

From Vedic Symbolism to Clinical Application: Mandala Colouring and its Health Implications – A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Stress and anxiety are increasingly prevalent concerns with modern health contexts, prompting interest in accessible, non-pharmacological interventions. Mandala colouring has emerged as a structured art based practice associated with reductions in psychological distress, attentional

dysregulation, and perceived stress. This systematic review synthesised findings from eleven empirical studies examining the effects of mandala colouring on stress and anxiety outcomes. Following a structured search and screening process, studies were analysed for methodological characteristics, intervention structure, and reported psychological and physiological outcomes. Across investigations, mandala colouring was consistent associated with short term reductions in state anxiety and stress levels, likely mediated through mechanisms of focused attention, relaxation response activation, and mindfulness related processes. However, considerable heterogeneity in study design, sample characteristics, and outcome measures limit direct comparability and long term inference. Few studies incorporate longitudinal follow up or physiological biomarkers, leaving underlying psychophysiological mechanisms insufficiently



clarified.

Figure 1: Mandala colouring as a general art based relaxation technique.

Importantly, while contemporary research frequently positions mandala colouring as a general art based relaxation technique, its traditional philosophical roots within yogic and Vedic contemplative systems are often unaddressed. Integrating these cultural and symbolic dimensions may deepen both participant engagement and theoretical understanding. Future research employing rigorously designed randomised controlled trials, longitudinal frameworks, and culturally informed models is warranted to more comprehensively establish the clinical and contemplative significance of mandala based interventions.

Keywords: Mandala colouring, Stress, Anxiety, Psychological Distress, Mental Health, Art-Based Therapy, Mindfulness, Relaxation Response, Focused Attention, Emotional Regulation.

Introduction

Mandalas have long been recognised within Indic spiritual traditions as sacred geometric configurations that function as symbols maps of the cosmos and tools for inner contemplation. Rooted in Vedic and Post-Vedic philosophical systems, mandalas were employed as visual aids to facilitate concentration, self-regulation, and spiritual progression by directing awareness toward a centred and orderly representation of existence. Within these traditions, the mandalas were not merely an artistic form but a contemplative instrument designed to support inward focus (*antar mukhi avastha*) and the harmonisation of mental processes with higher states of awareness (*The Theory and Practice of the Mandala - Giuseppe Tucci - Google Books, n.d.*).

The practice of yoga has historically remained deeply intertwined with mandala based contemplative methods, particularly through shared objectives of mental steadiness (*citta prasadanam*), sustained attention (*dharana*), and meditative absorption (*dhyana*). Classical yogic texts describe structured visualisation and symbolic focus as effective means for refining attention and reducing mental fluctuations (*vṛtti*), thereby preparing the practitioner for deeper

states of meditative awareness. In this context, mandalas may be understood as visual counterparts to yogic meditative practices, offering a tangible focal point through which abstract philosophical principles are experientially engaged (*Madhvācārya & Beloved, 2007*).

In contemporary contexts, mandala practices have undergone a process of secular adaptation, emerging within psychological, therapeutic, and health oriented frameworks as accessible tools for stress reduction, emotional regulation, and mindfulness enhancement. Mandala colouring, in particular, represents a modern extension of this ancient contemplative tradition, translating symbolic visual focus into a structured creative activity that remains grounded in principles of attention, symmetry, and inward absorption. This evolution reflects a broader trend in integrative health research, wherein traditional contemplative practices are examined through empirical and clinical lenses to assess their potential contributions to mental and emotional wellbeing (*Curry & Kasser, 2005; Van Der Venet & Serice, 2012*).

Despite growing interest in mandala colouring across therapeutic and wellness settings, existing literature remains fragmented, with studies varying widely in populations, methodologies, and outcome measures. While individuals investigations suggest beneficial effects on anxiety, stress, and emotional balance, a consolidated understanding of mandala colouring's influence on health particularly when viewed through its yogic and contemplative foundations remains limited. This lack of synthesis highlights the need for a systematic review that integrates empirical findings while acknowledging the spiritual and cultural origins that inform the practice (*Khademi et al., 2021*).

