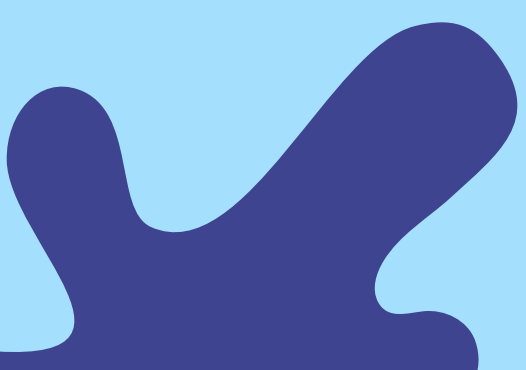




PSYCHOLOGY OF ART AND COMPLEMENTARY TECHNIQUES FOR STIMULATING CREATIVITY, SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND SELF-EXPRESSION

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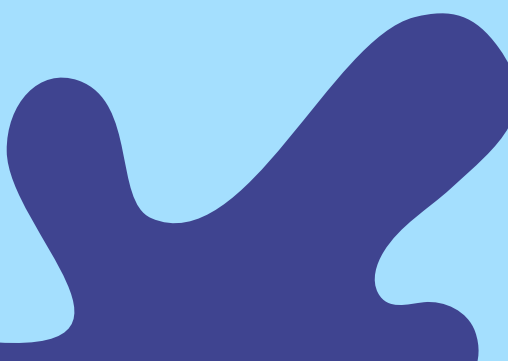
Advantages



Psychology is the science studying scientifically processes connected to behaviors, thoughts and emotions. Psychology is widely applied in the field of well-being and not only to clinical areas or therapies for psychological disorders. In the recent decades, psychology and neuroscience studied scientifically the positive effects of meditation on mental well-being and found convincing evidences.

In this chapter, we will explain why meditation is so important in the creative process, and how you can replicate meditation techniques in a context of Art-Therapy for Elders, and specifically MailArt.

Meditation techniques can be applied by trainers in a flexible manner in different moments of the training. I personally use it as follows:

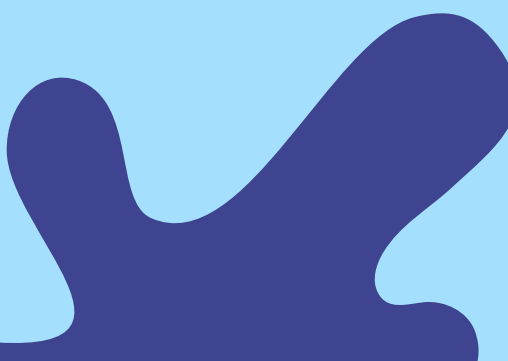
- 1.As a warm-up exercise: at initial stages before the creative process started
 - 2.During the creative process, for solving creative blocks, or even during the creation of artworks (eyes-open meditation)
 - 3.At the end of a training course in order to reduce stress or favor positive feelings as social connectedness
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The advantages of meditation techniques are many:

- These methods can be easily adapted to many target groups and conditions. It's technically an inclusive method which can be performed in all conditions, do not require a particular training and can be replicated also autonomously by participants
- It's possible to audiotape guided meditation in order to favor the personal use and continuation of techniques

Specific aspects that should be considered for the target groups of elders are the following:

- Meditation techniques are effective to prevent some aspects of mental deterioration as many other mental training do
 - Meditation do not strictly require to assume particular or complicated body positions and can be applied in whatever condition and freely. Therefore, participants that may have body-skeletal conditions can adapt freely the physical part in order to perform the exercises correctly.
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Participants

Technically speaking there is not a maximum number of participants to meditation sessions, I personally held sessions up to 200 participants in the same moment without particular complications. Anyhow, of course if you increase the number of participants, also the level of personalization and follow-up will be limited.

Therefore, if you include this practice in MailArt Sessions you should carefully determine the number of participants according to all activities included in this guide. But do not limit yourself in the number of participants if needed. For example, if you are called to demonstrate techniques to big audiences and want to stimulate the importance of this method even in big conferences or events, you can do it, and promote the importance of mental and social well-being in this case.

Of course, to perform a meditation techniques with 1, 12 or 200 people is quite different. Especially with enormous audiences you should prepare much more in detail the audience, consider that bigger audiences have also major variability in behaviors, in the ways in which you apply the method and do follow-up. For example, with 200 people you cannot take follow-up one by one efficiently, or rapidly. Therefore, what I suggest you is to be around 20 participants.

