

# Using Art Therapy to Engage the Mind, Body, and Spirit to Cope with Tinnitus

## Perhaps because the world of

music and art is occupied by people with extraordinary talent and training, the world of Art Therapy seems like a place where you need a portfolio to get an appointment. That misperception means that many people who might benefit from it may not understand its purpose, application, and power to address such issues as anxiety, depression, and addiction. To learn more about Art Therapy and how it can be applied to coping with tinnitus, the American Tinnitus Association (ATA) interviewed Cara Fisher Wellvang, an Art Therapist and Licensed Professional Counselor at the Institute for Therapy through the Arts (ITA) and Linden Oaks Hospital in Chicago.

**Joy Onozuka (JO):** *What exactly is Art Therapy?*

**Cara Fisher Wellvang (CFW):** Drawing on the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) definition, Art Therapy is a mental health and human services profession that integrates art making, creative processes, and applied psychological theory within the psychotherapeutic relationship.

Art therapists use interventions to support the personal and relational goals of clients informed by knowl-



edge of artistic traditions, visual media, and advanced training in clinical psychology. Some applications of art therapy include improving cognitive and sensorimotor functions, fostering self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivating emotional resilience, promoting insight, enhancing social skills, and reducing and resolving conflicts and distress.

**JO:** *How do you measure progress? Is progress self-sustaining, or do people typically engage in Art Therapy for long periods to maintain their sense of well-being?*

**CFW:** As with all forms of therapy, there are many ways of implementing and measuring progress in Art Therapy. Some clients are seeking long-term therapy and continue to work with their art therapist for months or years; others may choose to attend a limited number of sessions. The treatment setting, insurance coverage, and goals of the individual client can affect the decision as well. Many art therapists are dually licensed as counselors, so — depending on the client's needs and the licensure of the therapist — they may act as the client's primary therapist, co-treat him or her alongside another primary

therapist, and/or be integrated into the client's treatment team.

**JO:** *Does insurance cover Art Therapy?*

**CFW:** This is a somewhat tricky question — the simple answer is yes, sometimes. It depends on state laws and the individual art therapist's licensure. Art Therapy has its own licensure board (Art Therapy Credentials Board), and, as I mentioned, many also are licensed as counselors (National Board for Certified Counselors).

**JO:** *What do you say to the person who feels anxious and stressed about participating, because he/she lacks artistic talent?*

**CFW:** Everyone has the capacity for creativity and the ability to engage in Art Therapy, no matter their familiarity or comfort with art or art materials. Many adults find the process of creating art to be a daunting or intimidating task, due to past experiences with art and/or social constructs around what constitutes "art" or being an "artist."

In Art Therapy, there is great value in the *process*, as well as the product. We often remind people that, because art is a mode of self-expression, there is no right or wrong way to create. Many people who did not previously identify as "artists" can find meaningful ways of engaging and connecting through art media and creative experiences. That being said, we also recognize that individuals have their own personal preferences, and Art Therapy may not be for everyone. Others may prefer to connect through

music, dance, drama, writing, or other forms of creative expression.

**JO:** *Is there research that shows the benefits of Art Therapy?*

**CFW:** A great deal of research has been done, or is being done, on the benefits of Art Therapy. For more information on that, I'd suggest referring to the AATA website: <https://arttherapy.org/upload/media-kits/Research-fact-sheet.pdf>

**JO:** *Those bothered by tinnitus often are distressed, because the sound disrupts their ability to sleep, concentrate, or enjoy things that previously gave them pleasure. This can result in anxiety, chronic stress, depression, isolation, and feelings of hopelessness. How might Art Therapy help?*

**CFW:** Through Art Therapy, participants develop ways to express and communicate experiences they find difficult to verbalize. As a result, it can help individuals increase feelings of empowerment, hopefulness, and self-worth. Art Therapy also can help participants build a sense of connection to themselves and others, as well as build a sense of belonging to a community.

Through Art Therapy, participants can strengthen the practice of mindfulness and begin to use art as a coping skill to help manage symptoms of anxiety and depression. I have had many clients who have experienced anxiety, depression, irritability, isolation, chronic stress, and suicidal ideation, in conjunction with a variety of medical issues, some including

tinnitus. Art Therapy certainly can be a beneficial part of treatment for tinnitus.

