

INSPIRING READS

# The fabric of wellbeing

Looking after our mental health is one of the most important things we can do. **Becca Parker** speaks to three quilters about being kind to our minds, and how sewing can act as self-care

**Gaze at any quilt and you will be assured of the time, skill and love that has gone into its creation. But what of the lasting effects on its maker? The truth is, there is an unseen facet of quilting that runs much deeper and leaves behind a positive mark. Beyond swoonworthy fabric stashes and the beguiling symmetry of patchwork lie the mental health benefits of the craft.**

It's a creative magic you may not have considered before. Quilting has a certain *je ne sais quoi* that calms

the mind, a quality that soothes. Hand appliqué lover Yasmeen Kreebani Branton of @sand.and.stars (sandandstars.co.uk) finds solace in her slower making. "It feels like an understatement to say it just makes me happy," she reflects, "because it's so much more than that. It helps me create my own little bubble of calmness and I can lose track of time, inadvertently helping me put things in my life into perspective."

That is something worth investigating. Understanding exactly

Imagine being able to lean into those benefits when you need them most. What remains to be uncovered is whether the mindful secrets of quilting lie in the change of focus, the mind-body-heart connection, the inexplicable wonder of craft, or something else entirely.

### Shifting focus

For many sewists, the term hobby just doesn't quite cover it. Quilting means more. Kate Basti (@katebasti) is a designer based in Ohio, sharing

*"Patchwork and quilting are creative and artistic, but also repetitive and analytic. It's wonderfully tactile, and it allows the process to be both stimulating and comforting"*

how quilting can bring about such a shift could unlock a whole new approach to creative self-care.

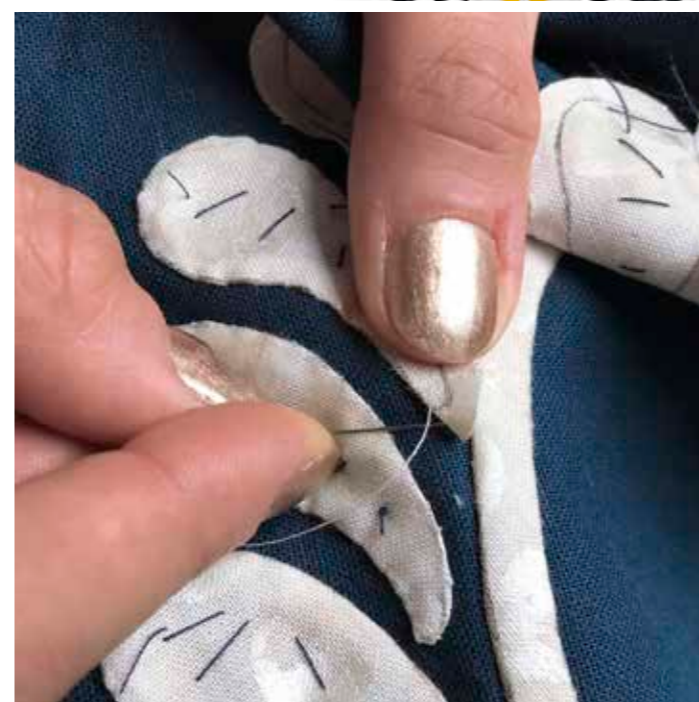
her quilt blocks on her Etsy store, QuiltWithKate.etsy.com. To Kate, quilting is a vital creative outlet that saw her through a very challenging time. "My father died just seven months after the birth of my daughter," she shares. "I was still struggling with postpartum depression." Quilting gave her space to turn her attention to something else. "I quilted while my daughter napped each day, and it permitted me to shift my focus onto something fun and positive, rather than the sadness and hopelessness I was feeling at the time. Over time, the postpartum lifted, the sadness evolved into acceptance, and the solace I felt from quilting shifted into a passionate hobby."



Above: Donna likes to get lost in pattern-writing when she's feeling anxious

Above right: Yasmeen's dog Kobie loves her quilts almost as much as she enjoys making them!