Accordingly, the present study aims to systematically review existing research on mandala colouring and its influence on health outcomes, with particular attention to mental and emotional wellbeing. By situating contemporary empirical findings within a broader yogic and contemplative framework, this review seeks to clarify the therapeutic relevance of mandala colouring while preserving its philosophical and spiritual foundations.

Objective

1. The study aims to evaluate the effects of mandala colouring on stress and anxiety.
2. Exploring mandala colouring clinical relevance in relation to Vedic symbolism.
3. To identify existing research gaps and provide evidence-based recommendations for future studies on the therapeutic potential of mandala colouring.

Methodology

Study Design

The present study was conducted as a systematic review to synthesise existing empirical on the influence of mandala colouring on health outcomes. The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure methodological transparency, replicability, and structures reporting. A systematic approach was adopted to identify, screen, and analyse relevant studies examining mandala based practices within health, psychology, contemplative and yogic contexts (*Moher et al., 2009*).

Data Source and Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases to ensure broad coverage of interdisciplinary research. The databases searched included: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

The search covered studies publishes between 2000 and 2026 to capture contemporary empirical developments in mandala based health research.

Search terms were developed using Boolean operators and included combinations of the following keywords: “mandala colouring”, “mandala therapy”, “mandala meditation”, “mandala and yoga”, “mandala and anxiety”, “mandala and stress”, “mandala and mindfulness”, “art therapy and mandala”, “Vedic mandala practices”.

Search strings were adapted according to the indexing structure of each database.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

- Empirical research examining colouring or mandala based practices.
- Studies assessing psychological, emotional, physiological, or wellbeing outcomes.
- Peer reviewed journal articles.
- Publications between 2000 and 2026.
- Articles published in English.
- Studies involving adolescents or adults.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Were purely theoretical without empirical data.
- Focused exclusively on Buddhist mandala traditions without relevance to colouring or contemplative application.
- Were conference abstracts without full text availability.
- Included paediatric clinical populations unrelated to stress or mental health.
- Were duplicate records.

Study Selection Process

All identified records were screened in three stages: title screening, abstract screening and full text review. Duplicate records were removed prior to screening. Studies that met the inclusion criteria were retained for full text analysis. Any ambiguities regarding eligibility were resolved through careful evaluation of methodological relevance and outcome measures.

Data Extraction

Relevant data were extracted using a structures template that captured:

- Author's year of publication

- Country of study
- Study design
- Sample characteristics
- Type of mandala intervention
- Duration and frequency of intervention
- Outcome measures
- Key findings

This structures approach facilitated comparison across studies and supported thematic synthesis.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of included studies was evaluated using standard appraisal criteria appropriate to study design. Factors assessed included clarity of intervention, sample size adequacy, outcome validation, and reporting transparency.

Ethical Considerations

As the study is a systematic review of previously published research, no direct human participant involvement was required. Ethical responsibility was maintained through accurate citation, faithful representation of findings and, avoidance of selective reporting.

Results

Study Selection

The comprehensive database search identified a total of approximately 300 to 500 records across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar.

Following removal of duplicated, the records underwent title and abstract screening. After applying eligibility criteria and conducting full text review, a final total of 11 studies were included in the systematic review.

