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Zentangles for Mental Health Awareness

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Zentangles for Mental Health Awareness
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Honors Project

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In today's world, stress related anxiety and depression has become an epidemic. Many people, including myself, suffer from being overwhelmed in the face of trying to balance finances, health, academics, careers, relationships, and much more all at once. There is a natural tendency to find comfort in knowing that you are not alone in your feelings, which has led to people using pessimism as a means of connecting with each other. Relating to each other by comparing feelings of anxiety and depression is dangerous, but unfortunately common. This realization is what prompted me to use my project as an opportunity to help people alleviate stress in a productive way while promoting a healthy sense of community. As an artist, I wanted to combine the methodology of art therapy with the idea of art as social practice, or using creative ideas and processes to engage with a community of people.

Zentangle is a traditional art form that encourages focus and creativity by creating intricate designs using simple shapes. This art form is something I have used as a personal stress relieving tactic for several years. In July of 2018, I traveled to Providence, Rhode Island for a four daylong seminar that was dedicated to training individuals to become Certified Zentangle Teachers, or CZTs. We were not only taught how to share the Zentangle methodology effectively, but also how to create a space of acceptance and freedom during our classes. Once I had completed the training, I gained the proper resources and knowledge to officially share it with others. This became the base for my honors project. I hosted a series of livestreamed Zentangle classes online that were free and open to anyone to raise mental health awareness, reduce stress, and build a community.

Initially, my research was going to primarily target college students and young adults, since my classes were to be hosted in a campus setting and be most accessible to that age group. This demographic also has high levels of stress on a daily basis. In my project proposal, I had

asked “what exactly is causing so much stress in young adults?” and “how effective is art therapy in treating that stress specifically?” The Zentangle classes were going to be held physically in Founders Hall and open to all students to attend. I would have provided all of the necessary materials, played music, and encouraged students to interact with each other throughout the process to keep the sessions as stress free as possible. After all of the class sessions were done, I had also planned to scan or take a picture of each tile made by the participants and create a poster that could be hung around campus as a reminder to take time to maintain mental health. However, when COVID-19 quarantine measures were put in place, this opened up my project to an interesting new series of inquiries.

I altered the class to accompany all ages and demographics in order to more fully explore the theme of community. After having to adapt my class to an online format that was open to more people, I began asking “how effective is art at treating stress in a community setting?” With social contact being cut down immensely, this project provided an opportunity to see if technology could provide a decent temporary substitute to public gatherings. Another question that came up was “how important do people feel their mental health is to their overall well-being compared to how much time they actually designate to taking care of their mental health?” Through this project, I wanted to reveal how the severity of stress that someone feels on a daily basis may align with a lack of proper devotion to mental health, which has a tendency to get set aside during a busy time period or if there is no immediately identifiable issue. Finally, a much broader goal of the project was to test if Zentangle was an effective method to combat anxiety and depression that originates from stressful global events. During a particularly sensitive time where everyone is relying on the news for updates, exposure to negativity in the media and

feelings of helplessness are even more common. I wanted to investigate how to combat these negative emotions that originate from difficult situations that impact society on a global scale.

This project is meant to act more as a creative service to a community as opposed to an in-depth research project. However, these research questions were used to guide the structure of my classes and prompted a request for feedback from participants to indicate whether the sessions were effective at helping to relieve stress. When initially researching the effectiveness of group art therapy, one particular source I found outlines the appearance of therapeutic factors, or recurring “mechanisms of change” that indicate healing in art therapy patients. This particular “meta-synthesis” used 119 different qualitative studies to define common “meta themes” in group art therapy in order to create more “outcome-based” data for the topic (Gabel and Robb 126). There are five of these common therapeutic factors: symbolic expression, relational aesthetics, embodiment, pleasure and play, and ritual. Symbolic expression refers to the participant’s abilities to use symbols to represent abstract thoughts and feelings. Relational aesthetics are the social relationships that form between group members, the instructor, and the artwork itself. Embodiment is putting personal thoughts and feelings into the artwork. Pleasure and play is the physical enjoyment of making art. Finally, ritual is the establishment of structure through methodology, routine, or meeting at the same place and time consistently (Gabel and Robb 129). I wanted to promote these factors within my Zentangle sessions so I created my lessons and guided the class in a way that would help accent each one. The Zentangle methodology inherently possesses several of these therapeutic factors, while the rest are brought out through the structure of the class itself.

