

HAND LETTERING EFFECTS ON  
SELF-COMPASSION

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Mom, Dad, Liz, Gerry, and Os: I will be eternally grateful for your love and support.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Mental Health in America report for 2020 indicates that 44.6 percent of Americans cited both affordability and cost of care as being the most prevalent reason adults with any mental illness did not receive treatment or documented an unmet need. This means that despite more Americans having some form of health insurance, their coverage was not enough to obtain access to much needed mental health treatment (Mental Health America, 2020). In addition, negative child and adolescent experiences and memories can have a profound impact on cognitive and emotional function, including producing anxiety-like behavior (Krugers and Joels, 2014). Many college and university students in North America struggle with depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychosis (Gallagher, 2008 as cited in Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). Some reasons for an increase in mental health symptoms in college and university students include academic pressure, accessibility of college, and the financial burden of higher education costs (Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). Additionally, the age at which mental disorders manifest themselves is between 18 and 24, and this coincides with the average age of student enrolment in college or universities (Kessler et al., 2005 as cited in Kruisselbrink Flatt, 2013). For this reason, college-aged students are the focus of this study because they have recently been indicated as a high-risk group for mental illness.

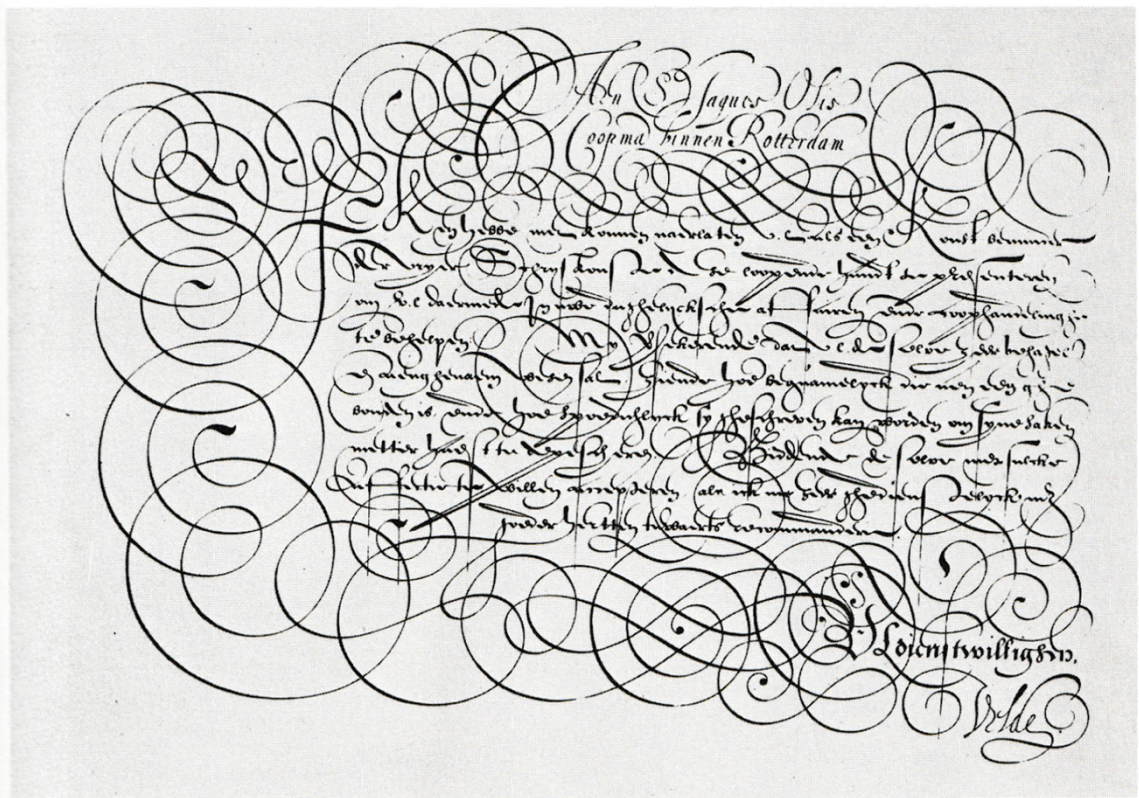
One approach to combat symptoms of mental illness is art therapy. According to the American Art Therapy Association, a not-for-profit education organization dedicated to growth and development of the art therapy profession, art therapy occurs during the creative process of making art, and it is considered to be healing, life-enhancing, and a form of nonverbal communication of thoughts and feelings. While there are many forms



of art, hand lettering—or the art of drawing letters in a system for a specific purpose or communicated message has been proven to be a method of creative expression (Gray, 1971). Mark R. Hatch, Maker Movement “godfather” and innovation expert, describes an explosion of creativity emerging from this new culture. The Maker Movement is a grassroots effort that has combined technology, do-it-yourself ingenuity, and innovation to create new markets as well as disrupt existing markets. The Maker Movement embraces the “changing nature of making things” and how it impacts one’s life. (Hatch, 2013, Introduction). Hatch goes on to describe that accessibility to affordable tools, creativity, and technology has paved the way to create an environment from which art can thrive (Hatch, 2020). He states that the Maker Movement’s main goal is to motivate a generation of young people with a desire to learn how to make things, and learning how to make things is tied to the fundamental concept of art therapy. The desire to create—whether hand-made, or as a new idea—combined with the tangible healing aspects of art therapy or creative expression via hand lettering could manifest into a powerful combination to address mental health and wellness.