Context

The selection of the context in meditation techniques is crucial since you should avoid many possible limits that reduces its effectiveness. For this reason, it's important for you to visit the venue of the event before. Many factors can reduce significantly the quality of the sessions which can be summarized as follows:

1. Consider auditive factors. The moderator of meditation sessions do not use a loud voice, therefore, auditory aspects should be importantly considerate. Check if your room is sufficiently sound-proof and isolated. Avoid any disturbance may interrupt the exercises (ie other people present in nearby areas, make sure that the room is quite distant from other training rooms where there can be music, sounds, noise which can disturb the participants)
2. Evaluate if your voice can clearly listened in all parts of the room. Consider that specifically for the target group of elders, there may be participants with auditive impairment. At the same time, you cannot speak loudly since it would not favor relaxation. Therefore, I suggest you to use a wireless microphone allowing you to speak softly but with an adequate volume, clearly hearable for all. If you decide to use soundtracks for relaxation, test it before its implementation in order to ensure that the volumes of the voice and the music background are well balanced.
3. Consider the space available in relation to the number of participants. The presupposition of many relaxation techniques is to have enough space for its implementation. Since the concept of "comfortable position", consider an adequate space and an adequate distancing among participants (ie 1 meter at least between participants)
4. Ensure that chairs are sufficiently comfortable for performing relaxation exercises



Time

The time allocated to a meditation session should be carefully evaluated. Too brief session may not achieve the goal set of favoring relaxation or stimulating creativity, a too long exercise may be boring or even favor too much relaxation or even to sleep. Therefore, I suggest you not to continue the practices for more than 30 minutes continuously. Ensure to have also enough time to preparatory activities (sharing instructions), and follow-up for checking that the exercises has been correctly implemented or any possible question from the audience.

Safety issues to be considered

Please consider that meditation is not a substitute of psychological sessions, which can be performed only by certified psychologists. Invite participants to contact a psychologist in case of need.

Please always consider to use safe and stable positions in performing meditation in order to prevent falls or injuries.

Do not use extreme or difficult breathing techniques, which can be very uncomfortable for elders or untrained people and anyhow not needed to favor mental relaxation



EXERCISE I - FAVORING MENTAL RELAXATION

The presupposition of meditation techniques is the mental relaxation and it's very important to teach adult learners how to reach this state and to ensure they reached an actual relaxation state. For this reason I think it's useful to start with a neutral exercise, only focused on reaching the mental relaxation state, and then to proceed with exercises having other specific goals.

Step 1 - the positioning

Ask to participants to adopt a comfortable position. The main position I suggest you is with:

- flat feet on the floor
- Hands relaxed on the feet
- Trunk up
- Consider the use of a recliner
- Or directly to lie down.

If you decide to use the sit down position, suggest to participants to keep the head up, without rotating backwards or downwards. These position may obstacle breathing and distract the learner from the performance of the exercise.

Ensure with participants that there is no feeling of tension in any body part. Usually, the lie down position facilitate a lot this task, but maybe relaxes too much. When you reach relaxation while lying down, you are doing something very similar to sleeping. And this do not allow you to discriminate the persons capacity to relax autonomously since the task is too facilitated.

Of course, it would be very useful to suggest to participant to have comfortable clothes and avoid clothes that limits movement (belts, suits, uncomfortable shoes, etc.)

Once you give instruction, ask explicitly to all participants if the position is sufficiently conformable and ensure this before to start the exercise.

Step 2 - achieving a state of relaxation

A state of relaxation can be achieved in several ways, anyhow, in this specific condition, it's very important to adopt strategies usable by all, performable with a various range of participants at the same time. A specific and definitive personalization can be successfully achieved in individual sessions; so you have to focus on strategies for making the exercises easy for all.

For reaching this goal I suggest you to train your voice to be relaxing and soft. One thing you can do is to train your voice to be:

rhythmic: the rhythm of your voice should be constant and slowing down during the whole exercise (the rhythm should be slower in the second part of the exercise)

No tension in the voice should be felt, we transmit our emotions through our voice. If we feel tension, this will be transmitted to participants

A very important strategy is to synchronize your voice with breathing of participants. Initially giving instruction more in detail, and after talking only when people exhales. Breathing out is the relaxing phase in breathing and if you give suggestions especially in this phase, the learners will associate your voice to relaxation and deepen even more this state of mind.