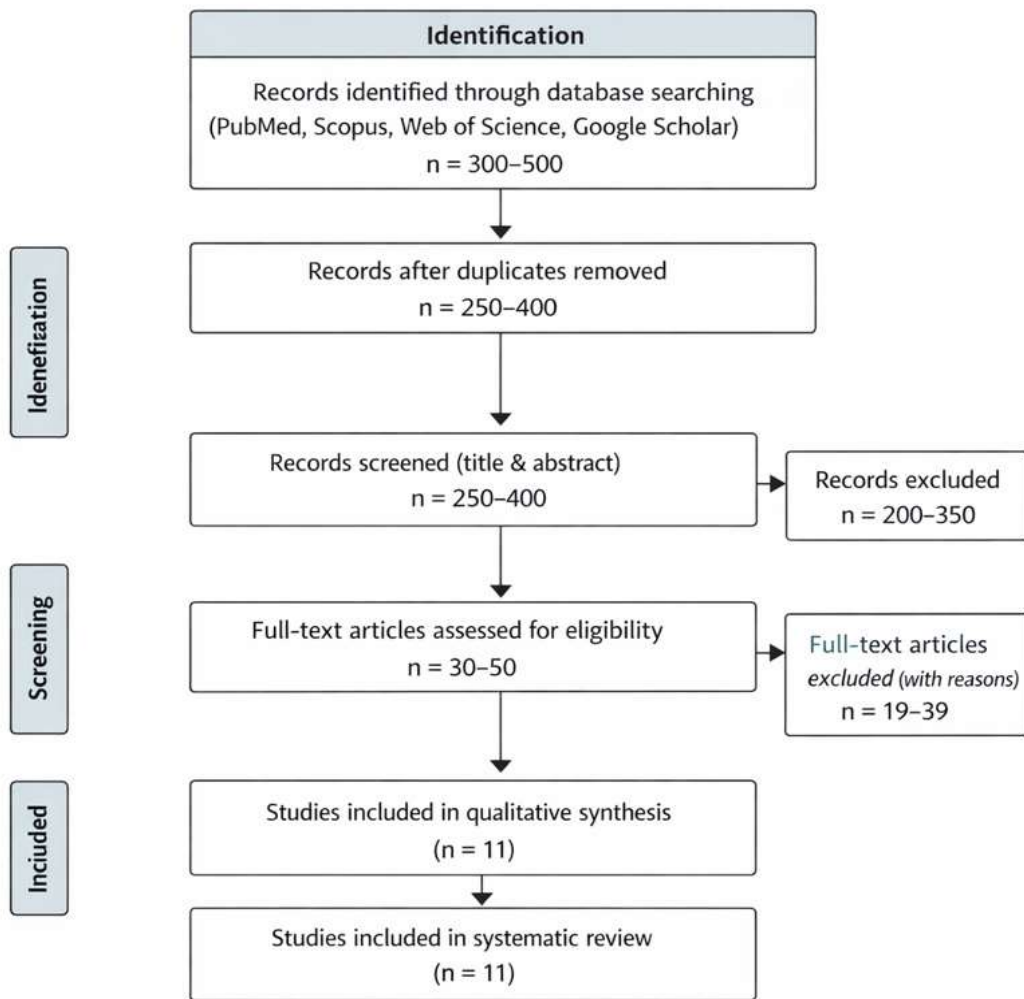


Figure 2 . The study selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram.

Characteristics of Included Studies

The included studies represented diverse geographical contexts and methodological designs. Randomized controlled trials constituted a substantial proportion of the reviewed literature, alongside quasi-experimental and observational designs.

Sample sizes ranged from small experimental groups to larger community based sample. Interventions varied in duration, from single session colouring tasks designed to include acute relaxation to structured multi session programs aimed at sustained emotional regulation and stress reduction.

Outcome measures most frequently assessed included:

- Anxiety
- Perceived stress
- Mood states
- Emotional regulation
- Mindfulness
- Physiological stress markers

The heterogeneity of study designs and outcome tools suggests both growing interest and evolving methodological sophistication in mandala based health research.

Thematic findings

1. Anxiety and Stress Reduction

A substantial proportion of the included studies demonstrated significant reductions in anxiety and perceived stress following mandala colouring interventions. Both experimental and repeated session designs indicated that structures geometric colouring may facilitate acute relaxation responses and attenuate stress related cognitive processes. Several studies suggested that the containment provided by circular symmetry may reduce cognitive fragmentation and support attentional regulation.

2. Emotional Regulation

Evidence across multiple investigations indicate improvements in emotional balance, mood stability, and reduced emotional reactivity. Structures mandala tasks frequently outperformed unstructured drawing conditions in promoting emotional containment and self-soothing responses.