There are many examples in history of how lettering has been used as a form of expression. In the late Gothic period through the 17th century, curls and flourishes were used in letterforms, carvings, and messages, and according to Nicolette Gray, a 20th century lettering historian, this lettering era was more concerned with “abstract pattern” than with “legibility” (Gray, 1971, p. 139). By the middle of the 15th century into the 16th century, the skill of scribes was transforming due to the invention of printing. Good and impressive handwriting was heavily sought after and admired, and scribes aspired to be “writing-masters” (Gray, 1971, p. 137). These writing-masters experimented with their

skills and techniques, often creating elaborate compositions and letters as a way to promote their work and style (Figure 1). With the combination of words, letters, and design expression, this research will study how lettering can provide a form of art therapy that addresses mental health symptoms. For those that struggle with such symptoms and illnesses, having an accessible and affordable way to connect to self-care such as creating hand lettering is vitally important to overall well-being for a fulfilling life. The practice of hand lettering within the communication design field can have additional value in our society beyond conveying messages through letterforms; communication design can bring value to other important academic and clinical arenas such as wellness.



**Figure 1.** A page from Jan van der Velde, a master-writer, *Spiegel der Schrijffkonste*, 1605. From “A History of Lettering: Creative Experiment and Letter Identity,” by N. Gray, 1971, p. 141. Copyright 1986 by Phaidon Press Limited.

One key component to battling symptoms of mental health disorders like anxiety, depression, or perfectionism is to address feelings of shame through self-compassion that may have manifested from childhood or adolescent experiences (Engel, 2015). Research has proven self-compassion can help us “cope with failure, take risks, and weather criticism and conflicts” (Engel, 2015, p.58). In order to measure one's current emotional and mental state, this study will use Dr. Kristin Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003). Neff is an Educational Psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin and is among the first academics to create a method to measure self-compassion. She has written numerous articles and book chapters on the topic.

The goal of this quantitative study is to survey undergraduate university students by randomly placing them in three groups. Each group was asked to complete an exercise: Group A completed a word-only exercise, Group B completed an art-only exercise, and Group C completed a hand-lettering exercise. At the end of each exercise, students were asked a series of questions about the task itself and also took Neff’s Self-Compassion quiz. By comparing the three groups, this study measured the effects hand lettering may have on one’s self-compassion score compared to self-compassion scores for students in the other two groups.

## II. HAND LETTERING IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN

The design discipline of typography is well-known and documented, and while typography has a significant importance in the design discipline, there is historical and current context that proves lettering also falls within the communication design discipline that has been practiced for centuries. Those include expressive outputs of letters to create meaning, and for words or phrases, the written word is also a method to communicate a message. Lettering has also become much more popular and pervasive since the rise of the digital age, and its popularity is not contained within the typography community. For example, a simple Instagram hashtag search for “lettering” brings up over 18.5 million results. Users are creating lettering art using various mediums such as on paper, with markers, specialty pens, tattoo designs, on wooden coasters and pillows, chalk designs, and with numerous other mediums and outputs.

According to Nicolette Gray, the first concept of a continuous moving line in the Western world dates back to the third century influenced by Egyptians’ use of papyrus—the cursive was created using an ink-primed reed pen (Gray, 1971). There are “two types of Roman cursive” that are regarded as drawing, and one of those examples gives the impression the writer thought of his cursive as “art” (Gray, 1971, p.9). This type of continuous-line drawing was reserved only for official documents, and those that wielded the pen were professional scribes or artists. The cursive drawings from this time period were intentionally elaborate so as to dissuade forgery, but it also represents the importance of what Gray describes as an “expression to the grandeur of imperial authority” (1971, p.10). It is clear that examples from this era were not only drawings, but lettering—the lettering was intentionally expressive in nature to convey meaning.

Between 366–384 AD inscription artist Filocalus created a new type of lettering for the purpose of expressing glorification of the Roman church—this inscription, etched on the catacombs of San Callisto, Rome, were verses written by Pope Damasus and served to commemorate the martyrs after the end of the persecutions in the mid fourth century AD (Figure 2). According to Stanley Morison, influential typographer and one of the creators of the Times New Roman typeface, Filocalus’ inscription was “an absolute and unique departure from anything ever seen before in Rome or, it should be emphasized, elsewhere” (Gray, 1971, p. 32). The intentionally-expressive inscription was a “conscious symbol” of complete independence of the Church from the state and gave the Bishop of Rome special status.





**Figure 2. An inscription designed by Filocalus, from the catacomb of San Callisto, Rome. Mid-fourth century AD. From “A History of Lettering: Creative Experiment and Letter Identity,” by N. Gray, 1971, p. 30. Copyright 1986 by Phaidon Press Limited.**

Along with considering historical aspects of lettering, evaluating the craft in modern times is also important. Martina Flor—a current-day expert typographer, designer, and hand letterer—describes lettering as “a unique, personalized typographic expression, made for a certain application by combining shapes and graphic elements, such as color and texture, in order to convey a certain attribute, message or idea” (Flor, 2017, p. 12). Flor goes on to say “Lettering ... tells a story by using drawn letter shapes.” Lettering is distinct from type design in the communication design field—type design

involves a designer creating a full alphabet, or font, to be used again and again. Lettering, however, is created for a single purpose like “an illustration consisting of letters” (Flor, 2017, p. 12). Lettering also uses the same typographic terminology as in type design. Flor’s examples point to the “feet of letters” called “serfis” and the empty space within letters like “a” and “p” is called a “counter.” Typographic rules also are applied in lettering, and therefore follow design rigor. Examples include rules like maintaining a uniform x-height along the baseline path, determining cap and descender height (the lines at which capital letters or descenders reach respectively), consistent strokes within the lettering piece, and maintaining appropriate letter spacing throughout.