Here some of the instruction I use for favoring a mental state of relaxation

Find a comfortable position

Without moving the head, look up

Notice your breath changing, breathing in and out

When you breath in, keep the eyes open

When you breath out, close your eyes

And simply continue like this, breath in, eyes open, breath out, close your eyes

After 2-3 cycles, of the points 4 and 5, only repeat to close the eyes, until everybody do.

After this part you can say "and close your eyes, because if you keep the eyes closed you can listen to my voice and to suggestions I will give you"



Step 3 - deepening

After the induction of eye-closure, it could be good to adopt some suggestions for deepening the state of relaxation. I write some examples here.

relaxing body parts. You can adopt this script: “and now imaging a wave a relaxation from the top of your head crossing the whole body down to your feet. And imagine to relax the muscle of your face, the muscle around your eyes, your mouth, the neck, the shoulders, arms, forearms, and then the trunk, then down, the stomach, the legs and feet. Every single muscle is relaxed now, and continue breathing in and out, deeply relaxed.

Counting. Here an example of script you can adopt: and now I would like to listen to my voice. I will count to 10 to 1 and at 1 you will feel even more relaxed. 10 breath in and out deeply, 9 the more you listen to my voice the more relaxed you become 8 all muscles are getting much more relaxed now, 7 imagine a wave of relaxation from the top of your head crossing your whole body down to your feet 6 and imagine to breath deeply through your whole skin now 5 and it's as if you can absorb the whole relaxation from the pure air through your skin now 4 and if any possible thought passes through your mind you just notice, accept and let go 3 letting go every possible thought now 2 even more relaxed 1 letting go and relaxing more than you can imagine now...

Step 4 - exit

The “exit” step is the moment in which you lead the participant to take awareness of the external content. While doing the exit you may also helping the participant to create a mental association between a body movement and this state of relaxation in order to help him/her to re-access this state through this association. An example, of script is this one:

And now that you are so relaxed I would like to support you to connect this peaceful state to a body movement called anchor, in which can associate all positive feelings experienced now. Now I will ask you to close your hand by closing the thumb under the four fingers and associating this state of relaxation in this movement. And every time you will do this, you will recover your mental relaxation. Now, I will count from 1 to 3. And at 3 you will exit from this status and re-emerge, and when the hand will be open, you will be completely focused on the external content. 1 your breathing is going faster 2 the eyelids become lighter and wants to re-open and 3 your fist is getting lighter and lighter and wants to open and open your eyes now. Ready for continuing this session of art-therapy.

Explanation: it's crucial to produce anchoring with an unusual movement, uniquely associated with the mental relaxation. In this way, the association will be more clear and univocal, since the person will not adopt that movement for other reasons.

EXERCISE 2 - STIMULATING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

According to our needs analysis, social isolation is a common issue in the elder population. The lack of social support is predictor of depressive and anxious state which can put at serious risk the mental well-being of elders. For this reason, it's very important to favor the psychological support in case of need with certified psychologists. Anyhow, it's also very important to act socially since social support is a buffer variable reducing significantly psychological stress.

One creative way to stimulate social connectedness can be performed under the meditation status through a technique called **Loving Kindness Meditation**.

Loving Kindness meditation is a techniques based on evoking mentally different persons and wishing them health, safety and happiness. The different persons evoked includes several levels of "difficulty" since the first person is a friend, the second is a neutral person, the third is person with whom the learner had a frustration or even an "enemy".

It's proven that Loving Kindness Meditation, in the organizational sectors, can increase social cohesion and empathy, reduce negative behaviors and favor organizational citizenships behaviors.

In order to improve the results offered by Loving Kindness Meditation, I propose you an adaptation of this technique based on self-expression and artistic expressions purposes. This meditation is specifically designed for sessions of MailArt and the presupposition for its application is that the person have to send a MailArt to a receiver.

Since the methodology for getting the relaxation state is similar to Exercise 1. I just suggest you to adopt this script before the "Step 4 - Exit" of the Exercise 1.

