

The Creative Journey: An Investment in Yourself

What I've Learned Through my Coloring Hobby

Introduction

Coloring is a well-known and accessible form of artistry, offering a diverse range of mediums and styles to explore. Through coloring, hobbyists can express creative visions using colored pencils, markers, crayons, watercolors, paints, or digital tools.

You might have become interested in coloring as a form of stress relief, to improve mental health, or to disconnect from technology.

However, despite many reasons to feel drawn to coloring and a wide range of affordable tools, you may find your curiosity stifled by societal perception, internal judgment, fear of failure, or lack of confidence.

Coloring is often associated with childhood and viewed through a simplistic and narrow lens. In today's productivity-driven society, we are conditioned to prioritize activities that lead directly to monetary gain or achievement of expected milestones. Anything that doesn't fit into this framework is dismissed as a waste of time. Consequently, many of us left coloring behind in childhood due to the demands of adulthood or the perception that we should move on to more "mature" interests.

Alongside these obstacles, the creative process presents its own challenges. Our passion to create can quickly be extinguished by *limiting beliefs*—feelings that our ideas aren't worth trying, that we can never measure up to others, or that we should be ashamed of making a mistake.

In this article, I aim to challenge these obstacles by sharing strategies I've learned in my own coloring hobby. Most importantly, I've learned that the creative process isn't about the final product—it's about the journey. The creative journey can serve as a powerful catalyst for personal growth, self-discovery, fulfillment, and overall well-being.

With these outcomes in mind, I invite you to challenge the obstacles standing in your way and embrace creativity in your own life.

Developing a creative process

For many, creative hobbies are intimidating. Overwhelm, frustration, or comparison may prevent you from starting or maintaining a creative hobby. Although coloring doesn't begin with a blank page, a new coloring page can still feel daunting.

In the past, I hesitated to start coloring because I doubted my ability to make color choices, properly execute a new technique, or avoid a mistake. Similarly, you may believe that you can never measure up to others, adding to the pressure. Even if you work up the courage to start, it's easy to become frustrated by what you've created and abandon the project. However, the value of any craft is not the result, but the development of the process.

If you don't know where to start or how to continue, a mindset shift can help you overcome these hurdles. In the following paragraphs, I share tools which may help you change your perspective.

Start small

The key to embarking on any creative journey is to start with small, manageable steps. First, cultivate a safe environment. Quiet the negative voice in your mind. Acknowledge that you don't need to share what you create with anyone; this journey is for you alone to enjoy. Be gentle with yourself and celebrate your choice to create. Recognize that by starting, you have already come far.

Begin by familiarizing yourself with your tools. Pick up a pencil, marker, or crayon and focus only on the implement in your hand. Practice holding your tool, moving your tool across a page, applying color, or creating small strokes. Keep doing this until you feel confident enough to begin a coloring page.

The more you practice moving your tool on the page and becoming comfortable with how it feels in your hand the easier starting becomes. Whether you create something to share with others or create only for yourself, this type of practice will develop your confidence over time.

Allow space for imperfection

One of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in any form of creative work is perfectionism. It's easy to develop an inner critic that doubts every decision and questions your self-worth. This constant fear of making a mistake not only undermines your confidence, but also paralyzes your ability to create.

Countless times in my coloring journey, I wanted to rip a page to shreds. I became frustrated because I colored outside the lines, made a mistake, or disliked my color scheme. Sometimes I became so discouraged I wanted to abandon the hobby altogether.

Due to societal pressure and our own biases towards conformity, we may feel that a mistake--literally or figuratively coloring outside the lines--is a cause for shame. However, mistakes don't indicate lack of worth or ability, but serve as the foundation for growth. To move forward in your abilities, you must accept the risk of imperfection and *reshape* your view of failure.

In creative pursuits, a mistake isn't an ending -- it's an opportunity to view something through a different lens and transform it. Novelist Nora Roberts emphasizes the idea that mistakes aren't absolute. Said Roberts, "Even if I'm not writing well, I write through it. I can fix a bad page. I can't fix a blank one" (*Writing advice*, 2022).

Releasing an idea from your mind onto paper is unsettling. Your work is now on display, visible, *exposed*. Now that you've created something tangible, you need to acknowledge your current level of ability. Don't judge yourself too harshly at this stage because your process has just begun.

Even among great artists, we wouldn't recognize the first draft of a great work of literature, an early sketch of a renowned painting, or the first few chisel strikes in a block of marble that will become a magnificent sculpture. Instead of letting early creations discourage you, recognize they're simply stepping stones on the path towards the abilities you'll eventually develop.