The historical context of lettering is important to understand its evolution and how it was applied in various contexts for a particular purpose. Similarly, understanding lettering’s current-day usage and how it is applied, practiced, and taught proves that lettering is a unique communication design discipline that has increased in popularity in the last few decades because of its ability to convey meaning through letters, words, and phrases using practical and accessible tools.

### **III. SELF-COMPASSION**

Creating visualizations through art and hand lettering can result in practicing self-compassion. To understand self-compassion, we must first understand the definition of compassion. In 2010 Goetz et al. defined compassion as “the feeling that arises when witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (2010, p. 351). Another element of compassion is “a sense of interconnection with the person who is suffering” (Cassell, 2002 as cited in Germer & Neff, 2019, p. 15); therefore, one must care and feel for the person who is in pain. According to self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff, self-compassion is compassion turned inward, so one must care for oneself and then practice that care. Neff goes on to describe self-compassion as “being touched by and open to one’s own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one’s suffering and to heal oneself with kindness.” (Neff, K., 2003b *Self and Identity*, 2, 85–101).

Compassion has the power of healing and, unlike in Western cultures that have historically valued individualization, in Eastern culture compassion has been written about for centuries and is an important part of life. Compassion is described as being “central to liberating our minds from the power of destructive emotions such as fear, anger, envy and vengeance” through practicing “loving-kindness” for others and for oneself in a non-defensive and non-judgmental way (Goleman, 2003 as cited in Gilbert, 2005, p. 1). Compassion-focused therapy, or applying a compassion model to psychotherapy (Gilbert, 2009), addresses activities that help one develop skills in building compassion; therefore, one can learn how to be self-compassionate. Self-compassion has been studied as a valid measurement of well being. There are also



methods to help increase and decrease one's self-compassion. In addition, there are studies that show how "compassionate imagery" can focus one's attention in a way that balances our negative thoughts with positive qualities. (Gilbert, 2009).

Human emotions are complex, and there are internal and external exercises that humans can practice to not only build one's own self-compassion but also combat feelings of shame, which is a clear indicator of low self-compassion. In a compassion-focused therapy and compassionate mind training study, researcher and founder of the Compassionate Mind Foundation, Paul Gilbert observed that "people with high levels of shame and self-criticism can have enormous difficulty in being kind to themselves, feeling self-warmth or being self-compassionate" (Gilbert, 2009, p. 199). According to Brené Brown—a research professor at the University of Houston that has spent two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy—humans are "hardwired for emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual connection, and shame is the undoing of those aspects of being human as well as being a universal and primitive human emotion" (Brown, 2015, p. 68). Brown defines shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging" (Brown, 2015, p. 69). She says that in order to combat shame, one must practice self-compassion.

Another aspect to surviving feelings of shame is described by John Bradshaw, a philosopher and counselor who founded the self-help movement. He states, to heal shame, one "must come out of hiding" (Bradshaw, 1988). Bradshaw proposed the method of externalizing shame; recommendations included sharing our shame with others, coming out of hiding through social contact, sharing our feelings, and writing and talking

about our shame, as examples. Knowing that hand lettering is a creative and expressive form of communication, it can be a connection to externalize hidden feelings that are kept secret when there is shame.

In more recent research, Dr. Kristin Neff has created a series of 26 questions that comprise the Self-Compassion Quiz (2003). Each question is then assessed using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003b). According to Neff, self-compassion can be defined by three main components: (1) self-kindness versus self-judgement, (2) common humanity versus isolation, and (3) mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff, 2019). Self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness are three factors that, when identified, increase one's self-compassion score. According to Neff's self-compassion quiz, self-kindness equates to being loving and caring towards oneself, even when one experiences emotional pain or suffering. Examples of having a common-humanity mindset include reminding oneself that they are not alone in the world, and that many people experience the same emotions. Examples of being mindful include when one keeps their emotions in balance and maintains perspective, even when one is upset (2003).

Lastly, self-judgement, isolation, and over-identification are dimensions that, when identified in the self-compassion quiz, lower one's self-compassion score. In Neff's self-compassion quiz, self-judgement is when one disapproves of their flaws or inadequacies. Isolation includes feelings or beliefs that others are happier than they are or feeling alone when one fails. Finally, over-identification is described by Neff as a person who gets carried away with their feelings when they are upset or tend to blow painful incidents out of proportion (2003).

Research has shown that using the Self-Compassion Scale is a strong indicator of well-being. Increased self-compassion scores relate to “strong positive associations” with results such as “happiness, optimism, and motivation,” while negative scores have outcomes such as “depression, anxiety, maladaptive perfectionism, and fear of failure” (Neff et al., 2019, p. 29). If shame is a belief that we are flawed and *unworthy* of love (Brown, 2018, p. 126), and measuring self-compassion can have direct implications to one’s well-being and state of mind, this study comparatively measured the effects of self-compassion scores between participants that write, create, or draw the phrase, “I am worthy of love.”

#### IV. MANTRAS & AFFIRMATIONS

Participants in this study used the phrase “I am worthy of love,” and in each cohort, the phrase was repeated or created visually over a period of time with the phrase in mind. Participants in the study might have been affected by this mantra-like or self-affirmation exercise. Additionally, would such repetition and affirming words have an impact on overall self-compassion scores?

The word “mantra” consists of the Sanskrit root *man*, "to think," and the ending -*tra*, indicating instrumentality; thus a mantra can be understood as "an instrument of thought (or the mind)" or "an instrument for producing (a special kind of) thought” (Burchett, 2008, p. 813). More concisely, a mantra is a prolonged repetitive verbal utterance, and it is widely used as a universal practice in human culture (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2015, p. 1). For example, not only do mantras have a long history in Hinduism, mantras also appear in other religions and philosophies of thought such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism (Nesbitt, 2016). They can be found in the Japanese Shingon tradition, and mantra hymns and chants are also found in Zoroastrianism (Boyce, 2001), Taoism, and Christianity (Gonda, 1963, p. 244–297).

