

A Creative Intervention: Mandala Art Therapy and Midwifery in Women's Health

ABSTRACT

Art therapy covers all mind-body based approaches applied as a method to improve the psychological health of the individual in the presence of illness or any difficulty experienced by the individual. Art therapies allow the abstract and complex thoughts in the individual's mind to become concrete. One of the many different types of art therapy involves mandala. Mandala, which has a deep-rooted history, is used in art therapy today. The ease of use and accessibility of mandalas for people of all age groups have contributed positively to the treatment of various diseases. From this perspective, mandala art therapy may be beneficial for different periodic life crises in women's lives. Midwives are health professionals who play a key role in every stage of women's health. Innovative midwifery approaches to create positive results in care at all stages of women's health are also nourished by spiritual and artistic practices. The International Confederation of Midwives has also developed a holistic and continuous care model in its midwifery care philosophy, covering women's social, emotional, spiritual, cultural, psychological and physical experiences. In line with this model, midwives' incorporating spiritual and artistic therapy methods in their care practices at all stages of women's health can make a difference in the quality of care. In this review, it is aimed to investigate the application areas of mandala art therapy in the field of midwifery, to evaluate the results of mandala art therapy in these areas and to identify gaps in the literature.

Keywords: Art therapy, mandala, midwifery, women's health

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Introduction

Art therapy is a therapeutic method aimed at helping individuals express their inner experiences during illness or any challenging situations, thereby facilitating emotional and spiritual relaxation. It encompasses all mind-body-based approaches applied to improve psychological health. Art therapy allows abstract and complex thoughts in an individual's mind to be transformed into tangible forms. Emotions and thoughts are concretely expressed through artistic products such as music, dance, sculpture, drama, painting, marbling, and mandala (Chadwick, 2009; De Botton et al., 2013; Gürcan, 2020). The history of art therapy dates back to ancient times. It was first discovered in the ancient theater at the Asclepius site in Pergamon, where it was used for communication, relaxation, and therapeutic purposes, continuing its journey from the Romans to the present day (Giannini, 2004). According to the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), art therapy is a psychotherapy method that utilizes the creative process of art to improve or enhance the emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental states of individuals of all ages. This definition indicates that art therapy assists individuals in resolving conflicts and issues, developing interpersonal skills, reducing stress, managing behaviors, and increasing self-esteem and self-awareness. Additionally, it supports individuals in gaining insight into themselves (American Art Therapy Association). Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive effects of art therapy (Anolak et al., 2023; Ergür et al., 2021; Gray-Foti, 2019; Obernyer, 2006).

Mandala Art Therapy

Mandala is a term derived from Sanskrit, meaning circle, center, and completion. Essentially composed of a center and a surrounding circle, mandalas represent wholeness and have a rich historical background. Throughout history, they have been used in various cultures, including Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, as a method of art therapy. Although mandalas can take on different forms, such as round, octagonal, or square, they always take shape around a center. They are also described as "containers that hold energy, as "manda" refers to essence or energy, while "la" means container. It is believed that while creating a mandala, the user's current emotions or wishes are held by the mandala (A. Aksun, Interview, 2015; Çelikbaş, 2022; Beckwith, 2014; Ergür et al., 2021).

From a philosophical perspective, a mandala becomes an object that can be carried by an individual or displayed in a visible space if it is created with positive and beautiful energy. Conversely, if a mandala is made during a state of negative emotion, burning it and scattering its ashes can symbolically initiate a healing process. Throughout history,

Hindus, Buddhists, and the Tibetan people have been influenced by the captivating and symbolically rich nature of mandalas, using them as ritual symbols in Asian cultures. Externally, mandalas are seen as representations of the universe; internally, they are regarded as guides for practices such as meditation (Aksun, Interview; Beckwith, 2014; Ergür et al., 2021).