The Zentangle process starts and ends with appreciation. A brief moment of time is dedicated to being thankful for the artistic materials, the opportunity to create, and anything else

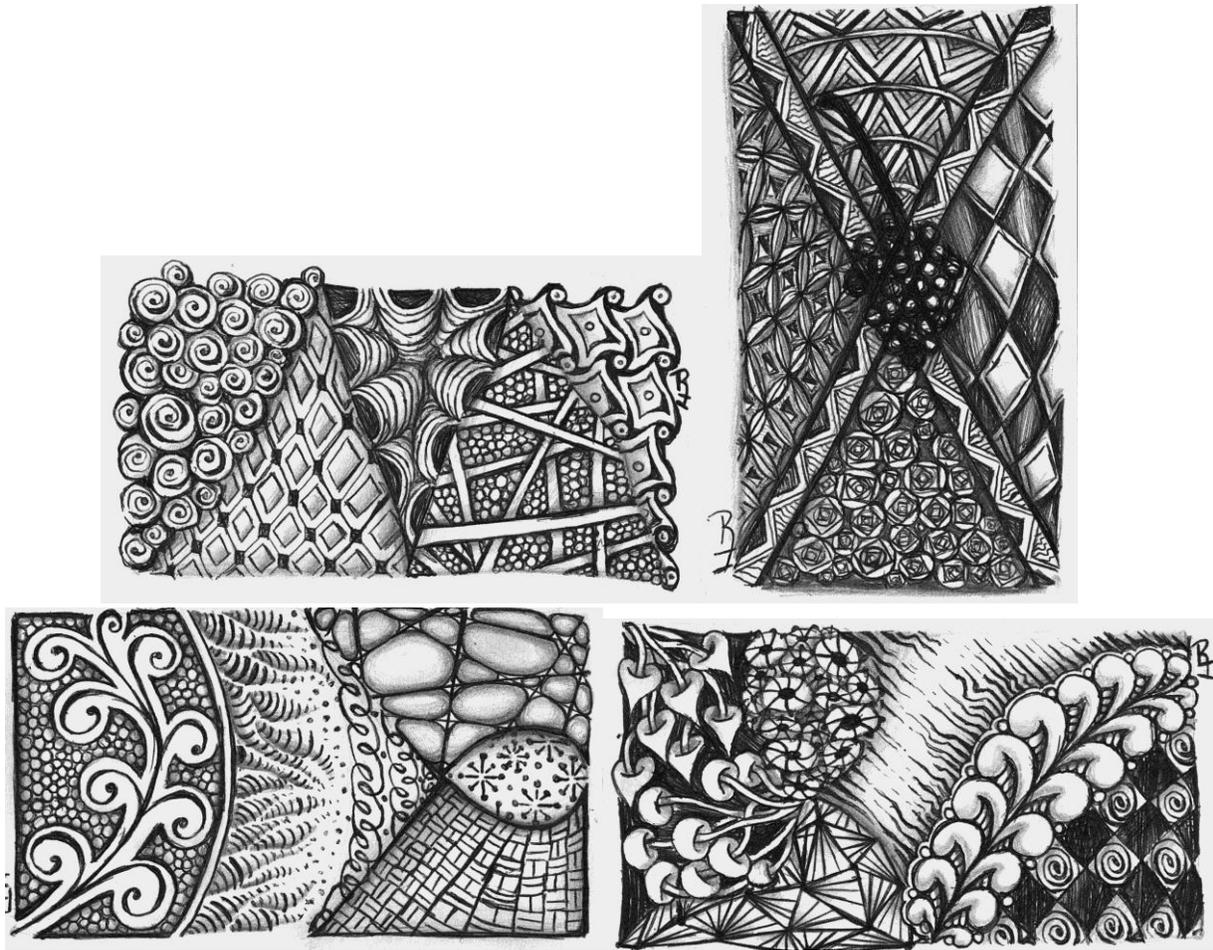
the individual feels the desire to acknowledge with gratitude. It is easy to take some of these basic things for granted and so Zentangle aims to bring attention to all of these positive things that can sometimes be forgotten. A piece is traditionally created on a 3x3 inch paper “tile” or within a space similar to an index card. Light borders are made in pencil to create gentle guidelines and designated spaces to fill with the “tangles” or designs. These tangles are done in black pen. These materials are kept simple in order to help make the art form more accessible. Simple shading, without regard to a light source, is then added to create depth and highlight certain parts of the tile while causing others to recede. The tile is then finished off with a “chop” or signature that is unique to the individual artist. The designs are nonrepresentational and have no clearly defined subject matter. This helps eliminate any expectations to achieve a certain level of perfection and realism that people often strive for when making art.