The difference between my early and my most recent coloring pages is striking. The scenes from my most recent pages are smooth, cohesive, and rich with dimension. I've perfected lighting, shadows, textures, and realism techniques. However, these skills didn't improve out of rigid expectations or external pressure, but by allowing myself the freedom to explore without fear of failure. Improvement was the natural outcome of trusting myself to grow at my own pace.

Remember that the journey is lifelong

Comparison is the thief of joy and the enemy of creativity. There will always be someone more skilled, more experienced, or more knowledgeable in any area you pursue. Initially, this realization may cause you to question if your hobby is even worth trying.

An antidote to comparison is the idea that growth is a lifelong journey, and your journey is unique. As long as you're alive, you'll be in a continual state of growth and change. Recognize that any skill isn't built overnight, but through years of dedication and countless hours of practice. Rather than becoming paralyzed by what you can't do, recognize that in time, these limitations will change.

By participating in online coloring forums, I learned to seek inspiration from others rather than becoming discouraged. I focus on one technique at a time and allow others' work to become a starting point from which to develop my skills.

In your journey, recognize that you won't be able to create something in the same way as someone else. You may be at a different stage of the journey, or there might be other abilities you bring to the table. Instead of trying to replicate the whole picture, observe aspects of others' work and allow them to serve as a catalyst for your own growth.

Focus on your personal growth instead of the achievements of others. Find joy in creating something unique and recognize that the only measure of progress is you.

Creativity and self-discovery

Creativity plays a vital role in self-discovery. In our productivity-focused society, the demands of the outside world are relentless. Working, maintaining households, caring for family members, or fulfilling obligations leaves limited time to focus inwards. Adulthood often forces us to abandon creative outlets to keep up with the demands of life.

Additionally, success is often measured by the outcome we produce. Society tends to value activities that advance our careers, increase our income, or enhance our skill sets in the eyes of employers. However, we're not machines, and our value isn't tied to what we can produce. Our skills in the workforce can be replaced, but what can't be replaced is our unique human ability to imagine and create.

Creativity—expressed through art, sculpture, handicrafts, and storytelling—has fueled humanity since the start of civilization. As articulated by Kumar and colleagues, "Creativity is undeniably one of humanity's most valued traits; the capacity to produce new ideas, innovations, and art is perhaps the most striking characteristic of the human brain" (2024).

As one of the most influential scientists of the 20th century, Albert Einstein understood the value of creativity. According to Einstein, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research" (*Quote origin*, 2013).

Engaging in a creative hobby such as coloring is a small yet meaningful way to reclaim humanity and find personal fulfillment in this chaotic world. Creativity is an outlet to reclaim autonomy of your choices, affirm your desires, and gain confidence in your abilities.

In the next few paragraphs, I share recommendations that can help to shift your focus away from a productivity mindset towards the authentic journey of self-discovery.

Reclaim autonomy of your time and choices

Many areas of our lives might make us feel burdened by disappointments and situations beyond our control. We must work to sustain ourselves, keep up with household tasks, and cope with unexpected financial burdens or illnesses. These demands can make it seem impossible to set aside time for a hobby that doesn't contribute toward external markers of "success".

Making time for creativity is a means of alleviating the overwhelm instead of to it. Constantly pushing through life—task after task—can quickly lead to burnout, apathy, mental

health struggles, and decreased self-esteem. Choosing to spend time on hobbies that create a sense of personal fulfillment isn't a waste of time—it's an investment in *yourself*.

The inner work begins when you give yourself permission to make your own choices. Stop focusing on what you think you *should* do, how others may view you, or what others will say. Recognize that every action is *your* choice. Give yourself permission to choose activities for the sole reason that they bring you joy. Overcome feelings of hesitation by selecting tools and art styles that excite you.

This is the first step towards reclaiming power over the inner narrative of judgment and finding a sense of autonomy. It's not selfish -- it's vital for restoration. The more often you make choices for yourself, the easier it'll become to embrace a sense of individuality and find true freedom.

Affirm your ideas with action

It's easy to feel discouraged about your ideas. Our inner voice, shaped by years of societal judgment and the opinions of others, often tells us our ideas are silly or a waste of time. Even with a strong support network cheering you on, encouragement can feel hollow if you don't believe in yourself.

