Why You Should Start Drawing Again — Even If You Are Not an Artist

How a few minutes with a pencil can reduce stress, quiet a busy mind, encourage flow, and support emotional well-being.

When was the last time you sat down with a pencil and a blank piece of paper and drew something?

For many of us, the answer might be years ago.

As children, we drew without giving much thought to whether we were "good" at it. We doodled in notebooks, drew pictures of our families, invented characters, and filled pages with shapes and designs.

Then we grew up.

Somewhere along the way, many of us decided that drawing was for artistic people. If we were not particularly talented at it, we stopped.

But perhaps we gave it up too soon.

Research suggests that drawing and other forms of art-making may offer some intriguing psychological benefits. Drawing can help reduce stress, focus our attention on the present, provide another way to express emotions, exercise visual and motor skills, and even help us enter that wonderfully absorbing psychological state known as **flow**.

And here is the good news:

You do not have to be an artist to benefit.

Drawing May Help Quiet a Busy Mind

One reason drawing can be calming is surprisingly simple: **It gives our brains somewhere else to go.**

When we are stressed or anxious, our thoughts can become repetitive. We replay yesterday's problems, anticipate tomorrow's difficulties, or repeatedly think about something we cannot immediately solve.

Drawing demands a different kind of attention.

We focus on lines, shapes, colors, and movements. Our eyes and hands coordinate. We make small decisions about what comes next.

Instead of telling ourselves, “Stop worrying,” we are giving our brains something else to do.

Research provides some support for this idea. In one study of 39 healthy adults, researchers measured levels of cortisol—a hormone associated with the body’s stress response—before and after 45 minutes of art-making.

Cortisol levels decreased significantly after the session. In fact, approximately 75 percent of participants experienced a reduction.

Perhaps most interestingly, previous artistic experience did not significantly affect the results.

In other words, **you do not have to be Picasso to potentially experience the benefits.**

Drawing Can Bring Us Into the Present

There is something about drawing that resembles mindfulness.

Think about what happens when you doodle. You watch a line develop. You notice the movement of the pencil. You decide where it should go next. Perhaps you become absorbed in a pattern that’s beginning to emerge.

Your attention has shifted from everything else demanding it to what is happening **right now**.

That is increasingly difficult to accomplish in a world filled with texts, emails, social media, news alerts, and other notifications competing for our attention.

Drawing gives our attention one place to land.

And sometimes that may be exactly what an overstimulated mind needs.

Drawing Can Help Us Find Flow

Drawing may also help create the conditions for what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi famously called **flow**.

Flow is that wonderful experience of becoming so immersed in something that we lose track of time and become less aware of everything going on around us.

You have probably experienced it.

Maybe it happens while gardening, cooking, exercising, playing music, doing a puzzle, or becoming absorbed in a favorite hobby. You look at the clock and suddenly wonder, *where did the last hour go?*

Research suggests that sketching can help facilitate this experience. In one experimental study, participants who were able to sketch while completing a creative task reported greater flow and found the task less difficult than those who had to develop their ideas mentally before drawing.

Another art-making study found that participants spontaneously described experiences resembling flow—becoming absorbed or losing themselves in what they were creating.

There is an important lesson here:

The benefit does not necessarily come from creating a beautiful picture. It may come from becoming absorbed in creating it.

Pictures Can Sometimes Say What Words Cannot

Drawing may also provide something psychologically important that conversation cannot always provide: **a nonverbal language for emotion.**

We don't always have words for what we are feeling.

Sometimes our emotions are complicated. Sometimes several feelings exist simultaneously. And sometimes we know that something is bothering us but cannot quite explain what it is.

Drawing gives us another route for expression.

Colors, shapes, symbols, images, and even scribbles can represent internal experiences without requiring us to put everything neatly into sentences.

But there is an interesting wrinkle in the research.

Drawing does not necessarily improve our mood simply because we put negative feelings onto paper. Some research suggests that drawing something *unrelated* to what is upsetting us can sometimes improve mood more effectively than drawing the distressing experience itself.

That reinforces an important psychological principle: Sometimes we do not need to solve or analyze every uncomfortable thought.

Sometimes temporarily redirecting our attention can be helpful too.

Drawing May Even Help Us Remember

Drawing may have another surprising benefit: **It can help us remember.**

Researchers have identified what has become known as the **“drawing effect.”**

Across a series of seven experiments, people tended to remember information better when they drew it than when they wrote it down.

Why might that happen?

Drawing requires us to process information in several ways at once. We think about what something means, visualize it, and then use our hands to represent it.

Researchers believe this combination of semantic, visual, and motor processing helps create a richer memory.

So, when we draw, our brains are not simply being creative.

Our eyes, hands, attention, and memory systems are working together.

The 10-Minute Drawing Reset

Here is the part I especially like:

You can test this on yourself.

No art class.

No expensive supplies.

No artistic talent required.

All you need is a piece of paper, something to draw with, and **10 minutes**.

Set a timer.

Then start drawing.

Doodle. Draw circles. Sketch the coffee cup in front of you. Make geometric patterns. Draw a tree. Create an imaginary place. Fill the page with squiggles.

There is only one rule: Don’t judge what you are creating.

This is not an art contest.

For those 10 minutes, forget about whether the picture is “good.”

Instead, become curious about what is happening **inside you**.

Notice the movement of your hand.

Notice where your attention goes.

Notice whether your thoughts begin to slow down.

Notice whether you become absorbed in what you are doing.

And when the timer goes off, do not grade your drawing.

Ask yourself something much more important:

How do I feel now compared with 10 minutes ago?

That is the experiment.

The goal is not to create a better picture.

It is to see whether 10 minutes of drawing creates a different state of mind.

Maybe Children Know Something We Have Forgotten

Perhaps there is an even bigger lesson here.

Children do not necessarily draw because they are trying to produce something worthy of hanging in a museum.

They draw because drawing is fun.

As adults, however, we tend to judge activities by how well we perform them.

If we are not good at drawing, we stop drawing.

If we are not good singers, we stop singing.

If we are not good dancers, we stop dancing.

Maybe that is unfortunate.

Not everything we do needs to result in achievement.

Some activities are valuable simply because of what happens to us while we are doing them.

So sometime this week, find a pencil and a blank piece of paper.

Give yourself 10 minutes.

Do not worry about being an artist.

Just draw.

You may discover that the most important thing you create is not the picture on the page.

It is the change in how you feel.

Small changes, practiced consistently, can make a big difference.

This is the image to use for Substack on Unsplash.

A Person's Hand Sketching in a Spiral Notebook — by Arkan Izz Zaydan Maulana.