skills.
- It taps into parts of the brain that are not accessible through language and speech.
- It tells a story by reflecting in visual form the unique way our minds work.
- It gives us information about ourselves that we can explore.

### **Coloring taps into our creativity:**

- For those of us who don't have artistic training, it warms us up to creativity and gives us some structure to start with.
- It helps overcome the 'blank canvas' anxiety that free drawing can cause.
- It lets us explore our creativity: in the materials we use, the color combinations we choose, and the way we emphasize different parts of the picture.
- The structure they provide can help us feel like we can be more successful at doing art.
- We can create something that is beautiful and that we can feel good about.
- The artists among us enjoy that it lets us take a break from the pressure of having to create something original while still inviting individual artistic flair and personal aesthetic choices.

## **Another Unexpected Benefit: Connection and Community**

Coloring has also become a way for people to connect. In fact, those connections are part of what has made coloring so popular. People don't only enjoy the process of making their art but they want to share their work with others—as gifts, in meet-ups, and in facebook groups. For example, the Adult Coloring Worldwide facebook group has 32,000 members sharing their coloring projects with each other.

## **But Wait, I've Heard That Coloring Stifles Creativity! Is That True?**

Many of our art therapy clients come to us with we call “art trauma”—memories of having been shamed at an early age for not being able to draw and/or of being punished for “not coloring in the lines”.

Although some well-intentioned but misguided educators may have insisted that you color neatly and perfectly “in the lines”, we now know that coloring actually *promotes* creativity. For example, research shows that when children engage in coloring and then are given complex tasks to navigate, they show more divergent problem-solving skills.

In addition, in terms of artistic creativity, the structured outlines in coloring images seem to warm people up to doing art rather than inhibit them. It seems to give them what one of our favorite art therapists, Judy Rubin, call a “framework for freedom”.

## **Using Coloring and Art Therapy to Overcome Unhelpful Messages About Doing Art**

Granted, some people might still struggle with negative internal messages about doing art in general, or coloring more specifically, and we have no desire to re-traumatize you. However, we support you if you want to use coloring as a way to revisit those unhelpful legacies and discover (or rediscover) the playful and relaxing fun that art and coloring can be.

If you want to take that a step further and work with an [Art Therapist](#)—like Rebecca and her business partner Gioia Chilton—they can help you overcome internal and external barriers to your creativity and wellbeing.

### Is Coloring Art Therapy?

There has been some confusion about whether coloring is Art Therapy. Often that is because there is confusion about what Art Therapy itself is. Art therapy, like most therapy, is designed to help people cope with challenges and experience a higher quality of life. The way art therapists do so is through art and the creative process.

Art Therapy relies on two essential components:

1. Doing art is healing.
2. Art communicates.

We know that, as mentioned earlier, coloring induces the relaxation response. What you choose to color and how you color is also telling a story. It is communicating. However, because coloring does not usually involve working directly with an art therapist along with all of the therapeutic support and insight he/she provides, we call it ‘therapeutic art’ rather than ‘Art Therapy’. Click [here](#) if you want to learn more about art therapy.



## How to Color

**There is no wrong way to color, but you might like some guidelines.**

- Try different kinds of art supplies and see what works for you: e.g., traditional crayons, markers, and pencils, or gel pens, watercolor pencils, oil/chalk pastels, paints, and even collage.
- Explore what colors you like—cooler colors like blues, green and purples; warmer ones like browns, oranges, yellows and reds; neutrals like grey and black; metallics like gold, bronze, and silver.
- Play with different textures: squiggly, diagonal, horizontal, or vertical lines; soft and seamless or heavy, dark, intense marks. Mix them up to create contrast.
- Stay in the lines or branch out and add your own designs and images.

*Sharpie Markers*

## When to Color:

- If you are anxious or feel stressed out.
- If you need to relax your body and your mind.
- When you need a quick mental break and a shift of focus.
- If you get restless when you have to sit and pay attention (it helps some people concentrate better, e.g. during long meetings or lectures.)
- If you have trouble meditating—coloring induces many of the same physiological benefits of meditation.
- At night to wind down and prepare for sleep.
- If you struggle with a physiological or psychological condition that affects your balance, fine motor control, attention, memory,

and/or concentration. It will help exercise and build those skills.

- To connect with your friends and family, e.g., color together and notice the different ways that you each treat the same image; explore how those choices might reflect something about you as individuals.
- To connect with other “colorists” who love coloring and sharing their coloring projects. (See below for some Facebook coloring communities).
- With an [Art Therapist](#) if you want to learn more about yourself, overcome blocks, and be more creative.

*Saguaro Moon Colored in by Rebecca's Friends and Family*

### **Coloring Books By Art Therapists:**

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## Facebook Groups Related to Coloring

- [Adult Coloring Worldwide](#) ≈ 32000 members
- [Coloring Book Café Coloring](#) ≈ 5600 members
- [24/7 Daily Adult Coloring](#) ≈ 850
- [Free Printable Colouring Pages](#) ≈ 1500
- [The Coloring Connection](#) ≈ 8000
- [Coloring Mandalas and More](#) ≈ 700
- [Mandala Coloring Club](#) ≈ 3000
- [Coloring Book Reviews](#) ≈ 4300
- [Adults Who Love to Color !!](#) ≈ 1300
- [The Creative Coloring Group](#) ≈ 14000

- [All About Coloring Supplies](#) ≈ 18100
- [Coloring Tips, Techniques, Reviews, Videos and Advice](#) ≈ 3100
- [Adult Coloring Book Techniques](#) ≈ 3500

## **Helpful Blogs and Websites**

- <http://www.cleverpedia.com/ultimate-guide-to-pain-free-coloring/>
- <http://www.cleverpedia.com/diy-ways-to-use-coloring-pages/>
- <http://www.cleverpedia.com/best-coloring-books-for-adults/#coloringsupplies>
- <https://www.colorit.com/blogs/news/how-to-blend-and-shade-with-colored-pencils-for-adult-coloring-books>
- <https://diycandy.com/coloring-for-adults-101-your-complete-guide/>
- [https://www.alibris.com/search/books/isbn/9781633223400utm\\_source=Google&utm\\_medium=cpc?utm\\_campaign=NMPi\\_Smart\\_Shopping&utm\\_term=NMPi\\_Smart\\_Shopping&ds\\_rl=1264488&ds\\_rl=1264488&gclid=ds](https://www.alibris.com/search/books/isbn/9781633223400utm_source=Google&utm_medium=cpc?utm_campaign=NMPi_Smart_Shopping&utm_term=NMPi_Smart_Shopping&ds_rl=1264488&ds_rl=1264488&gclid=ds)
- <https://mommyevolution.com/100-adult-coloring-book/>

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