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Welcome to Happy AF (And Flourishing): Daily Practices & Awe-Spiration for a Happier Life

I wrote this book for one reason: most people who come to therapy or treatment want the same thing—to feel better. Not someday, not after months of sorting through their past, but sooner rather than later. As a clinical therapist who has spent nearly two decades helping people climb out of depression, anxiety, and complex emotions, I can tell you this: feeling better is possible. And it usually starts with the smallest, most practical steps.

But I didn't write this book only as a clinician; I wrote it as someone who also needs these tools. Here's the truth: strokes happen, demotions happen, and marriages fall apart. Life hits hard and without warning. At 41, everything was solid. At 42, I found myself on my couch having a stroke two days after being demoted—one failed marriage behind me, my current relationship heading for collapse, and an unhealthy drinking habit tapping me on the shoulder like, *“Hey, want some wine to go with the chaos?”*

The months that followed were marked by hospital days and inpatient rehab, post-stroke depression, uncertainty, and a daily fight not to drown in self-pity. I wanted to feel better too—not someday, but *now*—and I needed practical ways to shift my own mind, mood, and momentum one small step at a time.

That's exactly what this book gives you. There are no long-winded chapters, no BS (or other bad words! I promise!) Just bite-sized, science-backed practices designed to shift your day in real, meaningful ways. Each entry stands on its own—a simple practice, most including a reflection prompt—and together, they create a steady, year-long path toward more joy, more ease, more clarity, and more connection.

Inside, you'll find 365 days of tools that actually work. Some are gentle nudges. Some will challenge you. Some will simply remind you to notice the good that's already there.

One exercise you'll meet along the way is the gratitude letter—a practice that's well-known to transform people's outlooks. Writing to someone who touched your life can strengthen meaning, connection, and emotional wellbeing in surprising ways. You'll get a guided version later in the book to make it your own.

Most of the exercises in this book are rooted in the principles of positive psychology as well as CBT. Positive psychology is defined as “the scientific study of what makes life most worth living” (Ackerman, 2025).

Rather than focusing primarily on illness or dysfunction, positive psychology studies what helps people thrive: strengths, virtues, positive emotions, meaning, resilience, connection, and the everyday practices that foster them. “The goal of positive psychology in wellbeing theory is to measure and build human flourishing” (Seligman, 2013, p. 29). CBT helps people see how their thoughts and beliefs influence their emotions and behaviors, and equips them with practical tools to respond more effectively.

Use these pages however you want. Move through them in order, choose randomly, or flip to something that matches your mood.

Some days will feel easy. Others will take effort. That's true about growth too: simple doesn't mean effortless. But if you show up—even imperfectly—these tiny actions will begin to shift things. Slowly at first, then noticeably. Often, the people around you will see the difference before you do.

Let this book be your companion—a grounded, encouraging voice you can return to on the hard days and the hopeful ones.

“We think too much about what goes wrong and not enough about what goes right in our lives” (Seligman, 2013, p. 33). Over time, small positive steps stack up. They reshape how you see yourself, how you treat others, and how you move through the world.

→ WHY IT WORKS

Instead of focusing only on problems or symptoms, positive psychology examines the habits, strengths, and daily practices that help people thrive. Research shows that small, consistent actions, like noticing what’s going well, practicing gratitude, connecting with others, and engaging in moments of awe—can significantly boost wellbeing over time. These aren’t quick fixes; they’re evidence-supported strategies that gradually reshape how you think, feel, and navigate your life. Positive psychology provides the foundation for the exercises, micro-challenges, and reflections you’ll find in this book, drawing on decades of work by researchers such as Martin Seligman, whose model of wellbeing emphasizes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. When you practice the skills in *Happy AF*, you’re not just “trying something new,” you’re tapping into approaches shown to reduce depression, strengthen resilience, increase life satisfaction, and improve overall happiness.

And if you let it, this book will change your life—not with grand promises, but by giving you the tools to create steady, meaningful shifts that actually last.

Don’t wait to feel happy. Create it. One shift. One moment. One practice at a time.

Here’s to a year of meaningful, sustainable change!

How to Use This Book

There's no wrong way to use this book. Use it when you need it. Skip what doesn't fit. Come back when you're ready. This is a tool—not a test.

Choose your pace

Use one entry per day, working through the sections in order, open to a random page, or sit with several practices when you're feeling motivated. Perfect consistency isn't the goal; engagement is. Every moment you choose to participate matters.