All of these aspects contribute to the stress relieving nature of Zentangle. It’s a combination of physical and mental aspects that draws focus away from common stressors including the news, deadlines, fear of failure, and many others. In a study done to formally analyze the stress relieving aspects of Zentangle, the art form was described as a “mindful/spiritual practice that promotes self-awareness, insight, creative problem solving and can also positively affect emotional and physical well-being” (Kopeschny iii). The physical act of making tangles may seem complex on the surface but in reality it is easily broken down into smaller, manageable steps. Certified Zentangle Teachers always tell their students, “if you can write the letters i, c, s, and o, you can make any tangle in the Zentangle library.” The repetitive nature of the pen strokes has a similar effect to yoga or meditation on the body by allowing participants to establish a pattern (Kopeschny 53). This ties back to the therapeutic factors of “pleasure and play” and “ritual”, which are more physical aspects of the experience. Enjoying

the process and taking it “one stroke at a time”, which means “breaking down an impossible task into simple components in order to get it done easier” is one of the most important mental aspects of Zentangle (Roberts and Thomas 9). Many of the methodology’s rules, like “one stroke at a time”, can be applied to daily life as well.

To invite participants to the project, I created a poster and brief text-based advertisements that could be sent to all BGSU students and faculty, friends and family. These ads emphasized the practice of creativity, a chance to learn something new and the stress relieving qualities of Zentangle. Those that saw the ad were encouraged to share the class information in any way they could. I posted it on my own personal social media accounts and through multiple campus resources including the Campus Update, the Honors College online engagement page, and the Digital Arts division Listserv. Participants who attended also posted their creations to their own social media accounts and explained where they created it.

I developed a flexible itinerary that could easily be adapted to a class's particular needs, depending on who showed up and how many participants attended. In general, I would start each class by introducing myself, giving a brief history of Zentangle for anyone who had not previously joined the class, explaining the step by step methodology, and then finally diving into creating the tangles. I chose specific tangles to teach that varied in complexity and contrast. Before each session, I made rough templates with the selected tangles that I used as a guide when teaching so that I already had an idea of how the tile would turn out in the end and the participants could easily follow along as I executed the tangles. Below are my own personal results from the four weeks of classes. I drew these step by step along with participants, creating my own unique work while encouraging participants to find ways to make new variations outside of my instructions.



These classes were hosted every Saturday for a full month from 2:00-4:00pm, which allowed those who were off from work or school a chance to participate and also gave the attendees plenty of time to absorb the information, ask questions, talk, and relax. I would provide occasional commentary, tips, and small talk throughout class to keep participants engaged with each other and myself but also leave some moments quiet in order for them to focus on their own work. A ten-minute break occurred halfway through each class and participants were strongly encouraged to stretch, breathe, drink water, and take care of anything they needed to. Time was allocated for every participant to share their work and see what others had created at the end of the class. This was not a critique, but a chance to admire the individuality of each work of art. A