In this context, mandalas are considered meditative guide-objects. According to psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, the mandala functions as a form of art therapy that allows for the expression of emotions and thoughts, as well as a representation of the unconscious self. Jung used mandalas as a therapeutic tool during difficult periods experienced by his patients and referred to certain dreams as "mandala dreams." Observing that his clients found relief by drawing rose-like diagrams, Jung emphasized that mandalas foster personal wholeness and balance (Jung, 2017). He argued that coloring or drawing mandalas could serve as a way to gain insight into the individual, suggesting that such practices help access the inner world of the person. Believing in the mandala's functions such as enhancing psychological integrity and promoting harmony, Jung adopted it as a tool for relaxation, both for himself and for his patients (Jung, 2017). Mandalas are also frequently encountered in traditional Turkish culture, appearing in everyday objects such as lacework made by elders, carpet patterns, and tea saucers. Similar center-outward expanding designs can be found in Ottoman and Persian motifs as well (Çelikbaş, 2022; Ergür et al., 2021).

From another perspective, mandala can also be considered a method of concentration. It helps calm the mind and allows the individual to perceive a sense of wholeness. While creating a mandala, the individual directs full attention to the process, thereby remaining in the present moment. Through this focused concentration, one experiences a state of mindfulness, staying away from the worries and chaos of the past or future. The individual becomes distanced from disturbing noises and confusion. Additionally, due to the various psychological effects of different colors, one's energy and emotions are also affected (Ergür et al., 2021; Taşkın, 2015).

Although mandala drawings may result in extraordinary works of art, beyond their visual appeal lies a meditative and symbolic meaning (Çelikbaş, 2022). The aesthetic quality of the final product in a mandala is irrelevant, as mandala creation serves as a form of self-expression. This removes the pressure of producing something beautiful and allows for a more authentic creative process (Babouchkina, 2015). Art activities based on creativity have been shown to have positive effects on individuals in various domains, including

spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being. Such creative art-based activities help individuals distance themselves from stressful situations and enable them to enter a realm where they can express their emotions and thoughts through alternative means (Özsavran, 2022).

Types of Mandalas

Mandala, as a form of art therapy in which individuals freely transfer shapes and colors onto paper as they are inspired, can be categorized based on the nature of its design. When the design is entirely created by the individual, it is referred to as an “unstructured mandala.” In this method, a center point is identified on a blank sheet of paper, and concentric circles are drawn around it. The individual is free to shape and color these circles as they wish. This process results in a unique design that is entirely self-directed and reflective of the individual's inner world. In contrast, a “structured mandala” involves a pre-drawn design, created by someone else, which the individual fills in by coloring. Unlike the unstructured mandala, the form is predetermined, but the person is still free to choose how they engage with the coloring process (Ergül et al., 2021; Jung, 2017). Figure 1 presents examples of structured mandalas, while Figure 2 shows examples of unstructured mandalas.