**JO:** *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an evidence-based method for coping with tinnitus distress. Is CBT applied in Art Therapy?*

**CFW:** There are art therapists who use numerous theoretical models, including CBT, in their work. Generally, the therapist will use principles of CBT as a basis to guide the therapeutic process; however, there are many different ways that CBT can be incorporated into Art Therapy. For example, art could be used to help illustrate some of the abstract concepts or principles of CBT, practice cognitive and behavioral skills, or help clients to see a visual representation of their change/progress over time, to name a few possibilities.

**JO:** *Are certain methods of Art Therapy better than others for reducing depression and anxiety? Is there research that shows the benefits of one type over another?*

**CFW:** Art Therapy interventions include a diverse range of art media and experiences, many of which have shown effective results in treating anxiety and depression. Because individual experiences with art and reactions to various materials differ so greatly, a process that may benefit one client may increase symptoms in another. To select effective treatments, art therapists incorporate their clinical theoretical orientations, training in specific media/processes,

and the client's needs to create an individualized treatment plan. Specific research focused on anxiety and depression is growing, and there are many interesting studies in the *Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* detailing this.

**JO:** *It's been suggested that structured creative expression — like coloring a mandala — as opposed to free form drawing, is better at reducing anxiety, because it requires greater focus. What are your thoughts on that?*

**CFW:** It is true that it could be one way of reducing anxiety for some individuals, but I would not say that it is necessarily "better." Some individuals may appreciate structure, while others may find structured activities to be constraining and stressful. A qualified art therapist can help an individual, or group, explore what feels most comfortable, and also may help participants engage with art practices in new, or less familiar, ways to try to facilitate growth and encourage new forms of expression. Sometimes the processes are used to help understand, explore, express, or commu-

nicate about a difficult emotion or experience. Therefore, using structured activities doesn't always allow for the most creative expression and self-exploration, even though it can be helpful in certain circumstances.

**JO:** *Are you surprised by the popularity of coloring books among adults? Is there merit to the claim that they reduce stress?*

**CFW:** I'm not surprised by their popularity. In our society, artistic ability is often thought of as a skill that you either have or you don't, which is something art therapists would dispute. For many people, as they age, they tend to feel increased pressure and judgment around their artistic abilities. As this happens, their interactions with art in general tend to decrease. Coloring books have become a bridge for many to reintroduce art-making in a safe and comfortable environment. Coloring books are a great recreational activity and can be stress-reducing tools for many people. The common misconception is that coloring books are Art Therapy, which is not the case. Art Therapy requires a qualified

therapist to be present and cannot be done independently. That being said, if one finds coloring books to be a useful tool, or coping mechanism, that is great! It is just important to know the difference between recreational activities that can be used as coping skills, art as a therapeutic tool, and Art Therapy as the treatment intervention.

To learn more about Art Therapy, see: <https://arttherapy.org/about-art-therapy/> 

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*Cara Fisher Wellvang received her Masters of Arts in Counseling Psychology, with specialization in Art Therapy from Adler University (formerly the Adler School of Professional Psychology) in Chicago, IL. At the Institute for Therapy through the Arts, Cara works with individuals and families and runs groups in nursing homes, residential facilities, schools, and communities throughout Chicago. At Linden Oaks, Cara works in the in-patient and out-patient psychiatric treatment settings with adolescent, adult, and geriatric populations, providing Art Therapy and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy. She works with clients to address such issues as chronic mental illnesses, neurodevelopmental disorders, social isolation, acculturative stress, school, and family challenges. She uses a variety of approaches in therapy that integrate art, play, and creative expression.*

