

# A LABYRINTH WALK AND MANDALA REFLECTION EXPERIENCE

Participant reports on a wellbeing resource

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents a novel combination of personal growth processes – labyrinth walking and mandala creation – that are showing therapeutic promise for reducing anxiety and depression and enhancing wellbeing. Labyrinth walking has been likened to a moving meditation, and mandala drawing has been shown to support self-reflection, integration and to reduce anxiety. To begin to substantiate extensive anecdotal observations, 13 participants in a morning's labyrinth walk and mandala-drawing program were asked to complete questionnaires about their experiences of the processes. Two main themes of journeying and appreciating time out for self-reflection emerged. Overall, participants found all stages of the program protocol supportive, with the most appreciation expressed for the mandala creation, the walking and the group sharing. All would consider another labyrinth walk within a month or two. We found therapeutic value in this combination of modalities that met a need for personal growth and contributed to experiences of

peace, harmony and connection with others. We hope to contribute to the body of substantiating literature through further research.

## Introduction

On 14 September 2019 we held a group labyrinth walk and mandala-drawing workshop for counselling students and professionals in a university setting. This article is an attempt to explain:

- why we would do this;
- what a labyrinth walk is;
- what mandala drawing is (in this context);
- the protocol we used;
- some participant outcomes; and
- the program's potential to become a more widely used, evidence-based, wellbeing and self-reflection resource.

We have had extensive experience walking and presenting with the labyrinth, in particular the 11-circuit Chartres floor labyrinth, an exact facsimile of the one that has inspired people since the 13th century in Chartres Cathedral, south of Paris. Labyrinths have been created for over 4000 years and appear in a wide range of cultures, such as Native American, Greek, Celtic and Mayan (Tunajek,

2012). Labyrinths on cathedral floors became known as a symbol of pilgrimage (Morrison, 2003). Interest in the Chartres floor labyrinth has been revived over recent years by the Reverend Canon Lauren Artress (1996), at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

In addition to the few outcome studies, we have observed that the process of walking the labyrinth offers people the opportunity for reflection, and a range of responses may arise: memories, kinaesthetic sensations, emotions, insights and inspirations, to name a few. Whatever a person is moving through in their life, the end result of the walk has shown to be consistently beneficial (for examples, see Assam, 1998; Katsilometes, 2010; Zucker et al., 2016). This report is our first attempt to gather participant experiences in a systematic way to shape more extensive outcome research with the labyrinth and mandala processes.

A labyrinth is not a maze; there are no blind alleys. There is one winding path into the centre and the same path to walk out on. Interestingly, the word for meditation in Latin is *meditare*, which means



'to find the centre' (Griswold, 2001, p. 107). Walking the labyrinth can be a metaphor for walking to the centre of one's self. It takes approximately 20 to 30 minutes to walk (on average). Over the years participants have called the process a "walking meditation" or a "centring exercise". The labyrinth's form is circular, with a subtle but detectable reference to the four quadrants. As the path weaves among the four quadrants, the labyrinth seems to have an inherent ordering principle for the brain, in particular the right hemisphere (Tunajek, 2012). In fact, the labyrinth itself could be called a mandala.

The word 'mandala' is based on the Sanskrit word for circle. In its oldest historical usage it refers to a circle containing a design that

implies or overtly indicates the four cardinal points and a centre. In the ancient Hindu and Tibetan drawings a god or a goddess was often represented at the centre. Both the process of creating and contemplating a mandala was used in different cultures for meditation and spiritual evolution. A well-known example is the sand mandala, or the Kālacakra ("Wheel of Time") mandala, formed from coloured grains of sand by Tibetan monks (Bühnemann, 2017).

The circle is one of the oldest and strongest symbols used by humans to represent wholeness. For example, it was central in ancient Chinese cosmology (Doeringer, 1982), and has been described as a central symbol in Native American rituals (Garrett, Garrett & Brotherton, 2001).

Its use in healing drawings was explicitly described at length by Carl Jung in his research and in his own healing process (Jung, 1957/1980). As a process to aid integration after labyrinth walks, we use an adapted form in which a lightly pencilled circle is drawn on an A3 page of paper. Using oil-based pastels, participants are invited to draw reflexively and intuitively. Whether a person stays inside the circle or covers the whole page, the pencil circle is a constant suggestion toward healing and wholeness. It seems to promote psychic integration.

The two modalities of labyrinth walking and mandala drawing have small, slowly emerging evidence bases. Labyrinth walking is a physical, emotional and sensory experience, and can support small

to medium improvements in blood pressure (Sandor & Froman, 2006), reduce dysfunctional thinking (Lizier et al., 2018), and reduce stress (Zucker et al., 2016). Labyrinth walks have been shown to support creating a calmer state (Assam, 1998), to support learning (Marshall, 2003), and to enhance a spiritual quest (Katsilometes, 2010). Mandala creation has been shown to support mental health and wellbeing (for examples, see Babouchkina & Robbins, 2015; Kima et al., 2018; Pizarik & Larson, 2011).

The project aims included gaining qualitative feedback on participants' experiences, and their perspective of the usefulness of the seven protocols for the program of labyrinth walking followed by mandala drawing, which could be the basis for further study.

### The protocols

We have a standard seven-step protocol for a group process, as follows.

1. It begins with personal introductions from all participants.
2. Next, we offer a brief history of the labyrinth.
3. Then suggestions are made about the various intentions and concepts people use to walk it.
4. Suggestions are also offered for approaching the mandala drawing, including the idea that it is about personal expression rather than great artistry.
5. The group labyrinth walk is usually undertaken in silence.
6. The mandala drawing is also undertaken in silence, as is any written recording or significant journaling about the walking experience.
7. Considerable time is allowed



for optional personal sharing from each of the participants regarding the whole of their experience with the walk and the drawing. We observe that the interpersonal connection that arises through this final stage completes the internal experience with a subtle, but profound sense of community.