Do one, do all, or modify them. On heavy days, 30 seconds of engagement might be all you have. On other days, you'll stretch a little further. Both count. Pairing this book with a journal can deepen the work, but it's not required.

Understand the structure

You'll notice some repetition in the practices because positive psychology is built on a core set of proven strategies. Repeating these small actions isn't redundant—it's how habits form and how meaningful change takes root.

Most days include:

- A **happiness practice**: the core idea for the day
- A **challenge** or **micro-challenges**: a simple breakdown of the main exercise or multiple variations of it
- A **reflection prompt**: a quick way to anchor the shift you're making and strengthen the habit

How to Use This Book (cont.)

Some entries also include **micro-awe-spirations**—tiny invitations to slow down and notice the small wonders, textures, and moments you might otherwise miss.

On certain days, you'll see the **arrow symbol** (→). The arrow points to a research-backed insight or evidence-based resource that deepens the work you're doing. The science snippets are brief by design—just enough to show you why the strategy works without overwhelming you.

The **arrow symbol** (→), may also indicate an article or a free online assessment designed to prepare you for a reflection or prompt you'll encounter later in the book. They're optional deeper dives that reveal more about the practices, show you why a practice works, and help you build confidence in the process. You'll find a complete list of every article and quiz referenced in this book at the end for quick, convenient access.

Turn your favorite tips into habits

Even though the book offers one practice per day, you'll get the most out of it when you choose a handful of the tips that resonate the most and repeat them until they become part of your life. Happiness comes from repetition—small, consistent choices that build real change over time.

Use what resonates; skip what doesn't

Some prompts will speak directly to what you're navigating. Others won't hit at all. That's normal. Think of this book as not just a simple guide, but a tool.

How to Use This Book (cont.)

Every month or so, you'll get a page to create your own happiness practice to set intentions, develop micro-challenges, and reflect on what fits your life. Build on what you've tried or make it entirely your own, something as unique and amazing as you are.

Reflect in your own way

Journal if you like writing. Meditate if you prefer quiet. Talk it out with someone. Think about it while you're walking your dog or making dinner. Return to a prompt later in the day if it sticks with you. There's no single "right" format; reflection is reflection.

Let the work be imperfect

Life gets busy. You'll have days you skip and weeks that feel heavy. Come back when you can—no guilt, no restarting, no losing momentum. This isn't about perfection; it's about presence.

Track your progress

If you'd like to track your progress as you move through this book, consider taking the free Authentic Happiness Inventory (registration required) at

<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires/authentic-happiness-inventory>



How to Use This Book (cont.)

The Authentic Happiness Inventory is an online, interactive self-scoring measure that assesses your overall happiness on a scale from 1 to 5. You can take it weekly, monthly, or simply before and after completing the practices in this book. With consistent engagement, you may notice your score rising over time. For the most meaningful results, answer as honestly and authentically as you can.

Alternatively, you can use the Everyday Happiness Inventory (EHI) on pg. 321 as a baseline measure and ongoing assessment. You can download and print copies of this assessment on the companion website for Happy AF at <https://mindremakeproject.org/happy-af/>. A blank EHI is also available at the end of the book.

Notice what shifts

Real change shows up in small ways; you breathe a little easier, you snap less, you savor more, you recognize joy sooner, or you simply feel more like yourself. These patterns add up. Pay attention to them—they’re proof the practices are working.

Use this book like a compass

Not to dictate your path, but to gently point you toward what matters. Let it help you orient yourself toward a life that feels more intentional. **Let's dive in!**

BEGIN → BUILD → DEEPEN → SUSTAIN

Ground yourself.

Lift yourself.

Understand yourself.

Become yourself.

PART I:

Awareness

PART I: Awareness (Begin)

Where change starts

This section focuses on noticing—your thoughts, your emotions, your patterns, your environment, and the small, often overlooked moments that shape the quality of your days.

As you work your way through *Part I*, you'll begin to:

- Pay attention to your actions.
- Recognize emotional cues.
- Understand what drains—and what recharges—you.
- Notice what influences your wellbeing.
- Strengthen your mindfulness skills.

Before we begin, here's what you need to know about me: I had a stroke at 42—as an active, healthy adult with zero risk factors on paper, just a high-stress job and a wine habit to cope with it. Alcohol had quietly become my only escape. I didn't realize how disconnected I was from my body until it forced my attention by shutting down my brain with a deadly weapon, a clot. Prior to this, I'd gone through a traumatic divorce. To be honest, I *felt* broken... and I *was* in an almost literal sense. Both my brain and my heart needed “Out of order” signs.

