

A Creative Guide to Stopping Self-Harm: Overview and Exercises



Who Self-Harms?

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According to current statistics, approximately 14 million people in the U.S. alone are self-harming: cutting or burning their skin. The DSM-V calls it, “Non-Suicidal Self-Injury” or NSSI. It’s actually a self-soothing behavior, and can become quite addictive over time. Despite decades of research on the subject, no one solution has been developed to help those who suffer.

But it can be understood and overcome, with help. I know that because I did it. After struggling with the behavior off and on for four decades, I finally got the help I needed. I also realized that I’d been using my art to find healing. So, I developed a series of creative exercises to help others in their journey toward stopping self-harm. This guide samples just three of them, in the hopes that you might be inspired to start your own journey inward.

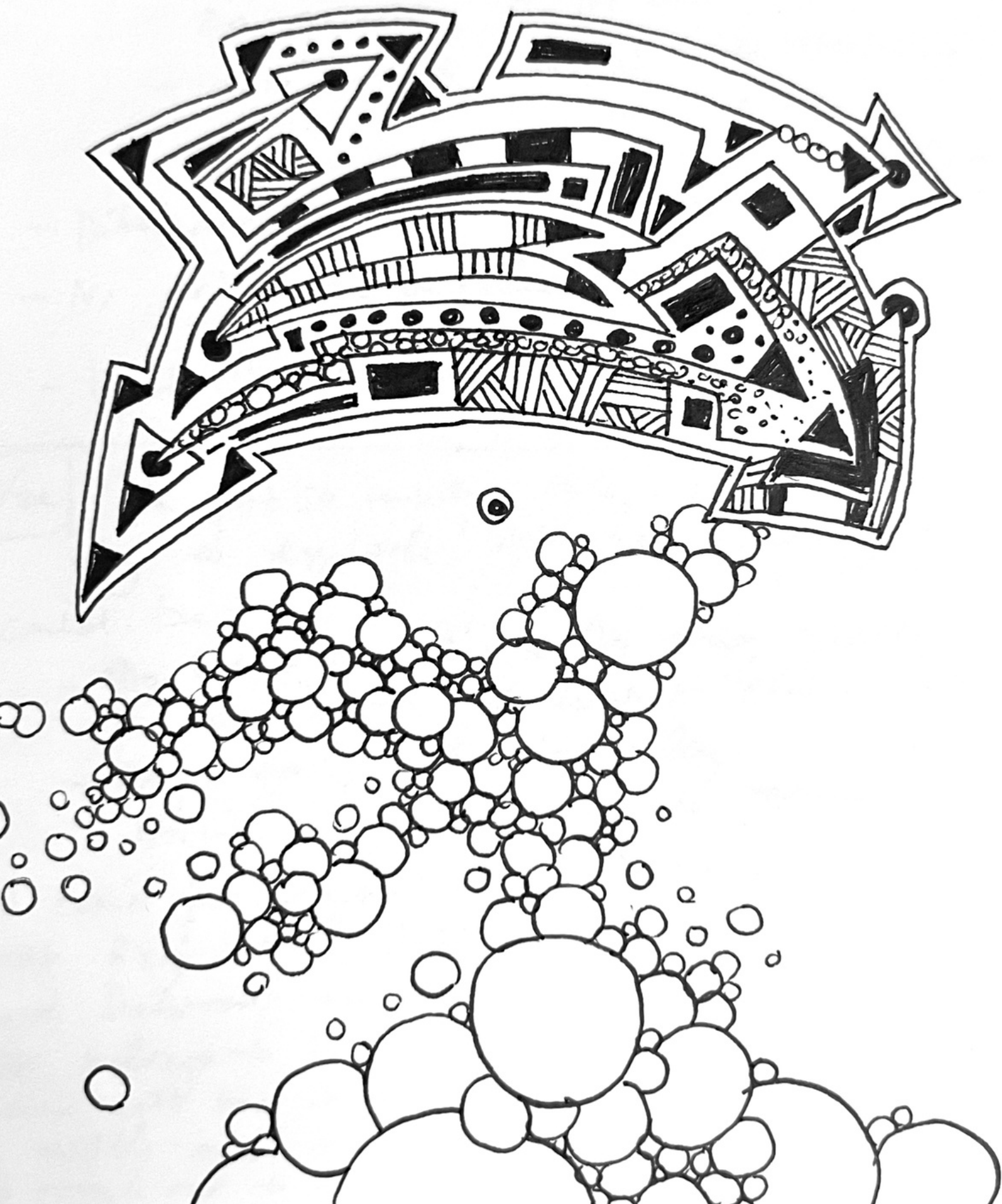
Why Use Creativity?