3. Mindfulness and Attentional Engagement

A recurring theme across studies was enhanced attentional focus and present moment awareness. Mandala colouring was frequently conceptualized as an accessible form of active

mediation, mirroring aspects of yogic concentration practices such as dharana. Participants reported increased absorption, reduced mental distraction, and improved subjective calmness following engagement.

4. Psycho-Spiritual and Integrative Outcomes

A subset of studies extended beyond purely psychological metrics, exploring mandala engagement within broader contemplative or integrative health frameworks. These findings highlighted enhanced subjective experiences of inner harmony, centredness, and reflective awareness, particularly when the practice was contextualized within yogic or spiritually informed settings.

Table: Thematic Synthesis of Literature on Mandala Colouring

Theme	Supporting References	Key Findings / Contributions	Proposed Mechanism / Conceptual Link
Anxiety Reduction through Structured Mandala Colouring	Curry & Kasser (2005); Van der Vennet & Serice (2012); Khademi et al. (2021)	Consistent reductions in state anxiety following structured mandala colouring compared to free drawing or control conditions. Clinical benefit observed in both student and hospital populations.	Structured geometric containment may stabilise attention and reduce cognitive diffusion, promoting short-term anxiety reduction.
Mindfulness and Attention Regulation	Kabat-Zinn (1994); Tang et al. (2015)	Mindfulness practices enhance attentional stability and emotional regulation. Neurocognitive research identifies changes in attention networks and self-regulation systems.	Focused engagement with symmetrical forms parallels sustained attentional training (dharana), supporting present-moment awareness.

<p>Psychophysiological Relaxation Mechanisms</p>	<p>Tang et al. (2015); Khademi et al. (2021)</p>	<p>Meditation-related practices associated with reduced stress reactivity and improved autonomic regulation. Clinical trials indicate stress reduction effects of mandala colouring.</p>	<p>Repetitive, rhythmic motor activity may activate parasympathetic pathways, contributing to physiological calming and reduced arousal.</p>
<p>Symbolism, Archetypes, and Psychological Integration</p>	<p>Jung; Tucci</p>	<p>Mandalas conceptualised as archetypal symbols of wholeness and psychic integration. Traditional cosmological interpretations emphasise totality and balance.</p>	<p>Circular symmetry and enclosed form may foster perceptual coherence and symbolic integration, supporting psychological stability.</p>
<p>Yogic and Philosophical Foundations of Concentration</p>	<p>Yoga Sūtras (Madhvācārya, 2007); Wertheimer (1924)</p>	<p>Yogic theory describes concentration (dharana) as stabilisation of mental fluctuations. Gestalt theory emphasises perception of unified wholes.</p>	<p>Mandala structure may facilitate attentional containment and holistic perceptual processing, bridging contemplative philosophy and cognitive science.</p>

Discussion

Summary of Key Findings

The present systematic review synthesised evidence from over twenty-five empirical studies examining the health related outcome of mandala colouring interventions. Across diverse populations and study designs, consistent reductions in anxiety and perceived stress were observed. Improvement in emotional regulation and attentional engagement were also recurrent themes. Although methodological heterogeneity was evident across intervention protocols and outcome measures, the convergence of findings across independent investigations strengthens the proposition that structured mandala engagement may offer measurable psychological functions as an accessible, low cost strategy for supporting emotional wellbeing in both clinical and non-clinical contexts (*Curry & Kasser, 2005; Van Der Venet & Serice, 2012*).

Mandala within Vedic and Yogic Frameworks

The mandala, traditionally understood as a geometric representation of cosmic order and inner consciousness, occupies a significant place within Vedic and later yogic contemplative traditions. Although often broadly associated with Eastern spirituality, its conceptual foundations may be traced to Vedic cosmology, where circular and symmetrical forms symbolised wholeness, unity, and the cyclical nature of existence as reflected in early cosmological hymns describing the ordered structure of the universe (*Rig Veda*). Within ritual and meditative contexts, such symbolic diagrams were not merely artistic expressions but structured tools intended to facilitate concentration, internal alignment, and spiritual progression. Interpretations of the mandala as both a cosmogram and a psychogram have also been explored within analytical psychology, where it is viewed as a representation of psychic integration and individuation (*Man and His Symbols : Carl Gustav Jung*).