This section is your chance to catch the signals before they turn into full-blown burnout, or worse, a medical crisis. My goal is simple: help you tune in to what your body has been trying to tell you all along, so you don't learn the hard way like I did. **Ground yourself.**

DAY 1: Discover your character strengths.

→ QUIZ: *Discover your Strengths* through the VIA Institute on Character <https://www.viacharacter.org/> (registration required). This quiz will take 10-15 minutes to complete. VIA notes that recognizing and using your character strengths can boost wellbeing and overall life satisfaction.

My top 5 character strengths:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

DAY 2: Start reading the book *Flourish* by Martin E. P. Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology.

“Building human flourishing starts by asking what really makes us happy,” (Seligman, 2013, p.29).

Seligman’s *Flourish* pairs naturally with *Part I: Awareness* because both center on small, intentional actions that build wellbeing from the ground up.

In *Flourish*, Seligman introduces the PERMA model—Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—which emphasizes practical, daily habits that strengthen each pillar over time. Part I mirrors this approach as you start focusing on mindful engagement and noticing what brings you joy.

Flourish will help you better understand positive psychology concepts for happiness, while *Happy AF* gives you the exact steps for building a happier life.



DAY 3: Appreciate a skill you've developed over the years.

MICRO-CHALLENGES

- Identify when you first began learning this skill. Notice what motivated you then and how your motivation has shifted as you've grown.
- As you think about this skill, reflect on or write down one way it has changed how you respond to challenges—emotionally, mentally, or physically.
- Pay attention throughout the day for a moment when this skill naturally shows up. Notice how it supports you in real time.

REFLECT

When you think about a skill you've developed over time, what do you notice in your body or emotions? Does recalling your growth bring up pride, discomfort, surprise, or something else?

DAY 4: Start reading the book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear.

“The most effective way to change your habits is to focus not on what you want to achieve but who you wish to become” (Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 2018, p. 41)

Atomic Habits fits seamlessly with *Part I: Awareness* because both focus on the power of incredibly small, doable actions to create meaningful change.

In this section you learn that transformation doesn’t come from motivation or giant breakthroughs—it comes from self-awareness, consistency, repetition, and micro-shifts that rewire the brain over time. If you want to feel happier, act like a happy person and do what a happy person would do in any given situation.

James Clear’s framework reinforces this by showing how habits compound, how identity shifts through action, and how tiny improvements create powerful momentum.

Pairing *Atomic Habits* with *Happy AF* will give you a practical foundation: you don’t have to overhaul your life—just take the next small step, again and again, until change becomes your new default.

I recommend reading through at least the first 211 pages. That might sound like a lot, but Clear’s writing is so engaging—and the concepts are so compelling—you’ll move through it faster than you think.

DAY 5: Meditate on what you're grateful for.

Before meditating, notice your current mood and rate it on a scale from 1-10 below.

<---1---2---3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10--->

3-Minute Gratitude Meditation

Take a comfortable seat or lie down if that feels better.

Let your shoulders drop.

Let your jaw loosen.

And allow your breath to slow just a little.

Inhale gently... and exhale fully.

Do that one more time—slow inhale... slow exhale.

Minute 1: Arriving in the body

Bring your attention to the simple fact that you are here, breathing.

Feel the rise and fall of your chest, the weight of your body supported beneath you.

Notice one thing—just one—that feels okay in your body right now.

It might be the steadiness in your feet, the warmth in your hands, or the softness of your breath.

Let yourself feel a small sense of appreciation for this moment of being alive.

Minute 2: Shifting toward gratitude

Now bring to mind one thing you're grateful for today.

It doesn't have to be big.

It might be a person, a pet, a good cup of coffee, a moment of peace, or simply making it through a hard day.

Hold that image or thought gently.

Notice how your body responds—maybe a softening, a slight lift, or a feeling of warmth.

Let that gratitude settle in your chest like a warm glow.

Minute 3: Expanding the feeling

Now widen your sense of gratitude just a bit.

Think of one more thing you appreciate—maybe something you normally overlook.

A small comfort, a simple joy, a part of yourself you're proud of.

Let both pieces of gratitude sit with you—two small anchors, steadyng you.