Step 1 - Friend

And now I want you to imagine a friend, a person you like, just evoke mentally this person, imagine he or she is in front of you, imagine the body posture, the facial expression and all details now. Now I want you to imagine to make him/her the best wishes, to be healthy, happy, at ease, and peaceful, completely relaxed now, and see the response in behavior, and just continue like this. And now, among all positive adjectives you may donate to this person select the most appropriate now. And see the reaction in the image you created. Now, I want you to imagine to send your MailArt to this person, and see the reaction. Receiving positive messages in thankful words from this friend. Greeting your friend and let go.

Step 2 - neutral person

And now, among all person that may come up in your mind. Find a neutral one. A person that do not stimulate in you a particular positive or negative reaction. An acquaintant. He's in front of you, you can imagine his posture and facial expression and all details now. Now I want you to imagine to make him/her the best wishes, to be healthy, happy, at ease, and peaceful, completely relaxed now, and see the response in behavior, and just continue like this. And now, among all positive adjectives you may donate to this person select the most appropriate now. And see the reaction in the image you created. Now, I want you to imagine to send your MailArt to this person, and see the reaction. Receiving positive messages in thankful words from this person, greeting this person now.

And even if it's not easy, I ask you to identify a person with whom you had a frustration in the past, or maybe even a conflict, that may cause some negative emotions. And also this person, even if you had a frustration in the past, needs health and positive emotions as any other human being. Is now in front of you and even if it's more difficult you know that every human being deserve empathy and happiness. Now I want you to imagine to make him/her the best wishes, to be healthy, happy, at ease, and peaceful, completely relaxed now, forgiving and forgetting all frustration, but keeping in mind what you learned from this experience and see the response in behavior, and just continue like this. And now, among all positive adjectives you may donate to this person select the most appropriate now, even if not easy. And see the reaction in the image you created. Now, I want you to imagine to send your MailArt to this person, and see the reaction. Receiving positive messages in thankful words from this person, greeting this person now.

Step 4 - Exit

And now you can thank yourself, having donated all this positive thinking to others, you can congratulate with your inner mind, and remember the role you have now, and imagine to extend this positive wishes to all, human beings, nature, extending creativity and positive thinking to all. Now I will count to 1 to 3 and at my 3 you will be fully relaxed, and you will feel socially connected to others and ready to start again with MailArt activities. 1 your breathing is going faster 2 the eyelids become lighter and wants to re-open and 3 your fist is getting lighter and lighter and wants to open and open your eyes now. Ready for continuing this session of MailArt.



EXERCISE 3 - STIMULATING CREATIVITY

Meditation can be applied also for preparing people to a specific task. For example, sportsmen may perform meditation before a competition, a professional can perform meditation before a public speaking and artists can do it before a performance or during the creative process.

The assumption of this methodology is that experimenting mentally a task would improve the performance later, reinforcing self-esteem and perceived efficacy in that task.