Right and below: Kate relaxes with EPP projects, while Donna opts for hand-sewing quilted details and Yasmeen enjoys hand appliqué



The various processes of quilting help draw attention back to the present and the practical, and entirely occupy the mind. "The required focus for quilting allows us to tune out nearly everything else while we're creating," says Kate. "When you pair that with the joy the craft brings so many of us, it's a magical combination." That vital change of focus she mentions is where so much of the power lies. Modern quilter Donna from @xoxsew (xoxsew.com) has her own theories about this. She recognises that the craft can tap into different parts of the brain. "It's similar to the benefits of sensory play in young

kids," Donna explains. "Patchwork and quilting are creative and artistic, but also repetitive and analytic at the same time. It's wonderfully tactile, and I think that allows the process to be both stimulating and comforting." Yasmeen reckons there's a lot to be said for the powerful mind-body connection that occurs during the creative process. "In particular, tapping into your brain's reward centre, releasing lots of mood-boosting endorphins, reducing stress and anxiety. It's the combination of effort and concentration, and the result you get is a beautiful end product which you or a loved one get to cherish for years."



Top left to right: Kate loves to slow down with EPP and patchwork projects

Below: Yasmeen finds that hand appliqué unites the hands and mind, helping her to be present in the moment



**Find your flow**

Quilting's myriad of associated tasks and techniques can divert or soothe, then, as needed. It's a matter of identifying the right method for the right time. For Donna, the entire process holds a variety of therapeutic benefits. "Each step fulfils a different part of my overall mental health. For instance, pulling fabric to start a new quilt feels rejuvenating, while piecing a top calms my anxiety." There's a particular recipe she follows for selecting projects. "When I'm mentally exhausted, I tend to reach for a quilt pattern that isn't mine," Donna reveals. "This way, I can turn off the analytical side and just enjoy the ride. When I'm anxious, I tend to get lost in doing something that requires a lot of attention, such as writing or testing a pattern."

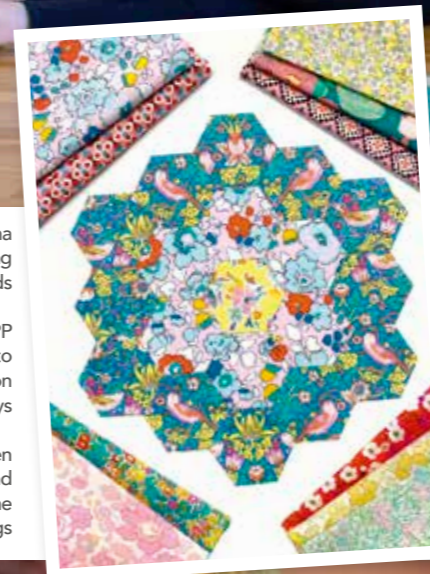
"On a challenging day, I may struggle to even want to go into my studio," admits Kate. "And those are the days that I try to make sure that I do." It's not about giving over huge amounts of time to it, or striving for perfection, but taking small and positive action for yourself. "Even if I just spend 15 minutes pressing and

sorting fabric to put away, those simple acts leave me feeling recharged. I also like to reach for my English Paper Piecing (EPP) projects on difficult days." This idea of taking positive action is very familiar to Yasmeen. "I always look forward to working on a project, as it will make me feel like I have accomplished something that day, even if everything else going on around me feels out of my control."

When she needs to go easy on herself, hand appliqué projects are Yasmeen's go-to. "It's such a portable technique that I can do anywhere. Some projects require a bit more prep to get to the stage of stitching, but I find that each part of the process is relaxing to do. I also like to do EPP and occasionally creating machine-pieced quilts. The methodical process of creating a block is very satisfying, especially when you see all your hard work come together at the end."

**In praise of slow**

"Quilting is a craft that requires focus, concentration and attention to detail," considers Kate. "Measure



Above: Donna enjoys her sewing space with her kids

Right: Kate's EPP projects help her to feel productive on difficult days

Below: Yasmeen finds time to hand appliqué in the evenings



Photo: Stuart Branton

incorrectly and you've potentially ruined a piece of fabric. A lack of focus can result in cut fingers. And don't forget the math involved!" It demands nothing less than full attention and there are no shortcuts. One must slow down and surrender to the absorbing nature of the craft.

A change of pace can bring so many benefits with it, though, and is known to help shift perspectives. Yasmeen, Kate and Donna have all discovered a fond affection for the languid speed of hand sewing, for this very reason. "It took me years to enjoy hand quilting," Donna confesses, "but I love it now. Every stitch kind of feels like I'm mending something that's bothering me that I haven't yet identified. It's hard to put it into words but let me tell you, it's a good feeling!"