Take one more slow breath in... and a long breath out.

When you're ready, gently open your eyes or lift your gaze, carrying that feeling of gratitude forward into the rest of your day.

REFLECT

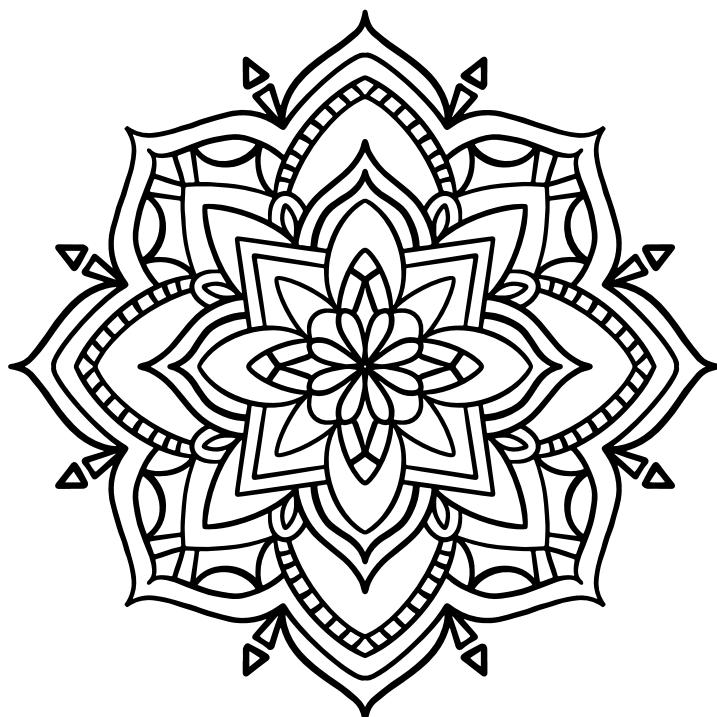
Notice again how you're feeling inside and rate it on a scale from 1-10 (below). Did the meditation impact your emotional state?

