

Activity: Nature

Goal: Psychological/Emotional

Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Nature Mandalas

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Materials

Harvest buckets/bags

Pruners

Pre-harvested natural items
(if indoors)

Paper

Glue

Gloves, wipes

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will gather natural items to create a mandala or meditative symmetrical art piece.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Identify plants; follow sequential steps strengthening focus and attention skills

Physical: Walk; bend; stand; use pruners exercising hand dexterity

Psychological/Emotional: Set personal goals; explore meditative activities; consider concept of temporality

Sensory: Harvest items that activate each sense

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials (if doing indoors or virtually).
2. Facilitator begins session by checking in with participants; they are asked to identify something that they have been ruminating about or something that they feel is important in their lives.
3. Participants will be given a harvest bucket/bag and pruners (if appropriate and safe for population).
4. Participants will be given ten or so minutes to explore the garden and to harvest natural materials (seeds, flowers, acorns, pinecones, stones, bark etc.) that they feel interested in/called to. If this is done indoors, items will be pre-harvested by facilitator and participants will have time to explore and choose items displayed on table.
5. Participants will be brought together again and prompted to identify central item for mandala to represent their central challenge or importance. Concept of Mandala/Nature Art introduced.
6. Participants will then be given fifteen minutes (or however much time is appropriate for group) to create their nature art.
7. Participants will 'check out' (observe other's mandala) and share how their art represents how they may be rethinking their challenge or how they have created something intentional and beautiful around the thing that is important to them.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This activity was originally developed to use in a residential setting with teens diagnosed with eating disorders and other comorbidities. This offered a gentle exercise that remained within the restricted movement requirements and offered the participants time for wandering and independence within a highly restrictive program. This was done as both an individual activity where each participant created their own mandala, as well as a group activity where each participant contributed to creating a group mandala to build cooperation and group cohesion. The initial prompt (intention of the mandala) can be changed to suit the

population, for example, this could simply be an exercise to explore temporality or creating beauty out of discarded/forgotten objects which would translate well with incarcerated individuals. Recommended to introduce this activity by sharing the sacred practice of mandalas used in Hindu and Buddhist traditions dating back to the first century. This activity has also been done virtually with participants with success. Items were pre-harvested by participants and the activity was done together through telehealth.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Movement considerations should be identified depending on population as bending over to pick up natural items may cause dizziness or imbalance. The distribution of sharps (pruners, scissors) should be considered depending on concerns within the population and potential for self-harm. The facilitator could hold onto the pruner and monitor harvesting with each participant. Wandering or elopement should be considered if the natural area/garden is not enclosed. Some nature items like pinecones may be sharp for people with skin sensitivity. Facilitator should be aware of potential nature items that could be ingested like berries, plants, mushrooms as well as plants that have thorns, excessive sap or toxicity.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: This activity requires relatively no cost and can be translated to many settings. The facilitator should be familiar with the setting and do a walk prior to activity to ensure that there are suitable items to harvest and no safety concerns (trip hazards etc).

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Burnham, T. (2016, July 26). Nature mandalas as therapeutic horticulture. *Naples Botanical Garden*.

<https://www.naplesgarden.org/nature-mandalas-therapeutic-horticulture/>

Fleming, L. & Sampson, K. (2022). Feed-Eating disorders and horticultural therapy. *Cultivate* 2(4).

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Henderson, P., Rosen, D. & Mascaro, N. (2007). Empirical study on the healing nature of mandalas. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 1(3), 148–154.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.