In relation to this hand-lettering study, the repetitive nature of the phrase in question could be interpreted as the instrument of both thought and of producing a specific thought. Additionally, a systematic assessment conducted on peer-reviewed empirical mantra meditation studies between 1970 and 2018 showed some evidence on how practicing mantra meditation can improve mental health; for the studies in this given assessment, a common observation was the reduction in burnout, stress, depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms (Lynch et al., 2018, p. 101–102).

A self-affirmation, on the other hand, is “an act that demonstrates one’s adequacy” (Steele, 1988). The act of repeating a kind message to one’s self in their own handwriting could be considered a self-affirmation. According to Claude Steele, the social psychologist that popularized the self-affirmation theory in the 1980’s and emeritus professor at Stanford University, “even small inputs into the self-system can have large effects, because a healthy self-system is motivated to maintain integrity and generate affirming meanings (Steele 1988 as cited in Cohen & Sherman, 2014, p. 337).

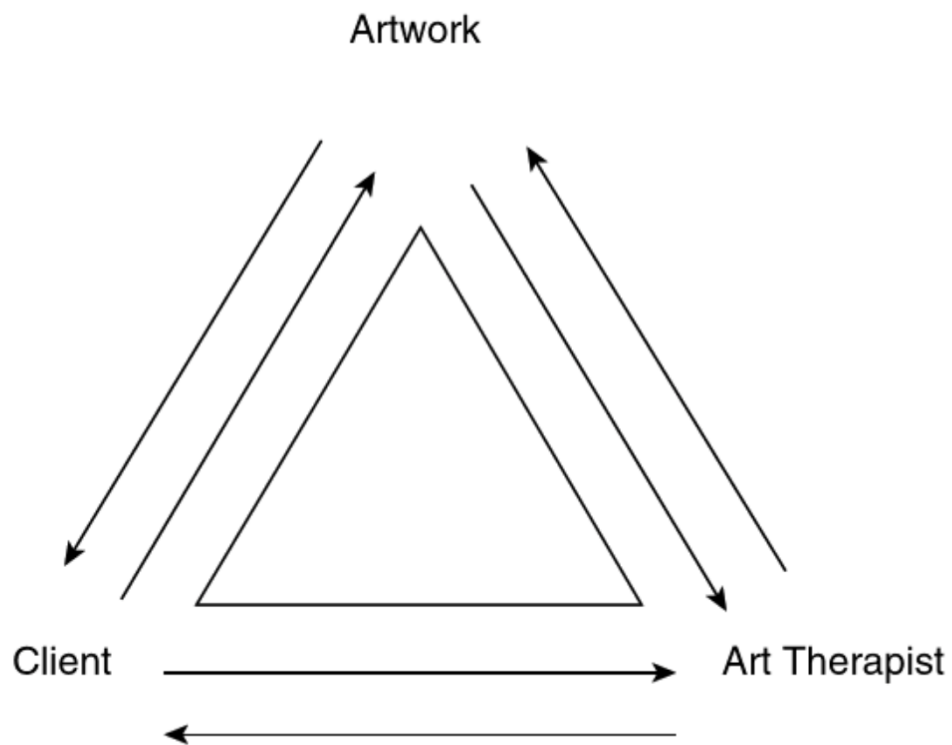
In a 2015 research study on repetitive speech on the brain, researchers found that the subjects who participated experienced a calming effect after repeating the same word over a period of time similar to Mantra-related practices, thus affirming the psychological calming effect typical of meditation (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2015). For the purpose of this hand-lettering study, repeating a key phrase (i.e. a mantra) and repeating a self-affirming phrase (i.e. an affirmation), should have a positive overall effect for participants actualizing the research exercise. Could the combination—whether through written form, artistic form, or through hand lettering—have a positive effect on one’s self-compassion score?

## V. ART THERAPY

According to the American Art Therapy Association, a not-for-profit education organization dedicated to growth and development of the art therapy profession, “Art Therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship” (*American Art Therapy Association*, 2017, About page). Art therapy is considered to be healing, life-enhancing, and a form of nonverbal communication of thoughts and feelings. Since the recognition for the field of art therapy was established in the mid 1900’s, there have been several studies conducted of how art therapy has been tested and used to reduce mental health symptoms and as a form of mental healing—research has also proven the effectiveness of art therapy in its therapeutic powers. Art therapy is also an established method to practice self-care and self-compassion (Williams, 2018 as cited in Braus & Morton, 2020). Because of its similarities to creating art as well as tools used, hand lettering could be a close comparison to those healing powers that help reduce mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, depression, or other mental health factors.

Margaret Naumburg was the creator of the art therapy profession and its first theoretician. Naumburg, a psychologist, was also first to define art therapy as a profession in the mental health field in 1940. With an approach of using both art and psychotherapy, Naumburg’s practices evolved using theories and techniques that helped the field of art therapy evolve. Around the same time, Adrian Hill, an artist from the UK also coined the term “art therapy,” but his approach to art therapy was different from

Naumburg (Edwards, 2014). The distinction lies in that Hill described art *as* therapy while Naumburg approached art *in* therapy—as the field has developed and studied over time, the association and correlation between the artwork, art therapist, and client have formed an equal-weighted framework called the “triangular relationship” (Figure 3) (Case, 1990, 2000; Schaverien, 1990, 2000; Wood, 1990 as cited in Edwards, 2014).