Many studies have shown that creativity enhances the brain's ability to recover from trauma-related injuries and disorders. Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross detailed many of them in their book *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us*. Creating art actually rewires the brain by forging new pathways of communication that can bypass the damage from trauma.

In my own experience, art making not only changed my brain, it also led me to the part inside that was doing the self-harming. I wasn't able to give it a voice through therapy alone. By embracing that part, and letting it paint instead of cut, it was as much a spiritual process as an intellectual, emotional one.

"The Dream" by Maggie Parr





#1: Listening Doodle

For this first exercise, start with any piece of paper. Draw a shape you like, letting your hand wander and draw what it wants.

Now look at it, and pose the question gently in your mind, What next? Notice where in your body you're feeling strong energy, and settle into that place. Let that part of you draw what comes next. Maybe it's connected to your first shape, maybe it isn't. It might be a response to what's already on the page, if you've chosen a piece of paper that isn't blank. Just start drawing and listening and drawing and listening. Lose yourself in the doodle until you feel done.

Afterwards, thank that place inside you for sharing. Notice if it feels any different than it did when you started.

#2: Rage Art

Before beginning any exercises that trigger big emotions, it's important to check with your therapist or psychiatrist, if you have one, or to create safe rituals that keep you grounded. I list some of them on my website, www.stoppingselfharm.com.

From the outside, this exercise looks like automatic scribbling. From the inside, it's an experience of letting the feelings do the talking. First, tune into the feelings that trigger self-harming. But instead of picking up a blade or other instrument of injury, pick up your pen and start to draw. Resolve to maintain contact with the page. Draw and write and scribble all those feelings and thoughts. Let yourself get mad and overwhelmed. The important thing is to emote with your pen until it passes through you and away.

Afterward, stand up and stretch, drink some water or hot tea, take a bath, walk, or nap. Be gentle. Thank that part of you that communicated through a pen instead of a blade (or other mode of self-harm).