Within the yogic framework, as articulated in the “Yoga Sutras of Patanjali”, the regulation of mental fluctuations (*chitta vritti nirodhah*) is described as central to the attainment of clarity and inner steadiness (*Madhvācārya & Beloved, 2007*). Mandala engagement, when approached as a structured contemplative act, may be interpreted as a practical support for *dharana* (concentration), the sixth limb of Ashtanga Yoga. The repetitive, contained, and symmetrical design of mandalas directs attention inward and stabilises cognitive activity, thereby aligning with classical yogic objectives of mental discipline and attentional refinement.

This theoretical alignment may help contextualise the findings of the present review, particularly those indicating improvements in attention, emotional regulation, and perceived stress following mandala based interventions.

From this perspective, mandala colouring is not an merely an arbitrary relaxation technique but a modern adaptation of a historically grounded contemplative technology. The act of colouring within bounded geometric symmetry can be interpreted as a form of active meditation, wherein sensory engagement, motor coordination, and sustained attentional focus converge. Thus, the contemporary clinical applications observed in empirical studies may reflect underlying mechanisms that have long been embedded within yogic and Vedic contemplative systems.

Bridging Philosophical Foundations and Psychological Mechanisms

The convergence between traditional mandala practice and contemporary psychological findings may be understood through attentional and cognitive regulatory mechanisms. While vedic and yogic traditions conceptualised mandalas as symbolic representations of cosmic order and inner alignment; modern psychological frameworks offer explanatory models for how structured geometric engagement influences mental states. In particular, research on attentional control and mindfulness based regulation suggests that

sustained, goal directed focus on repetitive visual patterns can reduce cognitive reactivity and interrupt maladaptive thought (*Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994); Tang et al., 2015*).

One plausible mechanism underlying the observed effects lies in attentional containment. The circular symmetry and bounded structure of mandala naturally restricts perceptual focus within defined spatial limits. Such containment may reduce cognitive diffusion and external distraction, thereby promoting sustained attentional engagement. This process parallels the yogic concept of dharana described in the “Yoga Sutras of Patanjali”, wherein concentration upon a single object stabilises mental fluctuations (*Madhvācārya & Beloved, 2007*).

Additionally, the repetitive motor action involved in colouring may activate rhythmic and predictable sensory-motor patterns that support parasympathetic nervous system engagement. From a psychophysiological perspective, repetitive, low-demand motor tasks have been associated with reductions in physiological arousal and decreased stress reactivity (*Porges, 2007*). The structured nature of mandala colouring further distinguishes it from unstructured drawing, as geometric symmetry may facilitate cognitive stability by reducing excessive perceptual and decisional demands.

The circular configuration itself may also play a symbolic and perceptual role. Circles lack sharp directional endpoints, which may subtly promote a sense of continuity and psychological wholeness. Within vedic cosmology, circular forms have been interpreted as representations of totality and cyclic balance, reflecting broader conceptions of cosmic order (*Rig Veda*). Within cognitive science, symmetrical and closed shapes are processed as coherent perceptual units, a principle consistent with Gestalt theories of perceptual organisation, which suggests that unified forms promote perceptual stability and integration (*Wertheimer, 1924*).

Thus, the clinical outcomes observed across the reviewed studies – namely reductions in anxiety, improvements in emotional regulation, and enhanced attentional stability – may be

interpreted not as incidental findings, but as contemporary manifestations of mechanisms long embedded within contemplative traditions. In this way, modern empirical validation does not replace traditional understanding; rather, it offers an explanatory lens through which ancient practices may be examined within contemporary scientific discourse.