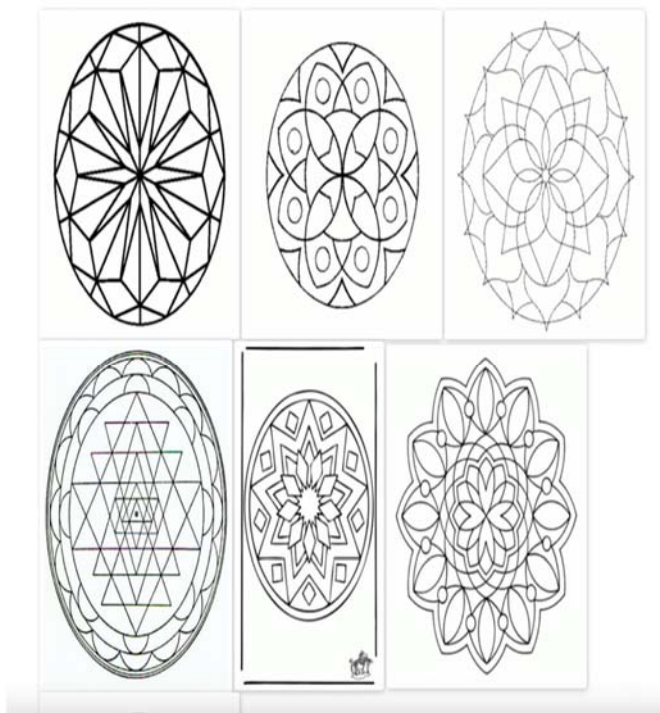


Figure 1.
Structured Mandala

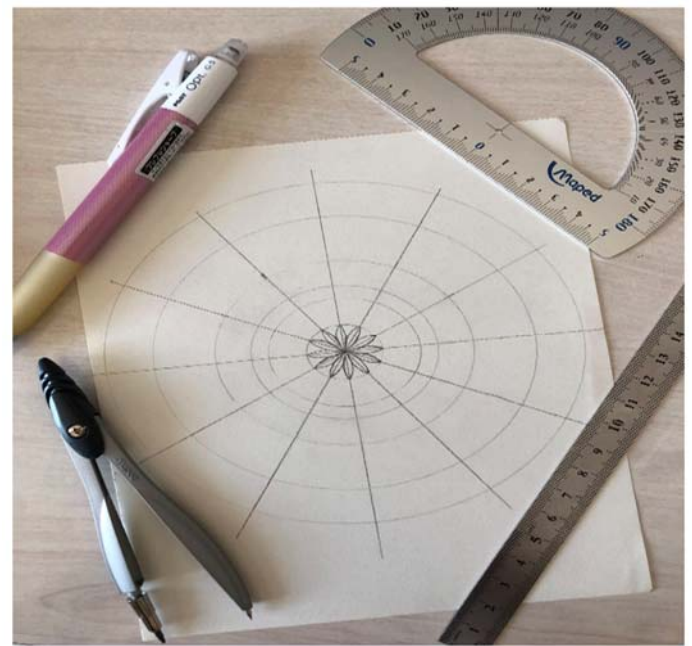


Figure 2.
Unstructured Mandala

Mandala Art Therapy and Women's Health

Today, mandala art therapy is widely utilized. It is believed that mandala art therapy supports positive psychological effects through therapeutic mechanisms underlying self-expression, self-discovery, and the creation of meaning (Cross & Brown, 2019). The fact that mandalas can be easily and comfortably used by individuals of all age groups has contributed to the treatment process of various health conditions (Ergür et al., 2021; Henderson, 2012; Kim et al., 2014). From this perspective, mandala art therapy can offer supportive benefits for women facing crises during different life stages. For example, it may serve as a helpful method in managing stress, anxiety, worry, and depression that may occur during pregnancy (Xie & Wang, 2021). In efforts to support women in coping with such crises, healthcare professionals (such as midwives and nurses) have made use of art therapy. Midwives are key healthcare providers during the prenatal, pregnancy, and postpartum periods, playing a crucial role in providing care and education to women. Introducing women to creative techniques within an appropriate environment may be a beneficial approach for this group. There are various forms of art therapy (such as painting, dance, music, and mandala) that can be used to help individuals better understand and express their emotions. These art therapy methods make non-verbal expressions visible through creative activities and can contribute positively to a person's emotional state (Bostancıoğlu & Kahraman, 2017; Çam, 2015). For instance,