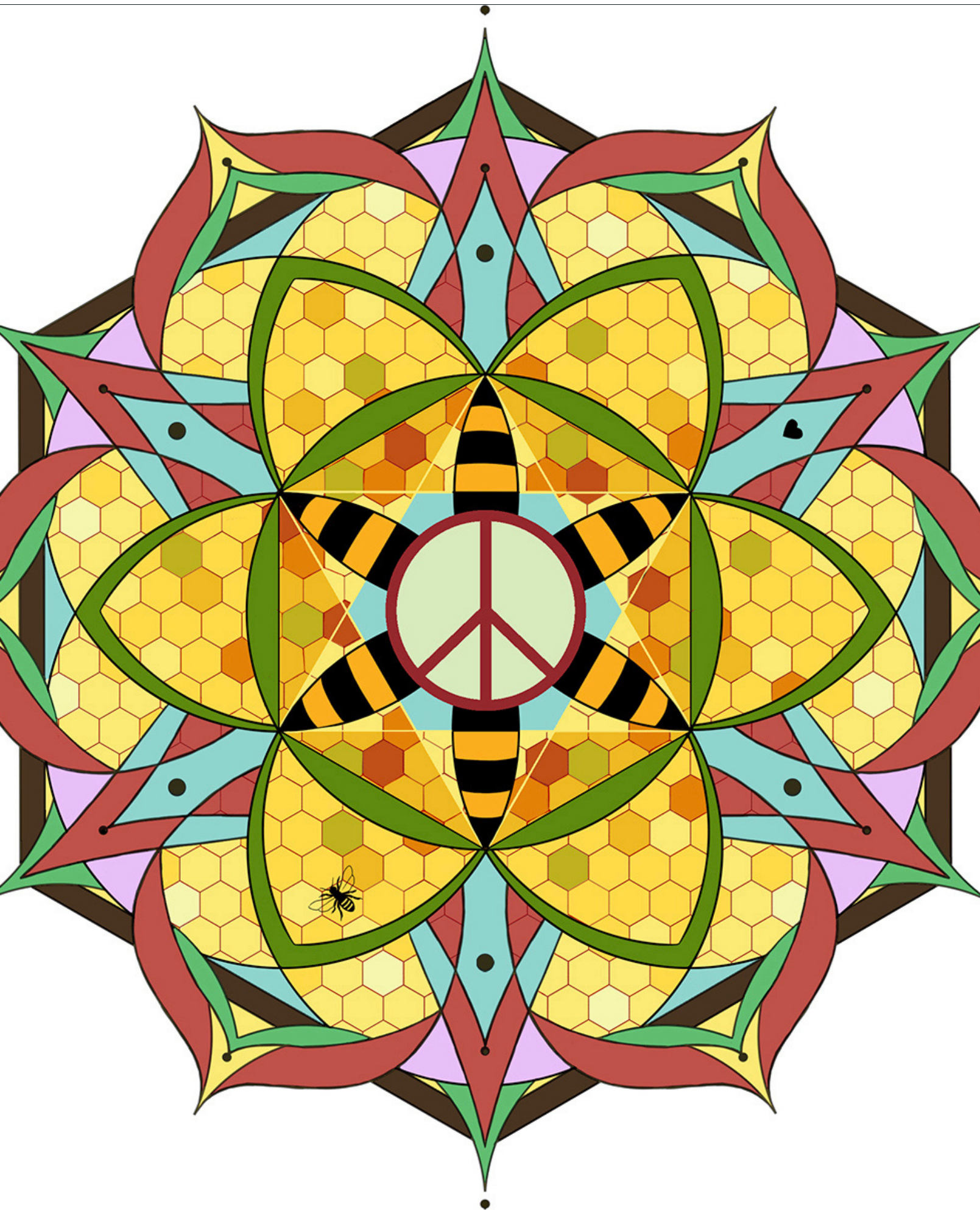
“The Confrontation” by Maggie Parr



The important thing is to keep contact with the page, without lifting your pen, and letting the feeling do the drawing. Don't let judgement or fear stop you. Afterwards, thank that part of you for sharing, and do something gentle to take care of yourself.