### Method

This was a qualitative investigation. Phenomenological (lived experience) data was sought, to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions, feelings and general responses to the processes. Additionally, participants' experience of the value of the seven protocols of the program was sought. An anonymous six-item paper questionnaire was distributed at the close of the program (see

Appendix, p. 12), completed privately, and placed in a box for researchers to collect after the program. All participants in the walk and mandala drawing program agreed to be participants in the study. Within a reflexive process (Goldstein, 2017), responses were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and through simple frequency counts.

The researchers were both facilitating the program and participating, while maintaining a level of presence to participants. This seemingly dual relationship was intended to support participants' self-focus, self-exploration, self-reflection and self-direction, rather than needing participants to keep attentive to external direction. The shared lived experience of the processes provided insights for the researchers and aimed to create

a non-hierarchical atmosphere of freedom for participants. University of the Sunshine Coast ethics approval was granted.

### Participant feedback

There were 13 participants: three male and 10 female. They were recruited through university social media and community networks. There was a wide age range, from 21 to 79 years. In terms of previous labyrinth experience, four had previously participated in a labyrinth walk and nine had not. All participants in the walk were advised that if they wished to have their feedback included in the pilot study, anonymous submission of the questionnaire would be taken as their consent.

### MAJOR THEMES

Two main themes emerged from participants' summaries of their experiences in the program. The theme of 'journey' emerged for how participants viewed and experienced the processes, suggesting that the experiences were viewed as occurring within a broader arc of personal growth. For example: "I appreciated meeting like-minded people on a journey of self-discovery".

Taking time out from everyday responsibilities for reflection and connecting with others was also a major theme. For example, responses included, "time out, inner focus, being together" and "got me out of the house and met other souls on different journeys". Some of the words participants used to describe their experiences were peace, reflection, clarity, balance, transformative, inner focus and flow.

### RESPONSES TO PROTOCOLS

In feedback on which steps of the protocol were more or less relevant or supportive (see Appendix Question 3), most indicated that all steps were supportive ("All of these – beautifully put together"). Four participants cited the group sharing and sense of community as important to their experience, and another four stated an interest in exploring creative arts therapies and exposure to new modalities as important. One commented directly that the "time drawing afterwards really helped to shape the feelings from the labyrinth", while another found the reflection time valuable, sharing her insight: "I don't need to try to live a spiritual life. I am spirit."

All participants reported that the steps of the protocol were supportive; nothing was reported as unsupportive. The time creating the mandala was indicated as one of the most helpful aspects, with the walk and the group sharing as close seconds. Altogether, participants reported deep engagement in these complementary activities, and felt the activities contributed to their individual quest for meaning.

### COMFORT

Eleven participants reported finding no uncomfortable aspects of the program; however, one found settling into the group of strangers initially a little uncomfortable. One participant found that it was a revealing experience and some discomfort was connected with this.

### PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS

Eleven of the 13 participants felt there was no way the program

could have been a richer experience, two did not comment, and one suggested experiencing the walk outside might make it richer, to "include the elements as well".

There are, around the globe, a number of outdoor labyrinths, and anecdotal feedback suggests these do support a feeling of connection with nature. Whether the outdoor setting supports internal self-reflection to the same extent remains to be explored.

### FURTHER INTEREST

All participants indicated an interest in considering another labyrinth walk in the future, in one to six months' time. Sandor and Froman (2006) found, in a three-month follow-up to their labyrinth study, that six of seven participants had independently walked the labyrinth again two to three times on average.

### Conclusion

The two modalities of labyrinth walking and mandala drawing seem to complement and support one another. Both are based on the integrative circle, and both are quiet, reflective activities that provide space from the intensity and distractions of daily life. While the labyrinth walk is a more ephemeral experience, the process of drawing a mandala can anchor and sometimes amplify the insights and self-awareness that arises during the labyrinth walk.

We see potential therapeutic value in this combination of modalities. Global conditions continue to deteriorate and general levels of anxiety continue to increase among people of all ages. The World Health Organization

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reports a 50 per cent increase in global levels of depression and anxiety between 1990 and 2013 (WHO, 2018). We feel this combination of creative arts therapeutic modalities, presented within a low-cost program that builds self-reflection and ownership of personal development, may be especially helpful in strengthening mental health resilience.

Further research is needed to gain a more generalisable view of possible outcomes. This research would gather feedback from a larger number of participants, possibly including a clinical population, with follow-up reporting over time. Further peer-reviewed research on outcomes from labyrinth walks and this form of mandala drawing are needed to substantiate this evidence of positive benefits from a single labyrinth event. We hope to contribute to that body of substantiating literature through further research.

#### Appendix

Feedback on your experience of the labyrinth walk and mandala drawing

1. Could you share a few words that might sum up ways today's experience might have been useful for you?
2. Have you participated in a labyrinth walk previously? If so, was that experience similar or different to today's experience?
3. Could you indicate any specific aspect(s) of the experience that were most or least supportive or relevant for you?
  - the introduction to the morning
  - the reflection time
  - the walk on the labyrinth
  - time creating a mandala
  - group sharing
  - social connections
  - the presenter(s)
  - taking time out from everyday life
4. Would you consider exploring a labyrinth walk again if it was offered? If so, how soon?
5. Was there any aspect of the event that you were uncomfortable with?
6. Are there any ways you feel the event could have been a richer experience for you? ■

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