pregnancy is considered a life crisis, and art therapy methods may be used to facilitate the expression and release of negative emotions and moods that may arise during this period (Bayıroğlu et al., 2023). A review of the literature reveals that mandala art therapy has proven to be a highly beneficial method across various stages of women's health. In a study examining the effects of mandala drawing and coloring on anxiety levels in pregnant women during the third trimester, it was found that participants experienced a significant reduction in anxiety levels (Amelia et al., 2020). A mandala activity implemented with infertile women undergoing embryo transfer was reported to strengthen their coping mechanisms and reduce stress levels (Şişli, 2023). Another study that explored the effects of different types of art therapy on anxiety in women during the last trimester of pregnancy found that mandala-based interventions significantly reduced anxiety (Sezen & Ünalsever, 2018). In research conducted with primiparous pregnant women, mandala activities were found to reduce fear of childbirth, and this effect was reported to continue into the postpartum period (Topçu, 2023). A separate study that investigated the impact of a combined mandala activity and technology-based breastfeeding program on breastfeeding effectiveness and mother-infant bonding found that breastfeeding self-efficacy and maternal attachment increased as a result of the intervention (Sarı & Demir, 2023). Another study aimed to determine the effects of mandala art therapy on blood glucose levels, mood, and anxiety in pregnant women with abnormal oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) values. Although the study was completed under Clinical Trials, the results have not yet been published (Güney, 2023). Another study found that mandala coloring during the menopausal period increased quality of life and reduced anxiety levels (Kirca et al., 2024). In a study conducted with mothers of children with special needs, mandala-based art therapy was found to significantly improve the mothers' comfort levels and psychological resilience (Özsavran & Ayyıldız, 2023). In another study involving gynecological oncology patients, it was shown that postoperative mandala activities reduced both pain and anxiety levels and influenced the types of analgesic treatments used (Akyol, 2024). Similarly, in a study examining the psychological well-being of gynecologic cancer patients during the perioperative period, mandala art therapy interventions were reported to enhance patients' psychological well-being (Mengqin et al., 2024). Beyond these examples, mandala art therapy has also been utilized across a wide range of populations, including patients with dementia, children with autism spectrum disorder or learning disabilities, individuals diagnosed with insomnia, university students experiencing exam anxiety, cancer patients, bone marrow transplant recipients,

bereaved individuals, and adolescents (Coar, 2010; Couch, 1997; Gençdoğan et al., 2018; Gürcan, 2020; Karagöz, 2023; Lu et al., 2017; Ratnasari et al., 2023; Yakar et al., 2021).

The Role of Mandala Art Therapy in Midwifery Practices

Midwifery practices, which are pioneering in creating positive outcomes in women's health at all stages, are also nourished by spiritual and artistic applications (Kurt, 2022). The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) has outlined a holistic and continuous care model in midwifery care philosophy, which encompasses women's social, emotional, spiritual, cultural, psychological, and physical experiences (ICM, 2024). In line with this model, the integration of spiritual and artistic therapy methods into care practices by midwives can make a significant difference in the quality of care throughout all stages of women's health. Communication is crucial in midwifery practices (Aktaş & Pasinlioğlu, 2016). Due to factors such as women's education levels and socio-cultural background, it is not always possible for women to establish effective verbal communication. In this context, art therapy can be considered one of the most effective methods for non-verbal communication (Bostancıoğlu & Kahraman, 2017). Mandala art therapy can help reach the emotional challenges individuals face within their inner world and raise awareness, making it easier to provide support. Mandala art therapy includes both relaxation and meditation, which could be particularly effective in midwifery practices. When applied alongside intrapartum midwifery interventions, mandala art therapy can help the woman focus her attention on a single point, thereby aiding relaxation. This, in turn, can lower her pain threshold and increase her tolerance to contractions (Kaya Bayıroğlu et al., 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, based on all the studies reviewed, it can be stated that mandala art therapy can be safely used in midwifery practices. The low cost of mandala art therapy facilitates its integration into various practices. Midwives, who play a significant role in women's health at every stage, can use this therapeutic method to help women relax and encourage them to express their emotions. Furthermore, considering the areas where mandala art therapy has been applied, there appears to be no studies in the literature regarding its use in cases of abortions, perinatal loss and grieving process, postpartum period, high-risk pregnancies, and adolescent pregnancies. This indicates that the use of mandala art therapy in these areas would fill a gap in the literature and make a unique contribution. The limited number of studies in women's health regarding these issues highlights the need for further research in this area and emphasizes its importance. In this context, mandala art

therapy's potential to provide psychological and emotional support, particularly during sensitive stages of women's health, should be explored more extensively and its application should be further promoted.

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