“Faith Rage” by Maggie Parr



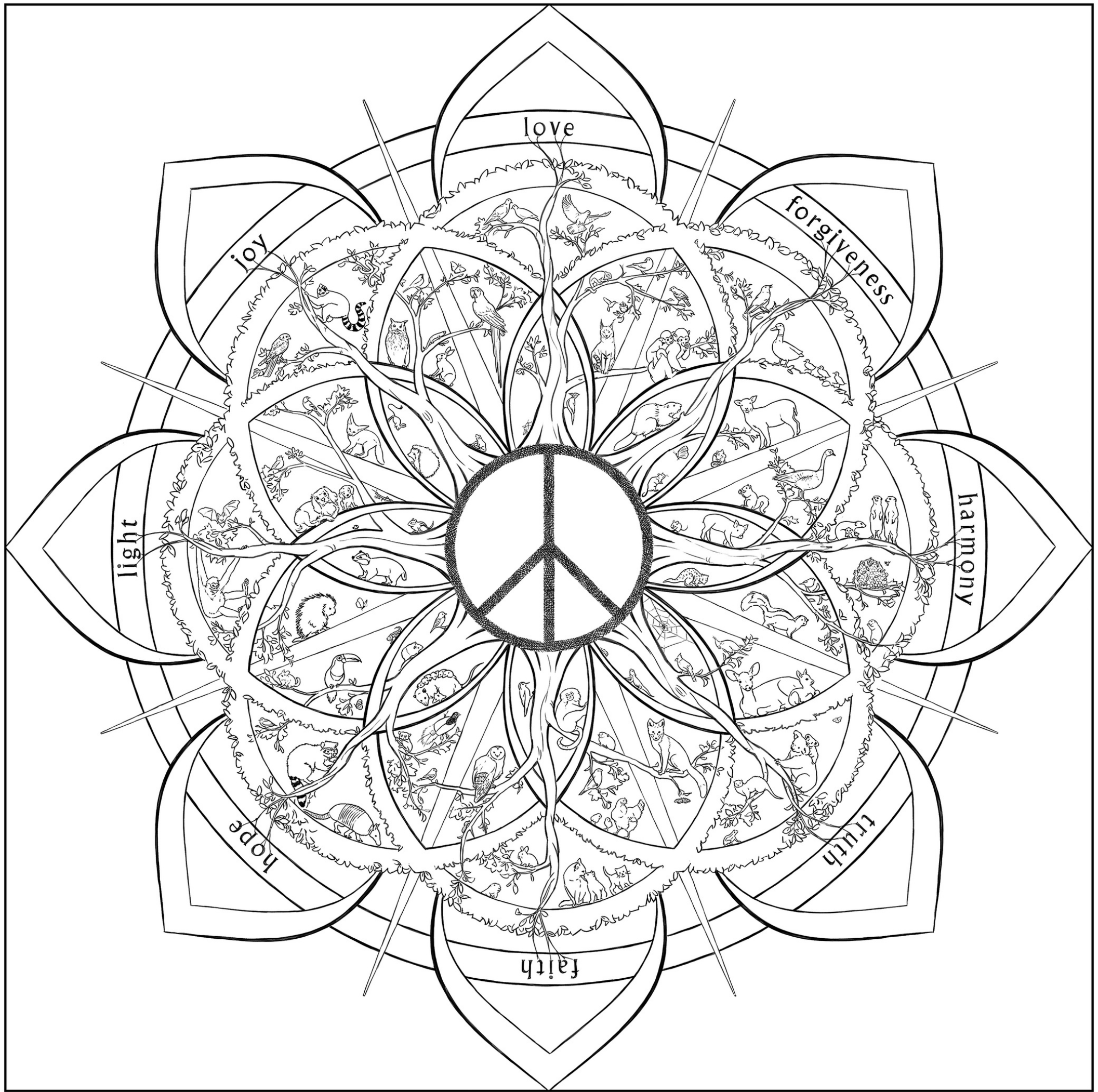


#3: Mandala Coloring

A mandala (Sanskrit for “circle”) is a circular pattern that carries meaning and function in different cultures around the world. For centuries, religious and philosophical cultures throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas have used circular geometry to map and connect with spiritual hierarchies and to make sense of their place in the natural world.

This exercise requires a set of colored pencils. The activity of coloring lowers stress and organizes the mind. Focusing on a mandala can bring in a more spiritual energy.

Light a candle, play some music. Notice which hues you like best, appreciate the sound of the pencil scratching across paper. Let the activity become a meditation; approach each shape with a sense of curiosity. Afterward, write about any thoughts or insights that came up.



“St. Francis Prayer Mandala” by Maggie Parr

Print this out and color at your leisure



Resources to help with your journey

Books:*

Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD

No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model by Richard Schwartz

ReWrite: The Journey from Self-Harm to Healing by Benjamin Sledge, Dr. Michelle Saari, and HeartSupport, Inc.

*These are books that I have found helpful, from the perspective of someone who struggled with self-harming, and should not replace working with a qualified psychologist or psychiatrist.

Further Study:

If you'd like to explore the process of using creativity to heal from self-harming behaviors, you can buy *The Creator's Guide to Stopping Self-Harm* (coming out in Fall 2024), download the online course (at www.stoppingselfharm.com), or schedule a one-on-one consultation with Maggie Parr

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Thank **you.**