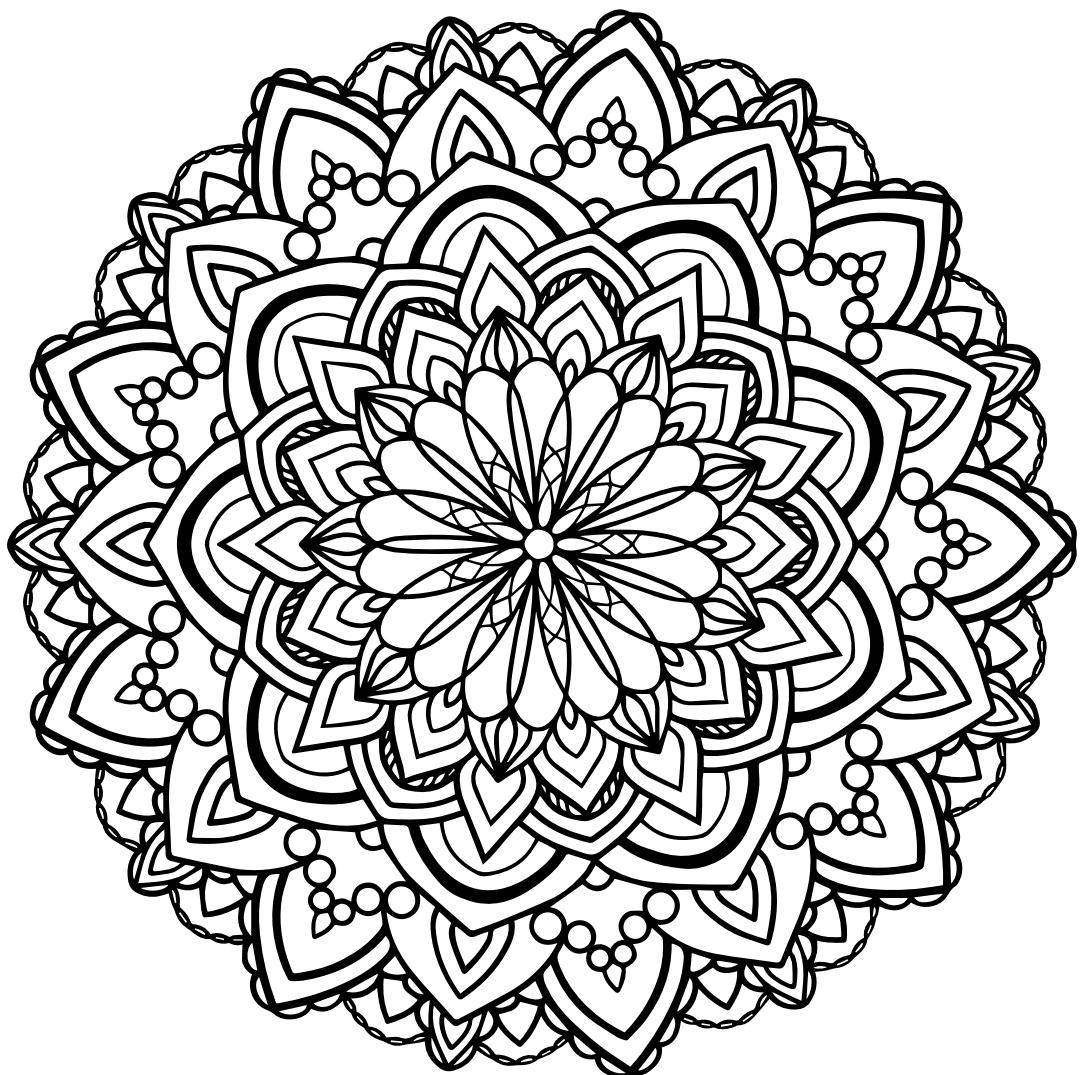
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