**Figure 3. The triangular relationship between a client, client’s artwork, and their art therapist.** From “Art Therapy (Creative Therapies in Practice series),” by D. Edwards, 2014, p. 2. Copyright 2004 by David Edwards.

Several controlled studies have been documented to provide insight into how art making reduces anxiety and stress or has “mood repairing” outcomes (Abbott, Shanahan, and Neufeld 2013; Babouchkina, and Robbins 2015; Bell and Robbins 2007; Curl 2008; Curry and Kasser 2005; Crane 2010; Drake, Coleman and Winner 2011; Drake and Winner 2012; Henderson, Rosen, and Mascaro 2007; Kersten and van der Vennet 2010;

Kimport and Robbins 2012; Pizarro 2004; Riccardi 2013; Sandmire, Gorham, Rankin and Grimm 2012 and cited in Buchanan, 2016). As an example from a 1995 study, Stephanie Brooke—an art therapist and instructor in psychology at Genesee Community College in Lakeville, New York—found that sexual abuse survivors showed improvement in self-esteem when they completed consecutive art therapy sessions in a group after eight weeks (Brooke, 1995). The participants in the study took a self-esteem inventory (SEI) test (Battle, 1981 as cited in Brooke, 1995) before the sessions began, then a post-SEI test after meeting for two hours every week for eight weeks for facilitated art therapy sessions. A control group of sexual abuse survivors that did not participate in the art therapy sessions were also asked to complete the SEI test. The author found that the participants in the art therapy sessions showed statistically significant increased levels of self-esteem compared to the control group that showed little to no change, thus confirming Brooke’s initial hypothesis that the use of art therapy increases self-esteem.

Another example of how art making reduces mental health symptoms is through mandala drawings. A mandala is a concept that refers to “a sacred circle or axial center” (Bi & Liu, 2019). According to Bi and Liu, researchers in the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science at East China Normal University, there are two types of mandalas: one is a predrawn, or structural, and the second is created, or nonstructural. In Bi and Liu’s 2019 study comparing the effects of creating a nonstructural mandala drawing versus a free drawing, creating mandalas showed significant effectiveness in relieving and treating social anxiety in college students when doing the activity for 30 minutes once a week for four weeks (Bi & Liu, 2019). According to the authors, mandala drawings have shown to be more popular as a treatment approach for art therapists. In



hand lettering, the structure of letters of the alphabet are predefined in the English language, some of which are circular in nature. The English alphabet allows for particular guardrails from which to work similar to working with the circular confines of a mandala.

Art therapy can be administered in a variety of forms and using different media or tools and not all media have the same effectiveness—examples include pencil, paint, clay, chalk, collage, etc. (Hinz, 2016, pp. 5–7). Hand lettering can also be executed using various tools. For example, one can produce hand-lettered art using paint, pencil, chisel, or chalk. Media used for art therapy versus hand lettering are not a one to one comparison; however, there are enough similarities using various media for both and learning from research in art therapy. In a 2015 study by Ichiki and Hinz, 111 art therapy graduate students were surveyed for the use of types of media preferences on their clients—media preferences for this study include clay, chalk pastel, oil pastel, collage, and black pencil. The findings indicated that some media have the effect of exuding feelings of “activating energy”. Those media that indicated activating energy were described as feeling more free and playful while using them. Another second finding was that other media types were described as “cognitive control,” meaning they exuded feelings of safety when using them (Hinz, 2016). Similarly, a hand-lettering artist might feel more in control when using a specific tool—like a pencil—than a tool that is more free-form, such as a paint brush.

In an 2020 article by Mallory Braus and Brenda Morton from George Fox University in Newberg, Oregeon, it is established that in times of extreme isolation, loneliness, and confinement, such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of mental health disorders, increased anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress, tend to

increase. They describe art therapy as an essential tool for a “low-cost therapeutic activity that promotes self-care and healthy outlets for heightened emotions” (Braus & Morton, 2020, p. S267). Art therapy also uses the practice of mindfulness (or “tuning out” the daily stress and anxiety), and when used intentionally, it “allows for self-reflection and expression.” Another benefit is that creating art inherently “makes that which is implicit explicit,” and one’s expressive thoughts and feelings are determined by shapes or colors rather than by language (Malchiodi, 2007 as cited in Braus & Morton, 2020, p. S267). Furthermore, creating art is tied to “the ability to go into a mindful framework in the practice of ... self-compassion” (Williams, 2018 as cited in Braus & Morton, 2020, p. S267)—the greater one’s self-compassion, the stronger the correlation to lower levels of anxiety and depression. (Allen & Leary, 2014; Barnard & Curry, 2011 as cited in Braus & Morton, 2020).

Art therapy has been used in psychotherapy as a way to heal and repair emotions—it has also been used to increase self-understanding and foster personal growth (Malchiodi, 2002). Because art therapy emerged as a form of psychotherapy, questions have arisen about its ability to be an outward-facing version of internal conflict or trauma, expressing creatively what cannot be done through words, written or spoken (Malchiodi, 1998). Even though art therapy is a well-known form of treatment, there are still unanswered questions regarding the full extent of its positive effects. Using art lettering as a cost-effective and accessible means of art therapy will provide further clarity on art therapy’s impact on mental health.

A great deal of research has been done to establish art therapy as a profession, an established and recognized field of study, and an effective way to treat mental health

symptoms. The inherent healing powers of creating art are also defined at varying levels depending on the tool the artist uses, and creating art has many similarities to creating hand lettering. Creating art also has been proven to show that artists are in a mindfulness state in the process, and mindfulness is a key ingredient to increased self-compassion.