At some point, you must confront the truth: often, the biggest obstacle standing in your way is yourself. No one knows your desires and aspirations better than you do. Instead of immediately dismissing your ideas, practice affirming them. View coloring or any creative outlet as an opportunity to manifest your ideas into reality. Even if the vision is not perfectly executed, creating is a conscious choice that nurtures a sense of self-worth and curiosity as you see your ideas brought to life.

Creative hobbies are all around us, available and waiting to be picked up. Every time you show up for a hobby that brings you joy, you're showing up for yourself. With each small step, you're building the confidence to pursue what truly matters to you.

Celebrate your growth

Often, we don't recognize how much our abilities have changed until we compare where we started to where we are now.

Much like starting small, the best way to maintain your motivation and build your confidence is to celebrate every small win. Every step forward—whether it's learning a new technique, mastering a tool, or simply setting aside the time to engage in your hobby—is worth acknowledging.

For me, consistency and routine are challenging, but allowing myself the freedom to pursue this creative outlet without the pressure of obligation or perfection has been transformative. Now, I can reflect on my early coloring pages and recognize a clear difference in my current

work. The only way to fully experience this type of growth is to celebrate each small step along the journey. By celebrating my progress, I've continued to build confidence in my potential.

Creativity as a tool for well-being

The benefits of engaging in a creative hobby extend beyond self-care. Research shows that creativity is a powerful tool for improving well-being, fostering a sense of purpose, and relieving physical and psychological suffering.

What is art therapy?

Over the past 80 years, art therapy has developed as a method to promote healing in physical and mental illnesses. During his recovery from tuberculosis in the 1940s, artist and author Adrian Hill discovered that making art released stressors from illness and improved his ability to engage in the present (Cheng et al., 2021). Today, art therapy is facilitated in structured environments by trained professionals.

The benefits of art therapy

Art therapy focuses on the creation process rather than the "quality" of what is produced (Cheng et al., 2021). This process strengthens the connection with the authentic self, initiates positive focus, and promotes a flow state.

Throughout our lives, we experience a multitude of emotions. Triggering situations invoke frustration, anger, sadness, or disappointment that build up without an outlet for release. Art serves as a means of emotional expression beyond verbal communication, and creativity is a direct connection to the subconscious. Immersion in creativity releases emotions through sensory experiences (Kumar et al., 2024). This expression leads to discovery of the authentic self and conception of meaning.

When an activity meets a certain challenge level and requires continuous engagement from the brain and body, the individual enters a state of flow. In flow state, subconscious action takes over, generating positive focus, quieting negative thoughts, and connecting with the present.

Research supports the therapeutic benefits of creative expression. For individuals with dementia, creating and appreciating visual art improved cognitive function, well-being, quality of life, and physical symptoms of dementia (Emblad et al., 2021).

Similarly, a randomized control trial determined that weekly art therapy sessions reduced anxiety and improved self-concept among children with asthma for up to 6 months after the conclusion of therapy (Cheng et al., 2023). Through art therapy, individuals with chemotherapy experienced a reduction in depression and fatigue (Cheng et al., 2023).

As Kumar and colleagues explain, "the creative person can be understood as being in a process to reach self-actualization and to develop characteristics that are related to mental

health, such as subjective well-being, resilience, optimism, quality of life, and other aspects emphasized by positive psychology” (2024).

Conclusion

In a world that focuses on productivity and tangible results, the impact of creative hobbies is often overlooked. It’s easy to let comparison, perfectionism, and doubt stand in the way of creating.

I encourage you to shift your focus away from the result and view the creative journey as an investment in yourself. Recognize that the creative process is a unique space to unearth passions and connect with your unique human ability to imagine.

Kumar and colleagues highlight the benefits of creativity beyond the final product, noting, “Creativity leads to the creation of something in the outside world, but simultaneously, it also has consequences every time on the inner self, leading to strengthening of self and inner resilience, validation and enhancement of esteem, relief from pain and distress, and restoration of order” (2024).

Whether it’s through coloring or another hobby—such as painting, writing, pottery, or crochet—allow yourself the freedom to grow at your own pace. You may find it easier to begin this journey by starting small, embracing imperfection, and resisting the temptation to compare yourself to others. Continue to honor your ideas with action and reclaim autonomy over your energy.

No moment on this journey is wasted. The creative process is not about the finished product, but about new insights you uncover within yourself. Each step, whether you view it as a success or a failure, is a valuable part of your evolution. Remember, growth is a lifelong journey.

As you continue to practice these tools and strategies, you’ll discover the beauty of the process. It’s not about being an expert, or the best. It’s about embracing your ability to see yourself and the world in new and fulfilling ways.

References

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