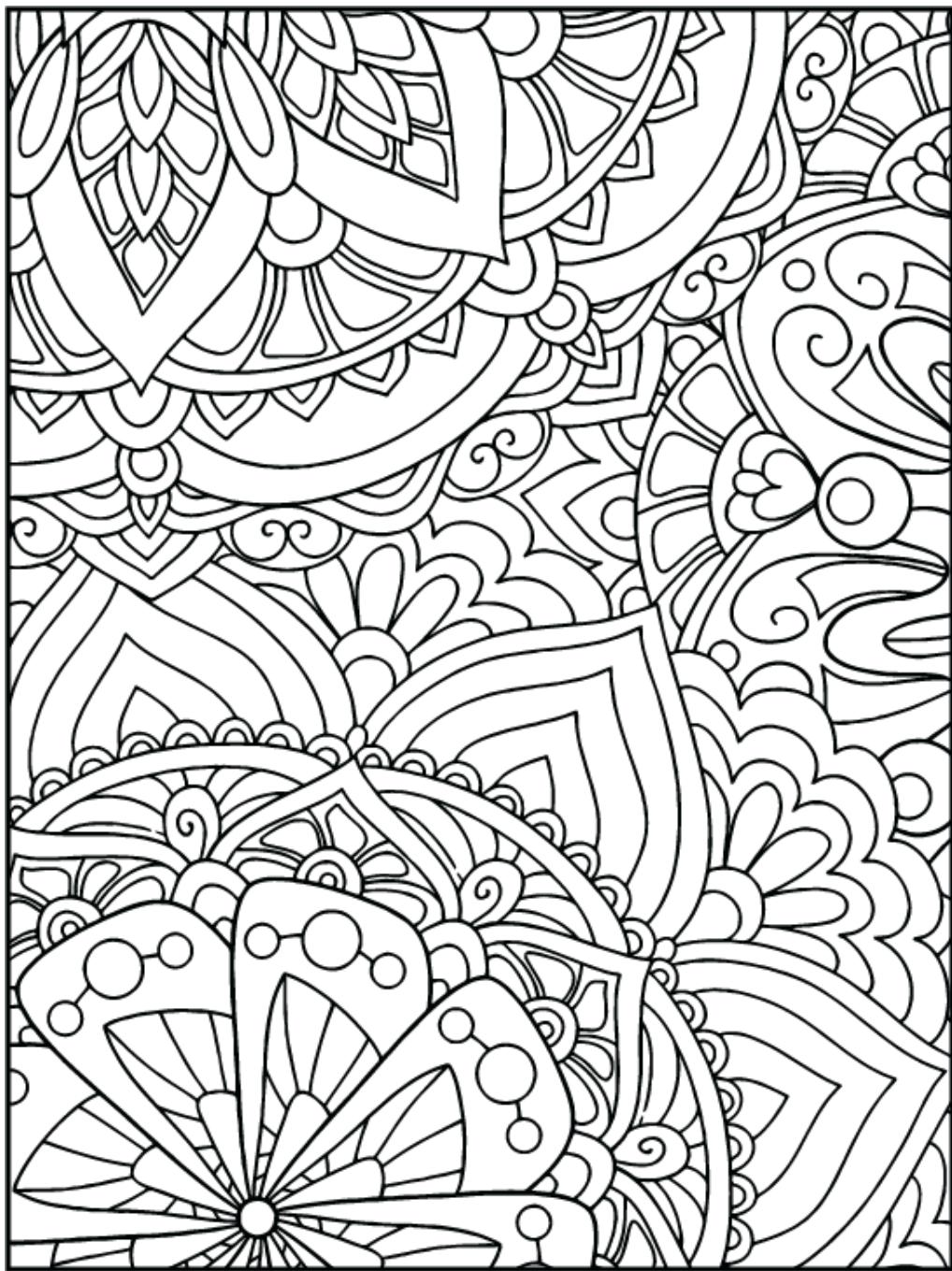
DAY 6: Color mandalas mindfully