## **VI. METHODS**

### **Anticipated Research Results**

Knowing that art therapy has the power to reduce anxiety and symptoms of depression and knowing that the tactile process can connect the mind and body, combining the artistic and written aspect of hand lettering could potentially reduce anxiety and depression symptoms and increase self-compassion. After completing the exercises, participants from each group took the same self-compassion quiz. The anticipated results included a higher self-compassion score for the language-and-art condition group (Group C) compared to the language-only and the art-only condition group.

### **Recruiting**

This study recruited undergraduate Texas State University Communication Design students in the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. Because the study required participants to complete a hand-lettering task, some familiarity with fundamental typographic skills were relevant. Texas State University offers an undergraduate degree in Communication Design, and the degree curriculum includes various levels of typography courses. The study coordinated with professors teaching those courses to encourage students to participate in exchange for extra credit in the class. The amount of extra credit given was set at the discretion of the professors.

### **Survey Format**

In this study, information was gathered on the effects of hand lettering on self-compassion. Self-compassion was measured using Dr. Kristin Neff's Self-Compassion Scale after taking the Self-Compassion Quiz. Students were randomly placed in one of

three groups: the language-only condition group (Group A), the art-only condition group (Group B), and the hand lettering (language-and-art) condition group (Group C).

Each student, regardless of group, was sent a Qualtrics test link, and the survey was completely online. Upon entering the study, the introduction section delineated the time commitment of no more than 60 minutes required to complete the study from start to finish. The first part of the survey involved basic demographic questions and questions confirming the participants had the necessary materials and allotted time needed to complete the survey. The middle part of the survey was completing the task—each student was placed in one of three task groups at random: Group A, Group B, or Group C. The final part of the survey involved follow-up questions to the task and completion of the Self-Compassion Quiz (see Index Test Script).

The Group A exercise is focused on using language and words in a written format. Participants in Group A were tasked to write out the following self-compassion phrase 15 times in their own handwriting: “I am worthy of love.” Group A participants were not given a time limit for completing their task. After they completed this task, participants were allowed to move to the next module via the Qualtrics prompt. The page redirected students to questions about how they felt about the exercise they just completed. Then participants were asked to answer questions from the self-compassion quiz. The final section of the survey asked participants to digitally upload their work via Qualtrics—this final task was optional. Upon completing these questions and tasks, this concluded the study for Group A.

Group B students (the art-only condition) followed the same format as Group A except for the exercise. Group B students were asked to create an artistic representation

of the same phrase used by Group A without using any words. Unlike Group A, Group B participants were given 15 minutes to complete this exercise. After the 15 minutes had passed, the Qualtrics page automatically proceeded to follow-up questions about how they felt about the exercise they just completed. Participants were then asked to answer questions from the Self-Compassion Quiz. Again, the final section asked them to digitally upload their work via Qualtrics, and like Group A, uploading work was optional. Upon completing these questions and tasks, this concluded the study for Group B.

Finally, Group C followed the same structure as Group B. Group C participants were tasked with creating a hand-lettering representation of the same self-compassion phrase (*I am worthy of love*). Given these are students enrolled in a Communication Design course, they might have had some familiarity with hand lettering. This group was also given a brief definition of hand lettering to ensure comprehension of what is being asked in the exercise. Students were given 15 minutes to complete the task. After completing the exercise, Group C was asked questions specific to the task and how they felt about it. They were then prompted with the Self-Compassion Quiz questions. The final section asked them to digitally upload their work via Qualtrics, and like Group A and B, uploading work was optional. Upon completing these questions and tasks, this concluded the study for Group C.

If art therapy has been proven to reduce mental health symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and hand lettering is an artistic form of expression and communication, this study explored how hand lettering might offer an artistic way to also reduce mental health symptoms. The comparative aspect was to measure the hand lettering group (Group C) to the word-only or art-only groups (Groups A and B, respectively). The

tactile process of hand lettering was used to test the connection of the body to the mind, combining the artistic and written aspect of the craft. The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) was then calculated per participant and referenced their respective group. The questions derived from the Self-Compassion Quiz are worded to measure one's compassion towards the self in their current emotional state and are a reflection of that state after they have completed the task.

## **VII. RESULTS**

A total of 26 undergraduate Texas State University students completed the study, which is typical for a pilot study of this type. The age range of the students was between 19 and 29 years old. The mean age of the students was 22 years old. Of the 26 students, 17 of them identified as female, eight identified as male, and one identified as non-binary.

Seven students completed the text-only exercise (Group A), ten students were part of the art-only exercise (Group B), and nine students were in the hand-lettering exercise (Group C). The anticipated outcome suggested that the hand-lettering group would score higher in their self-compassion score; however, this hypothesis was not confirmed. All three cohorts showed very similar self-compassion scores after completing their respective exercises. Self-compassion scores were 2.99, 2.95, and 2.85 in a one to five scale for Groups A, B, and C, respectively. Finally, students rated their enjoyment in each exercise as very high regardless of which exercise they were given. Enjoyment or accomplishment scores were 3.57, 3.9, and 3.59 in a one to five scale for Groups A, B, and C, respectively.



## VII. CONCLUSION

Given the need for greater access to mental health resources in the United States, this study explored how an accessible, low-cost, and creative outlet such as hand lettering could serve as a viable solution to address those unmet needs by increasing one's self-compassion score. Combining the artistic and expressive aspect of hand lettering could be a way to address mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety, similar to the healing aspects of art therapy and art therapy practices. Additionally, this study explores how the communication design field could expand into a new territory for addressing wellness versus the traditional uses of typography, whether commercial or social. The creation of expressive letters to signify meaning, convey personal and internal messages, and as a means to mindfulness could be a new aspect of typography not explored before with further research.

