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Opinion

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## Mandalas in the Nursing Classroom

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Opinion

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, nursing education as it was known, was drastically changed. Classes were delivered in an online format, clinical experiences were cancelled and then re-created to be virtual, and the student community was essentially disbanded. This caused students and faculty to become discombobulated. Faculty had creating online courses added to their workloads with the creation of material that could be delivered virtually. They were unsure about maintaining clinical experiences and were generally put under a fair amount of stress, as many did not normally teach in the cyber world. Students were nervous about the quality of their education, they were scared to go into the clinical arena with the new virus, and they lost their sense of belonging.

For the faculty this brought about changes in the classroom, and for the students, there was a change in behavior. Grades began to drop, work was missed, and students would verbalize their frustrations. As a faculty member, it was obvious that something needed to be done, so, mandalas were brought into the classroom. Why, you may ask? Let's start with a little history.

When one thinks of the universe, mandalas may not be the first image that comes to today's mind. Back in B.C.E. Buddhist monks created mandalas as their representation of the universe and its ability to bring joy out of suffering. Thus, creating a perfect image of the universe, here on earth. Their path along the Silk Road was traced by the beautiful rugs and paintings that were left behind documenting their physical and spiritual journey [1]. One of the most famous mandalas, preceding the Buddhists, from 763 CE, is in Japan and is called the Taima Mandala. This mandala is thought to cure bodily ailments as well as spiritual distress [2]. These ancient artifacts have not been forgotten, and you can continue to see mandalas throughout the world today.

Throughout history the symbol of the mandala has taken on many roles, both in art and in society in general. In early Asian society, the structure of power was based on the mandala- keeping the trusted within sacred circles [3], and in many ways, our government structures and friendship circles still follow this pattern. Kingdoms themselves were physically laid out to incorporate the sacred circles to allow for political and social interactions [4]. Typically, though, mandalas were used for meditation, healing, and performing sacred rights [5].

The word mandala comes from the Sanskrit and has multiple definitions depending on the literature that one is reviewing. It is typically agreed upon that the word mandala means a circle with depiction of higher meanings [5]. Though the term mandala has also been defined a bit more general as referring to a "painting, diagram, or an architectural structure with a specific symbolic meaning" [6]. Mandalas today are typically thought of as circular, though the Hindu type of mandala is often square with four gates in the corners with a circle in the center [7]. No matter the outer shape of the mandala, the main point is to lead one to the center. There are thought to be 3 main categories of mandalas: teaching, healing, and sand. Teaching mandalas are full of symbols and showcase different areas of religious or philosophical structures. Healing mandalas are geared towards meditation, and sand mandalas are designed to purify minds [7].

Carl Jung was one of the pioneers of the use of the mandala in the West. During World War, I he would sketch a small circular picture daily in his notebook similar to a mandala- towards the end of the war, as he "came out of his darkness", he realized that the mandala is "the path to the center, the path to individuation" [8]. With this realization, encouraged others to explore their inner selves and their relationship to the world as a whole. Henderson et



al, found that forming mandalas helped to decrease depression and anxiety [9]. Potash et al, in their study found that while creating mandalas, the medical students were able to start the process of handling complex feelings and helped to reduce anxiety, allowing them time for reflection [10].

This above premise, time for reflection, was one of the things our students needed. They were overwhelmed with work, taking care of children, and trying to maintain good grades and learn the content. So, mandalas were implemented into our class time. The students were given several options for premade mandalas or they could choose their own, they were asked to bring crayons or colored pencils/pens to the session, and they were asked to come with an open mind.

We spent an hour discussing mandalas and the benefits that were found by other students, such as self-reflection, and higher score on tests [11,12]. After the session, the students were asked to post their mandalas on the discussion board and write about their experience.

Amazingly, all but one student had a positive experience. The one student that did not enjoy said it was because they did not enjoy coloring, that it actually would make them stressed due to staying in the lines. The rest of the 300 or so students, really enjoyed the experience. Some of the overall feedback suggested feeling calm during the activity. Many students actually repeated the coloring of the mandalas and included their family members and talked about the nice family bonding time that it created. Other students talked about the smell of the fresh crayons, and how that alone transported them back to their childhood when things were much simpler. And another theme suggested feeling focused on the beautiful colors and allowing their minds to completely engage in the activity.

In the Covid-19 era, everybody is under tremendous amount of stress. Both students and faculty should adopt the new system of education in the middle of stressful life middle of Covid. Any intervention that can help ease stress should be welcomed and

will improve functionality of human brain. Mandalas are an easy, inexpensive and fun activity that may take our brains to the level that allows for active learning with less stress. Our findings are based on a small mixed methods study that had IRB approval (data not shown) and a larger study is needed to confirm our results as well.

## Acknowledgement

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## Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict interest.

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