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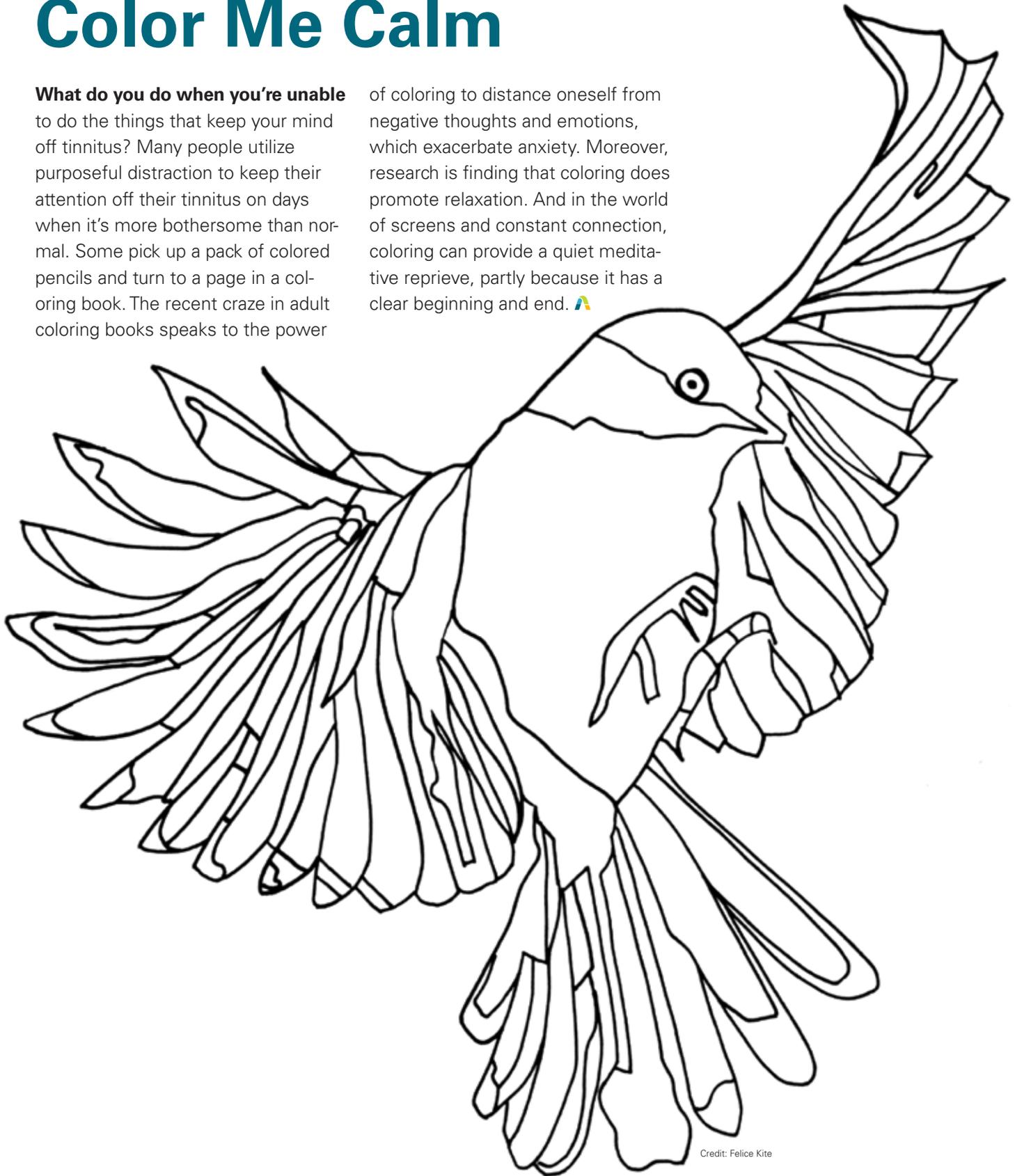
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# Color Me Calm

**What do you do when you're unable** to do the things that keep your mind off tinnitus? Many people utilize purposeful distraction to keep their attention off their tinnitus on days when it's more bothersome than normal. Some pick up a pack of colored pencils and turn to a page in a coloring book. The recent craze in adult coloring books speaks to the power

of coloring to distance oneself from negative thoughts and emotions, which exacerbate anxiety. Moreover, research is finding that coloring does promote relaxation. And in the world of screens and constant connection, coloring can provide a quiet meditative reprieve, partly because it has a clear beginning and end. 



Credit: Felice Kite

**We'd like to invite you to color the page above to see if doing so provides you with a sense of calm and distraction from your tinnitus. Let us know your thoughts by emailing: [editor@ata.org](mailto:editor@ata.org)**