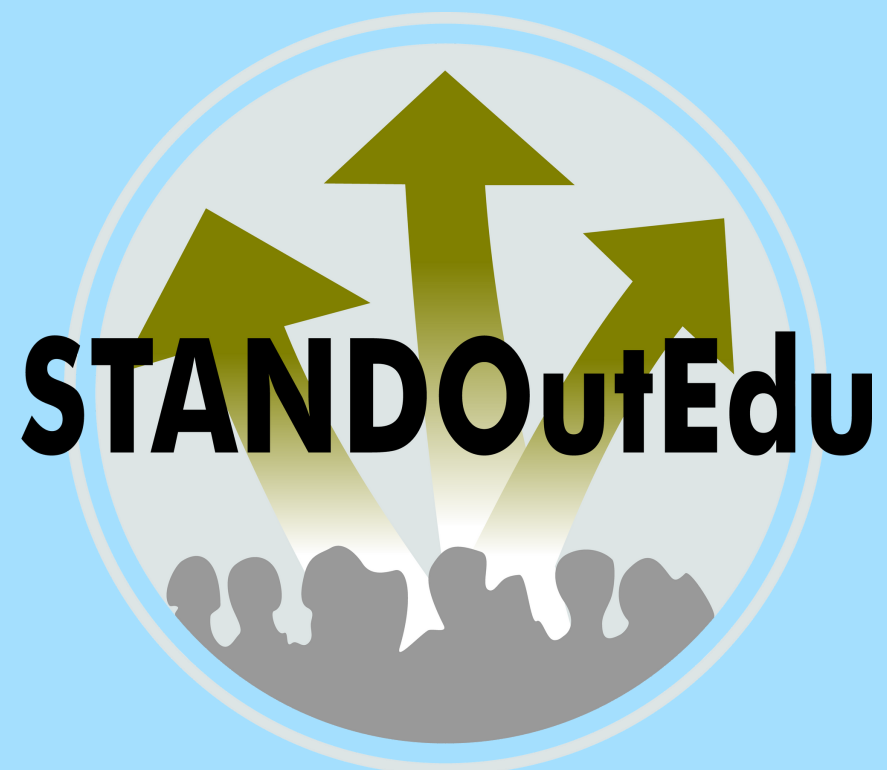
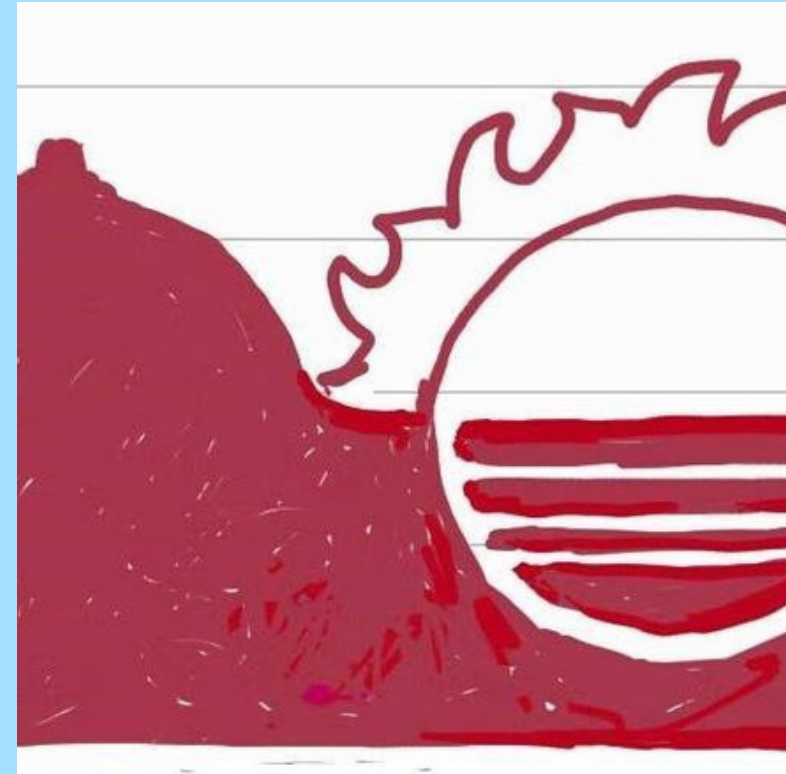
Therefore, I prepared a script to be adopted for favoring the creative process in MailArt. Similarly to the previous exercise, you can always use the technique of Exercise 1 for favoring the relaxation state. Before the step 4 “Exit” you can add this script for **Stimulating Creativity**.

“And now I would like you to imagine to be in a white space, completely white and to wash this place with a big white sponge, and when you do this, all negative feelings are gradually solved and relaxed, and you can focus yourself in the creative process in this enormous white space, since only you and creative work are present now, all your energies can be directed in the creation of some new MailArt products. Now I want you to the format of MailArt, by all formats you studied in this course and select the most proper one in your imagination, going beyond classical formats, selecting also objects not naturally associated with post, and even more, selecting your format now, and imagine what materials can be adopted with that format, and materials, by disposing mentally these materials in the format of MailArt you selected now. And also when you are ready, just imagine the colors you would like to give to this artwork now, among all possible colors, blue, violet, yellow, orange, green, red, and all variation, just by selecting the disposition of the colors in your MailArt, and unusual and creative combination of what you find the most appropriate in this specific moment of your life. And if you have some words, you can find now words and sentences, simple elements you want to communicate to the person. And when you completed, just imagine to go to the post service and send your message now. And the message is crossing all post service and after kilometers of travel, is finally issued. Imagine the person receiving your MailArt and the satisfaction in his face, his reaction and understanding of the art you delivered, receiving thankful message now, and also, imagine to receive an answer, which will help you to stimulate creativity even more.”

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ACTIVITIES!!!**



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