There was no significant difference in self-compassion scores as this study sought out to find, and the effects on self-compassion while creating hand-lettering artifacts were inconclusive. There are many possibilities for why there was not a clear difference in self-compassion scores among exercise groups. It is possible that the tasks acting as controls (i.e. the word- and art-only tasks) were just as effective in increasing self-compassion scores as was the hand-lettering task. Another possibility is that the sample size of 26 participants was simply not big enough to show a significant difference in self-compassion. Additionally, was the one-time task not a sufficient measure of self-compassion changing over time? Had the tasks been repeated multiple times with the same participants for several weeks, would that have shown a greater difference in self-compassion scores?

The communication design field currently serves a narrow focus of commerce and messaging. Researchers in the psychology field—perhaps those particular to the creative arts as a means to improve one’s wellness—could leverage hand lettering as a tool to explore how practicing the art of letters could be used as a mindfulness tool, increase self-compassion, and decrease common mental health symptoms. Designers, type designers, and hand letterers could also begin to explore other uses their craft may have on culture and the social science field. It is clear that more testing and analysis could help drive to answers.

### **Future Research**

Despite the hypothesis not being confirmed, the study presented itself with opportunities for future studies and expansion on the research. First, the study would have improved with more time to complete it—this could be actualized in many ways including repetitive sessions over a period of time. Second, if participants were incentivized with other means than extra credit for a course, engagement could have increased. This also brings up the idea that the target audience for the study could be expanded. Finally, conducting the study in person might have improved self-compassion score results.

Had the study been prolonged, the research findings might have presented different outcomes depending on the participants’ cohort. In this study, each participant completed one exercise, and they did not repeat the exercise at any other point. Additionally, the timeframe of the one exercise, regardless of cohort, did not exceed 15 minutes. Had the participants had more time to do the exercise (30 to 45 minutes), and if the study was extended for once a week for eight to ten weeks, the compounding effects

might have yielded a difference in self-compassion scores across the handwriting-only, art-only, and hand-lettering groups. For future considerations, this timeframe would be highly ideal.

Students were incentivized with extra credit from their professors in one undergraduate class to complete the study. This begs the question of whether the results not only affected participation, but also the target audience of participants that completed the study. Did the fact that Communication Design students were the audience influence the results in any way? Communication Design students might be thought of as more artistic in nature, and the art-only and hand-lettering exercises lend themselves to those skills. In future research efforts, the study would target a more specific audience from the self-compassion lens. What if participants recruited for the study were people struggling with mental health symptoms—an even more specific audience could be a group with PTSD.

The Communication Design discipline could benefit from further research in this area, specifically how practicing hand lettering might improve mental wellness and decrease mental health symptoms. As a field of study, the communication design discipline does not have to be limited to commercial or social issues—it can expand beyond traditional boundaries, and this type of research could help broaden the need exposure to the design community as a whole.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **APPENDIX A: Test Script**

#### **Q1**

Note: You will need to have writing utensils, blank or sketch paper, and be able to write/draw on a comfortable surface for this study. If you do not have those supplies, come back to this link when you are ready.

Ms. Carla Gomez is conducting a research study to learn about the effects of communication design on self-compassion. You are being asked to complete this survey because you are an English-speaking adult at Texas State University, and this is the targeted population.

Participation is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes and no more than 60 minutes. You must be between 18–30 years old to take this survey.

This study involves no foreseeable serious risks. The only possible risk is potential discomfort to your eyes from looking at a computer screen. We ask that you try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that make you uncomfortable or that you would prefer to skip, please leave the answer blank. Your responses are anonymous.

There are no direct benefits from this study. Possible benefits to society from this study are providing important information to the field of communication design.

You will not be asked to provide your email, social security number, address, telephone number, or any other direct personal identifier on any study records. You will be assigned a unique numerical identification code that cannot be traced back to your response set. This means that all your responses to the questionnaire items will be recorded only under a unique, participant identification code to ensure anonymity of your answers. The data will be only used for group statistical analyses and safeguarded for a period of three years in a secured storage in the Psychology Department at Texas State University.

Your course instructor will give credit towards your class as compensation for completing the study. Your name will only be collected for the purposes of distributing this credit and will not be linked to any of your answers in the survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Carla Gomez: [cmg137@txstate.edu](mailto:cmg137@txstate.edu) or the faculty supervisor, Alice Lee: [alicejlee@txstate.edu](mailto:alicejlee@txstate.edu)

This project 7464 was approved by the Texas State IRB on 10/20/2020. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 – ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu))

## Q2

If you consent to participate in this study, please select the button, “I consent to participate in this study,” below. If you do not consent to participate in this study, please select the button, “I do not consent to participate in this survey,” below.

- I consent to participate in this study.
- I do not consent to participate in this study.

## Q3

What is your age?

## Q4

To which gender do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to answer
- Option not listed (specify)

## Q5

Before moving on to the next module, ensure you have the following materials and supplies on hand in a place where you will be able to access and use freely.

- Several sheets of blank white paper or a blank sketchbook (required)
- Writing utensils (pencils, pens, markers, and/or drawing utensils, etc.) Have as many of these utensils available as you’d like. (required)
- Ruler (optional)

- Eraser (optional)

**Q6**

Do you have blank white paper or a blank sketchbook on hand?

- Yes
- No

**Q7**

Do you have writing utensils (such as pencils, pens, or markers) on hand?

- Yes
- No

**Q8**

Do you have a ruler on hand? (The ruler is optional and not a requirement of the study.)

- Yes
- No

**Q9**

Will you have at least 30 minutes to complete this exercise?

- Yes
- No

**Q10 - Group A**

On the following screen, you will be asked to write out a phrase on paper with your writing utensil(s) in your own handwriting. Write out the phrase in your handwriting until you have written it out 15 times. Use as much of the materials and paper as you need.

