

Circles of Confusion: The Mandala as a Therapeutic Intervention with the Disoriented Elderly in a Long Term Care Facility

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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to explore the therapeutic value of making mandalas with the elderly, particularly those experiencing various degrees and forms of dementia. According to the DSM IV (1994) there is a biological basis for the dementia as which are "characterized by multiple cognitive deficits that include impairment in memory" (Couch, 1997, p.123). Feil also suggests that disorientation and confused behavior may be the result of unresolved developmental issues. Janet Beaujon Couch notes that art therapy with older adults diagnosed with dementia can provide an avenue for nonverbal expression of thoughts and feelings, facilitate communication, convey strengths and conflicts, assist in determining developmental levels, and serve as an aid in assessment and diagnosis.

Furthermore, art therapy can be used for reality orientation and socialization (Wald, 1986). As Wald notes, people with dementing illnesses need a focus. They are more likely to become "confused, agitated, and feel more inadequate when left too much on their own" (1986). A circle drawn on paper may act as a stimulus and focus for expression with all individuals, particularly for people with dementia (Couch, 1997).

The ultimate task of the elderly is to achieve resolution and maintain integrity (Feil, 1985). Identifying activities that engage the elderly, disoriented person cognitively, socially, and physically necessitates patience and creativity. The mandala, which is a symbol for completeness and wholeness, can be used as a support in achieving cohesion. Introducing the mandala shape and providing a focus for the disoriented elderly may help channel creative energies and perhaps provide clues that assist in treatment planning (Couch, 1997).

This study will be based in part on the work of Joan Kellogg. Kellogg observed hundreds of recurring patterns, images, and shapes in mandala drawings by several patient populations and organized these images into a circular design with 13 basic structures. Each structure represents stages of developing awareness or internal processes within an individual. In the elderly, changes in color perception and lack of visual acuity make it difficult to determine to what extent color relates to behavior. Thus, the mandala will be used primarily as an aid to reawakening the spirit, vitality, and creative spark in the disoriented elderly, and, to provide them with a link to other dimensions and a way to communicate their feelings. Also, a broad overview of the biopsychosocial aspects of aging that influence vitality at the end of the life span will be included and, thus provide a context for art as a therapeutic intervention.