→ WHY IT WORKS

Mindful coloring engages focused attention and sensory grounding, which naturally quiet the brain's stress response and shift you out of worry mode. Research shows that structured coloring—such as mandalas or repeating patterns—significantly reduces anxiety by promoting calm, sustained focus and regulating emotional arousal (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Arch & Craske, 2006). When your attention is anchored to simple, repetitive movements, your breathing slows, your mind steadies, and your body begins to relax. Over time, this practice can help you manage stress more effectively and support greater emotional balance.

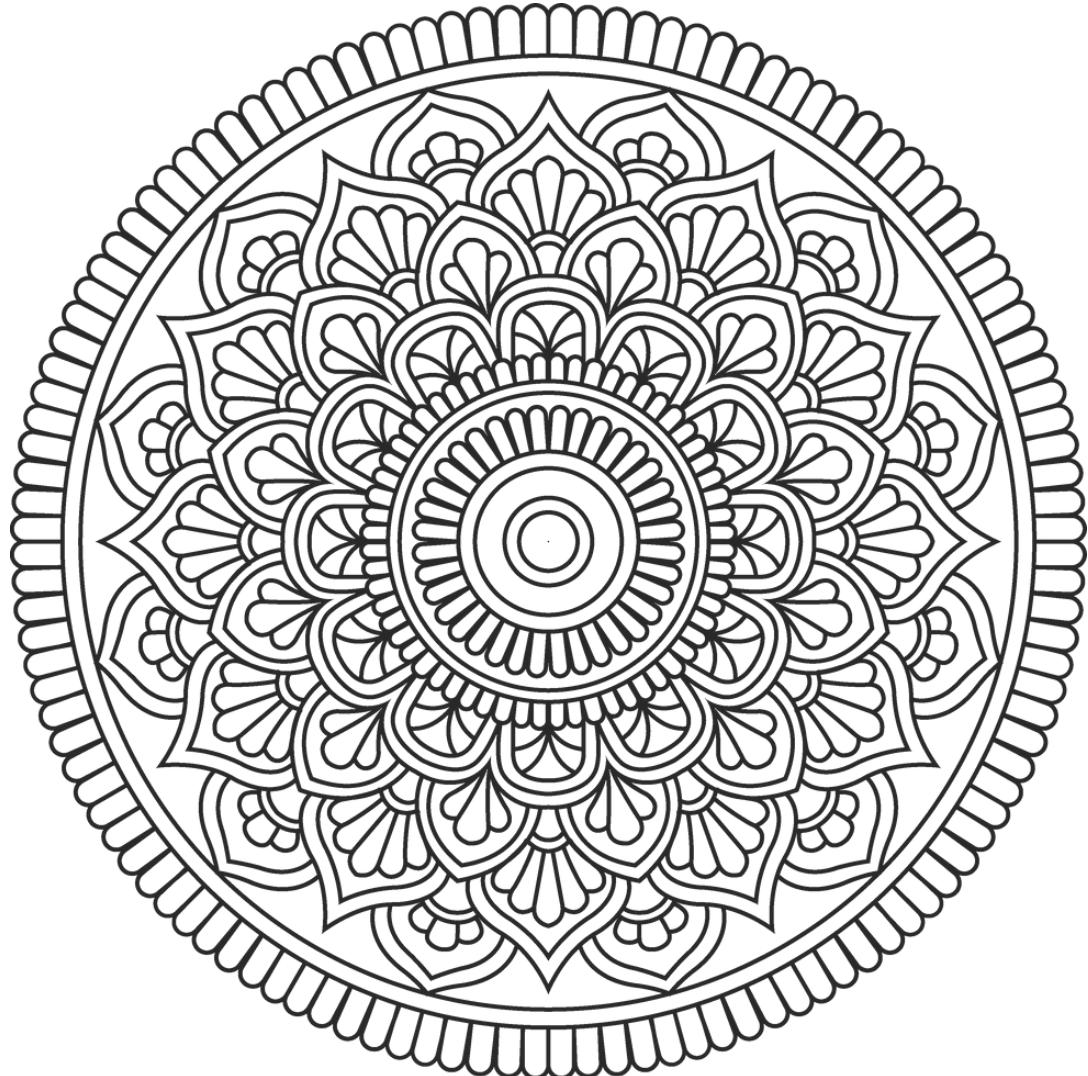






REFLECT

As you colored today, what did you notice happening in your mind and body? Did your breathing, tension level, or emotional state shift as you focused on the patterns?



DAY 7: Stretch your hands and relax your grip.

→ WHY IT WORKS

Stretching your hands and relaxing your grip releases physical tension that often builds up without you noticing, sending a signal of safety to your nervous system. Research shows that reducing muscle tension—especially in areas like the hands, jaw, and shoulders—lowers physiological arousal, decreases stress, and activates the parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) response (Lindgren et al., 2013). Even brief hand relaxation practices can calm the nervous system and improve emotional regulation. This simple release helps your body shift out of tension mode and into a state of greater ease.

MICRO-CHALLENGES

- Open your hands wide, stretch your fingers, then gently shake them out for 10 seconds.
- Open and close your hands slowly five times, noticing any tension release.
- Massage the base of each thumb and notice where tension hides.
- Make a fist, hold for 3 seconds, then release—repeat 3 times.
- While breathing out, relax your hands and jaw at the same time.

DAY 8: Go out and spend time in your community today.

→ QUIZ: *Connection to Humanity Quiz*

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/connection_to_humanity

MICRO-CHALLENGES

- Take a short walk through your neighborhood or local park. Notice who's out, what's happening, and how the space feels today.
- Say hello to at least one person you pass — a neighbor, a cashier, someone walking their dog. A simple greeting counts as connection.
- Visit a local café, market, or small business. Make a purchase if you can or simply show up and be part of the flow.
- Check out a community board (online or in person) and pick one event, group, or activity you might attend this week.
- Sit somewhere public (a bench, a plaza, a playground) and take a few minutes to simply observe. Notice moments of kindness, connection, or everyday humanity.

REFLECT

What did being out in your community make you notice about yourself and the world around you?

DAY 9: Let yourself be inspired by others.

MICRO-CHALLENGES

- Find one person who inspires you and spend a moment noticing what you admire about them.
- Write down one quality you admire in another person.
- Identify someone who inspires you—online or in real life—and learn one small thing from them today.
- Listen to, watch, or read something from a person who inspires you and let it trigger a creative insight.
- Choose one inspiring person and try applying a single quality of theirs in your own way today.
- Say “good for them” when you notice someone else doing well—and mean it.

REFLECT

Reflect on one thing you really like about *yourself* that others may find inspiring.

“Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

DAY 10: Get outside and spend time in nature.

→ WHY IT WORKS

Nature supports emotional regulation by lowering physiological stress responses and grounding your attention in the present moment. Research shows that spending time in natural environments—green or blue spaces—reduces anxiety and depression while improving mood, vitality, and overall wellbeing (McMahan & Estes, 2015; Jimenez et al., 2021). When you intentionally notice the sights, sounds, or sensations of nature, your mind settles and your resilience grows. Even brief moments outdoors can shift your internal state and help you feel more connected, centered, and steady.

MICRO-CHALLENGES

- Take a short walk outdoors—around the block, in a park, or even near your workplace—and pay attention to the natural world around you.
- Look at the sky and name one thing you see (clouds, color, light).
- Notice one sign of life outside (a bird, plant, breeze, sunlight).
- Step outside and place both feet firmly on the ground. Take three slow breaths while noticing the environment around you.

REFLECT

What did spending time in nature remind you of—about yourself, your needs, or what matters?

“By discovering nature, you discover yourself.”

—Maxime Lagacé