

Coloring the Canvas of Life

By Sachiko Sakamaki Bastable

At a weekly therapy session for senior adults, Beverly Thackerson was asked to color an intricate butterfly drawing. The neatly dressed 71-year-old first thought, "Coloring? I'm not a child." But she did it anyway. Using pencils and markers, she colored the butterfly with her favorite bright hues, adding shapes and details here and there to give the piece her own special touch. When she completed her assignment, she was proud. "It was my own work," says the silver-haired senior. "I enjoyed it."

Thackerson is one of many who have found that joy. For some, it tops the seniors' activity list — more popular than jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, and crafts. A wide variety of engaging activities is needed to entertain America's rapidly growing senior population, and coloring helps fill that need. In 1990, there were just over 31 million people in the United States aged 65 and over. That number is expected to eclipse 70 million by 2030.

"Coloring has therapeutic value," says Nate Murray, a therapist and the founder of Visiting Angels, an assisted living organization in Marshfield, MA. He says that people release stress through coloring.

Many senior facilities are already administering the medicine of arts and seeing overwhelming results. The benefits range from hand exercises for those with arthritis to activities that exercise the right brain— creative work that instills a sense of accomplishment, encourages social interaction, and allows the discovery of a hidden or latent talent.

One senior artist lost some ability to remember things and came to Nate Murray's assisted living facility. Caregivers began drawing and sketching with her. She started talking about her past and regained many memories. Murray says coloring is not a demeaning pastime for the elderly as long as they don't use crayons.

Gail McMeekin, a creativity coach and writer on creative development, recommends coloring throughout a person's lifetime. "Coloring is not just for children," she says. "Coloring should be enjoyed throughout the life cycle. With coloring, there are no mistakes. It frees people up from the fear of taking risks."

Another valuable effect is that coloring stimulates memory and promotes conversation. At Vista Del Sol, a long-term care facility in California, senior adults engage in weekly art therapy. When they color, it becomes a social activity. "Coloring encourages sharing information and building meaningful relationships," says Stella Henry, the facility's founder. Even dementia patients seem to enjoy it, as they can easily remember the distant past. It's a powerful tool, especially for those who've lost vocal capabilities.

Despite the benefits of coloring, seniors were lacking coloring books specifically made for them. Linda Mastaglio, an entrepreneur in Texas, was surprised to see her senior friend coloring a picture of Daffy Duck at her kitchen table.

She was working on the drawing as part of a therapy program. "Seniors deserve to have a coloring book series that is all their own, one that caters specifically to them," says Mastaglio.

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In March 2002, Mastaglio published the first in a series of coloring books designed for senior adults, called ColorPads (www.twipublishing.com). The first edition of ColorPads is called *Life in the '50s*, and is comprised of nostalgic drawings that range from drive-in restaurants, to a '50s Thunderbird, to poodle-skirted women and miniature golf.

ColorPad drawings provide space beside each picture to write about the memories that a drawing evokes. Mastaglio designed ColorPads as a way to encourage memory and communication as well as artistic expression. Her coloring system offers markers and cloth art bags to carry and store the associated coloring supplies.

Mastaglio hopes seniors will experience new joy in coloring while cherishing their fond memories. The early success of the venture led her to develop additional ColorPad books on *Life in the '60s* and *Life in the '70s*, which were published last June.

Art therapists list a few cautions for coloring. First, the seniors must be allowed to color freely, without criticism or comparison with others. "There's no such thing as an ugly piece of art," says Stella Henry. She believes the process and associated enjoyment is more important than the end result.

For Beverly Thackerson — and so many other seniors — coloring makes the canvas of life suddenly grow much larger.

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