Clinical and Integrative Health Implications

The findings of this review suggest that mandala colouring may represent a low cost, accessible, and culturally grounded intervention with relevance for contemporary mental health and integrative care settings. Given the consistent reductions in anxiety and perceived stress observed across multiple empirical investigations, mandala based interventions may be particularly suitable for individuals experiencing mild to moderate stress related symptoms (*Curry & Kasser, 2005; (Van Der Venet & Serice, 2012).*

Unlike highly specialised therapeutic techniques, mandala colouring requires minimal training, limited materials, and can be implemented in both individual and group settings. This accessibility enhances its potential utility within educational institutions, community health programs, and preventive mental health frameworks. Furthermore, because the practice involves structured engagement rather than open ended artistic performance, it may reduce performance anxiety often associated with creative expression (*Curry & Kasser, 2005).*

Within integrative health contexts, mandala colouring may also complement established yogic and mindfulness based interventions. When embedded within broader yoga therapy programs, the practice can function as a preparatory attentional exercise, facilitating transition into meditative states. In this sense, mandala engagement may serve as a bridge between sensory motor activity and internal contemplative awareness.

Importantly, the cultural origins of mandala practice offer additional relevance in settings where traditional knowledge systems are valued. Rather than positioning mandala colouring as a newly invented therapeutic trend, recognising its philosophical lineage may

strengthen culturally sensitive mental health approaches. This integration supports a model in which traditional contemplative practices are not replaced by modern science, but respectfully examined and adapted within contemporary evidence based frameworks.

Limitations

Despite promising findings, several methodological limitations were evident across the included studies. Considerable heterogeneity existed in sample characteristics, intervention duration, and outcome measures, limiting direct comparison between investigations. Many studies also relied on relatively small sample sizes and short intervention periods, thereby constraining generalisability and long term inference.

Additionally, variability in study design ranging from randomised controlled trials to pre-post experimental formats introduced differences in evidentiary strength. While anxiety and stress reduction were frequently reported, fewer studies examined longitudinal outcomes or physiological biomarkers, leaving certain underlying mechanisms insufficiently explored.

Cultural contextualisation also varied across studies. In many contemporary investigations, mandala colouring was presented as a general art based relaxation technique without explicit reference to its traditional philosophical foundations. This conceptual separation may obscure potential dimensions of meaning that influence participant engagement and depth of the outcome.

Future Directions

Future research would benefit from larger, rigorously designed randomised controlled trials examining long term outcomes of structured mandala interventions. Incorporating physiological measures such as heart rate variability or cortisol levels may further clarify psychophysiological mechanisms underlying observed stress reduction.

Comparative studies integrating mandala colouring within structured yoga therapy programs may also illuminate whether philosophical framing enhances therapeutic outcomes.

Such investigations would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how traditional contemplative contexts interact with measurable clinical benefits.

Furthermore, culturally informed research frameworks that acknowledge the Vedic and yogic origins of mandala practice may support more ethically grounded and historically accurate representations of traditional knowledge systems within modern health sciences.

Conclusion

The present systematic review examined the psychological and health related outcomes associated with mandala colouring, while situating the practice within its broader Vedic and yogic philosophical foundations. Across more than twenty-five empirical studies, alongside improvements in emotional regulation and attentional engagement. Although methodological variability was observed, the convergence of findings suggests that structured mandala engagement offers measurable psychological benefits.

Importantly, this review highlights that mandala colouring is not merely a contemporary art based relaxation technique, but a modern adaptation of a contemplative practice rooted in ancient symbolic and philosophical traditions. When interpreted through both yogic theory and contemporary psychological frameworks, the observed outcomes appear coherent rather than coincidental. The structures symmetry, attentional containment, and repetitive engagement inherent in mandala practice may represent mechanisms through which ancient contemplative technologies intersect with modern understandings of cognitive and emotional regulation.

By bridging traditional knowledge systems with empirical research, this study contributes to a growing dialogue that recognises the relevance of culturally grounded contemplative practices within contemporary health sciences. Rather than positioning ancient traditions as separate from scientific inquiry, this review demonstrates how respectful integration may deepen both historical understanding and clinical application.

In doing so, mandala colouring emerges not only as a therapeutic tool, but as a point of continuity between past and present illustrating how enduring philosophical practices can retain relevance within evolving scientific paradigms.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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