"EPP has proven to be the most relaxing of all sewing techniques for me, personally," shares Kate. "I enjoy the simplicity of creating something entirely by hand stitching – I thread baste, rather than using glue."

The very practical satisfaction of hand-making is not to be underestimated. At a time when

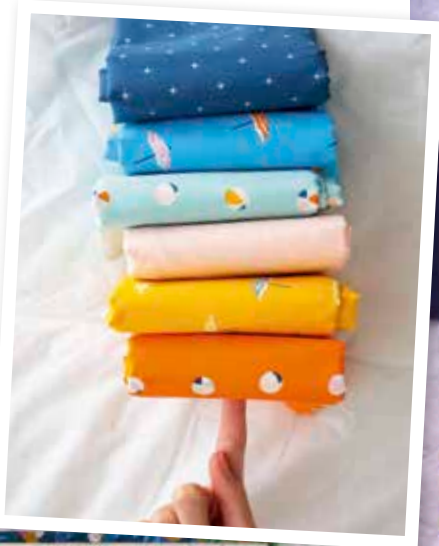
many are looking to reduce their screen time and pick up something practical in pursuit of peace, quilting is an obvious solution. "We live in a world that is predominantly driven by technology," asserts Yasmeen, "and the importance of using our hands for manual activities, such as quilting, is so vital to us as human beings." Hand quilting unites the hands and mind in one purpose, allowing the maker to simply be in the moment. And the physical results afterwards cast the unmistakable glow of a job well done. "I completely get absorbed in the task at hand and after I finish what I've been working on, I feel like I've accomplished something productive."

**Lean into what you love**

Being able to check in with yourself and identify a quilting process to aid a mood or mindset is the aim. And to get there? Simply start where you are and give yourself permission to play. For those seeking a mindful approach to their quilting, Yasmeen advises experimenting with more hand sewing projects. "Choose something that makes you feel so

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Left to right: Donna and Yasmeen recognise that working on a quilt block, hand sewing a quilt or even simply pulling fabrics for your next project can leave you feeling productive and rejuvenated



## MEET THE QUILTERS



### YASMEEN

Yasmeen is an advocate for slow sewing and its calming effects. She loves sharing her passion with others with her

hand appliqué patterns, video tutorials on Instagram and virtual teaching programmes on her website.

➤ [sandandstars.co.uk](http://sandandstars.co.uk)

📷 [sand.and.stars](https://www.instagram.com/sand.and.stars)



### KATE

Ohio-based quilt designer Kate shares her beautiful block patterns on her Etsy store. For her, quilting has been

a creative outlet, seeing her through challenging periods of her life and allowing her to slow down.

➤ [quiltwithkate.etsy.com](http://quiltwithkate.etsy.com)

📷 [katebasti](https://www.instagram.com/katebasti)



### DONNA

Donna loves making and designing modern quilt patterns. She finds that there's a certain thrill in seeing pieces

of fabric transformed into a fully fledged quilt!

➤ [xoxsew.com](http://xoxsew.com)

📷 [xoxsew](https://www.instagram.com/xoxsew)

excited that you really genuinely want to make it, not just because everyone else is making it," she urges. "It's also worth thinking about why you're making this project; is it for yourself or perhaps for someone you love? Where is it going to be used? This also applies to the colours you're choosing for your project. How do they make you feel?" It's a more intentional approach, but one that allows pursuit of what you love.

"What brings us joy and calms the mind may also be unique to each of us," says Kate. "I would suggest trying various aspects of quilting until you find what works best for you. Also, have the courage to explore all the different techniques, and don't be afraid of making mistakes along the way."

Mistakes are all part of the process. "Once in a while, go outside of your comfort zone and learn a new

technique," advises Donna, too. "Don't be discouraged when you make quilting mistakes. Instead, simply acknowledge them and move on. Quilting isn't a pageant. Your creations will always have inherent value, no matter your skill level."

So, what is the real unseen magic of quilting? The wellbeing benefits are abundant and cannot be distilled into a single element. "It's the whole experience of making a quilt," affirms Yasmeen. "Whether it's choosing fabrics that make you happy, losing track of time when you're in the methodical flow of stitching, or simply the cathartic reassurance of having the same project to return to time and again, like an old friend you can confide in silently."



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