Do you have your materials on hand and a surface on which you can write on comfortably before proceeding to the next screen?

- Yes
- No

### **Q11 - Group A**

Phrase: **I am worthy of love.**

Instructions: Write out the phrase above on paper with your writing utensil in your own handwriting. Repeat the phrase in your handwriting until you have written it out 15 times.

Use as much of the materials and paper as you need.

When you have completed the task, continue to the next screen.

### **Q10 - Group B**

For this exercise, you will be given 15 minutes to draw an artistic representation or picture of a phrase. Use the following steps as a guide.

1. Read the phrase provided (you will be given the phrase on the next screen).
2. Sketch or draw what the phrase means to you. Avoid using words in your artistic representation.
3. Use as much paper as you need to warm up or iterate on your drawing.
4. Feel free to use different writing utensils to convey stroke weights, shading, or even color.

Once the 15 minutes are up, the page will automatically proceed to the next screen.



Do you have your materials on hand and a surface on which you can draw comfortably before proceeding to the next screen?

- Yes
- No

### **Q11 - Group B**

Phrase: **I am worthy of love.**

Instructions: For the next 15 minutes draw an artistic representation or picture of the phrase. Use the following steps as a guide.

1. Read the phrase shown above.
2. Sketch or draw what the phrase means to you. Avoid using words in your artistic representation.
3. Use as much paper as you need to warm up or iterate on your drawing.
4. Feel free to use different writing utensils to convey stroke weights, shading, or even color.

Once the 15 minutes are up, the page will automatically proceed to the next screen.

### **Q10 - Group C**

Hand-lettering art is the drawing of letters—it refers to a unique, personalized typographic expression in order to convey a certain message or idea. Lettering tells a story by using drawn letter shapes. For this exercise, you will be given **15 minutes** to hand letter a short phrase using your paper/sketchbook and drawing utensils. Use the following steps as a guide.

1. Read the phrase provided (you will be given the phrase on the next screen).
2. Choose a style of letter shapes based on the phrase.
3. Make as many iterations of your sketches and drawings using as much paper as you need.
4. Refine your sketch(es).

Once the 15 minutes are up, the page will automatically proceed to the next screen.

Do you have your materials on hand and a surface on which you can hand-letter comfortably before proceeding to the next screen?

- Yes
- No

### **Q11 - Group C**

Phrase: **I am worthy of love.**

Instructions: Hand-lettering art is the drawing of letters. For the next 15 minutes, hand letter a short phrase using your paper/sketchbook and drawing utensils. Use the following steps as a guide.

5. Read the phrase shown above.
6. Choose a style of letter shapes based on the phrase.
7. Make as many iterations of your sketches and drawings using as much paper as you need.
8. Refine your sketch(es).

Once the 15 minutes are up, the page will automatically proceed to the next screen.

## **Q12**

For each statement, rate how you feel about the statement using the following scale:

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Somewhat disagree
- 3 - Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 - Somewhat agree
- 5 - Strongly agree

- I enjoyed this exercise.
- I felt a sense of accomplishment after completing the exercise.
- I learned more about myself after completing the exercise.
- I feel energized after completing this exercise.
- I felt rushed during the exercise.
- I felt restricted with the materials I was asked to use during this exercise.
- I feel motivated to do more hand lettering after completing this exercise.

## **(Self-Compassion Quiz)**

## **Q13**

Please read each statement carefully before answering. For each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following scale:

- 1 - Almost never
- 2 - Occasionally
- 3 - About Half Of The Time

4 - Fairly Often

5 - Almost Always

**Q14**

I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.

**Q15**

When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.

**Q16**

When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.

**Q17**

When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.

**Q18**

I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.

**Q19**

When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.

**Q20**

When I'm down and out, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.

**Q21**

When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.

**Q22**

When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.

**Q23**

When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.

**Q24**

I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

**Q25**

When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.

**Q26**

When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.

**Q27**

When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.

**Q28**

I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.

**Q29**

When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.

**Q30**

When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.

**Q31**

When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.

**Q32**

I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.

**Q33**

When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.

**Q34**

I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.

**Q35**

When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.

**Q36**

I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.

**Q37**

When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.

**Q38**

When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.

**Q39**

I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

**Q40**

Optional: Take photos of your work, and upload the photos.

The photos you provide will not be associated with your name or any other identifiable information. Any images provided will only be used as an aggregated artifact for the study.

**Q41**

If you chose not to upload your work, why not?

**Q42**

When you advance to the next page, you will be asked to provide your first and last name and course to receive the extra credit. Your name is kept separate from answers and any files you provide.



## **APPENDIX B: Self-Compassion Score Coding Key per Kristin Neff, Ph.D.**

Self-Kindness Items - Questions 5, 12, 19, 23, 26

(reverse score) Self-Judgment Items - Questions 1, 8, 11, 16, 21

Common Humanity Items - Questions 3, 7, 10, 15

(reverse score) Isolation Items - Questions 4, 13, 18, 25

Mindfulness Items - Questions 9, 14, 17, 22

(reverse score) Over-identified Items - Questions 2, 6, 20, 24

Subscale scores are computed by calculating the mean of subscale item responses. To compute a total self-compassion score, reverse score the negative subscale items before calculating subscale means - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification (i.e., 1 = 5, 2 = 4, 3 = 3, 4 = 2, 5 = 1) - then compute a grand mean of all six subscale means.

Researchers can choose to analyze their data either by using individual subscale scores or by using a total score. (This method of calculating the total score is slightly different than that used in the article referenced above, in which each subscale was added together.

However, I find it is easier to interpret the total score if a mean is used.)

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