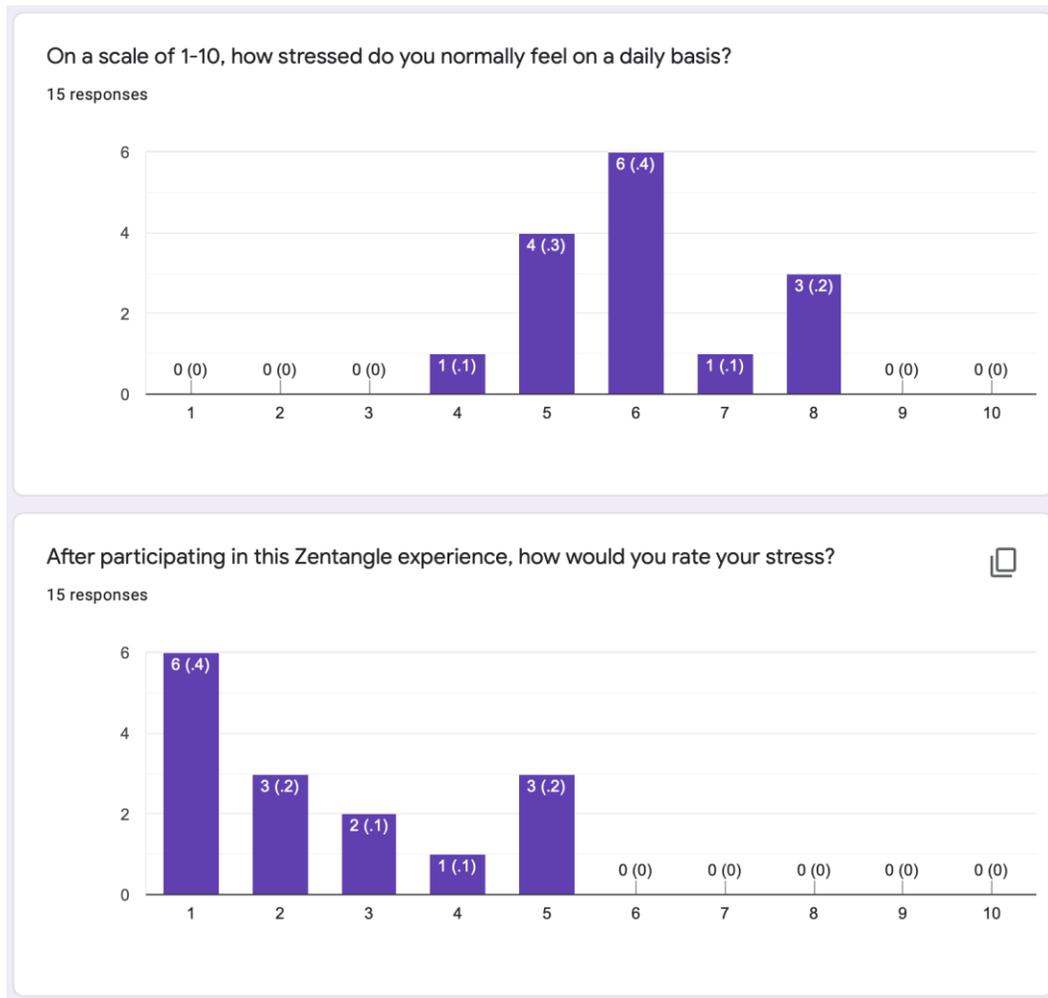
brief survey was also administered to obtain feedback on their Zentangle experience, their opinions on mental health and their exposure to stress on a daily basis.

This series of classes was designed to promote mental health awareness by acting as a designated break time to create art and provide a method to participants that they could use in the future for stress relief if they chose to. When asked in the survey if participants would consider using Zentangle in the future as a method of stress relief, given “yes”, “no” or “possibly” as potential responses, 50% of participants said yes and 50% said possibly. I provided the link to the official Zentangle website for those who would want to continue pursuing the method beyond my lessons.

The Zentangle method has the principle of community built into its methodology, which is why it is sometimes referred to as “the worldwide mosaic”. It is specifically designed to be inclusive and appeal to a wide range of people. This makes it an ideal art form to share with large groups. In the same way that a mosaic is a collection of individual motifs that, when combined make up a larger artwork, each individual tile or creation stands beautifully on its own but is amplified when joined together with others. All of the participants that attended the Zentangle livestream have become part of the global “mosaic” that is the Zentangle community after the completion of just one tile.

The classes had a total of nine different participants. Two of them attended all four classes over the course of the month, one attended twice and all others attended once. Both the quantitative and qualitative feedback I received for the class was overwhelmingly positive. Participants were engaged and receptive to the Zentangle methodology. I have even received requests to continue classes beyond the project.

Using Likert scales, participants were asked to quantify their stress levels on a daily basis, with 1 being “Not very stressed” and 10 being “Extremely stressed”. The next question then asked them to quantify their stress level after participating in the Zentangle class. The results are shown in these graphs below.

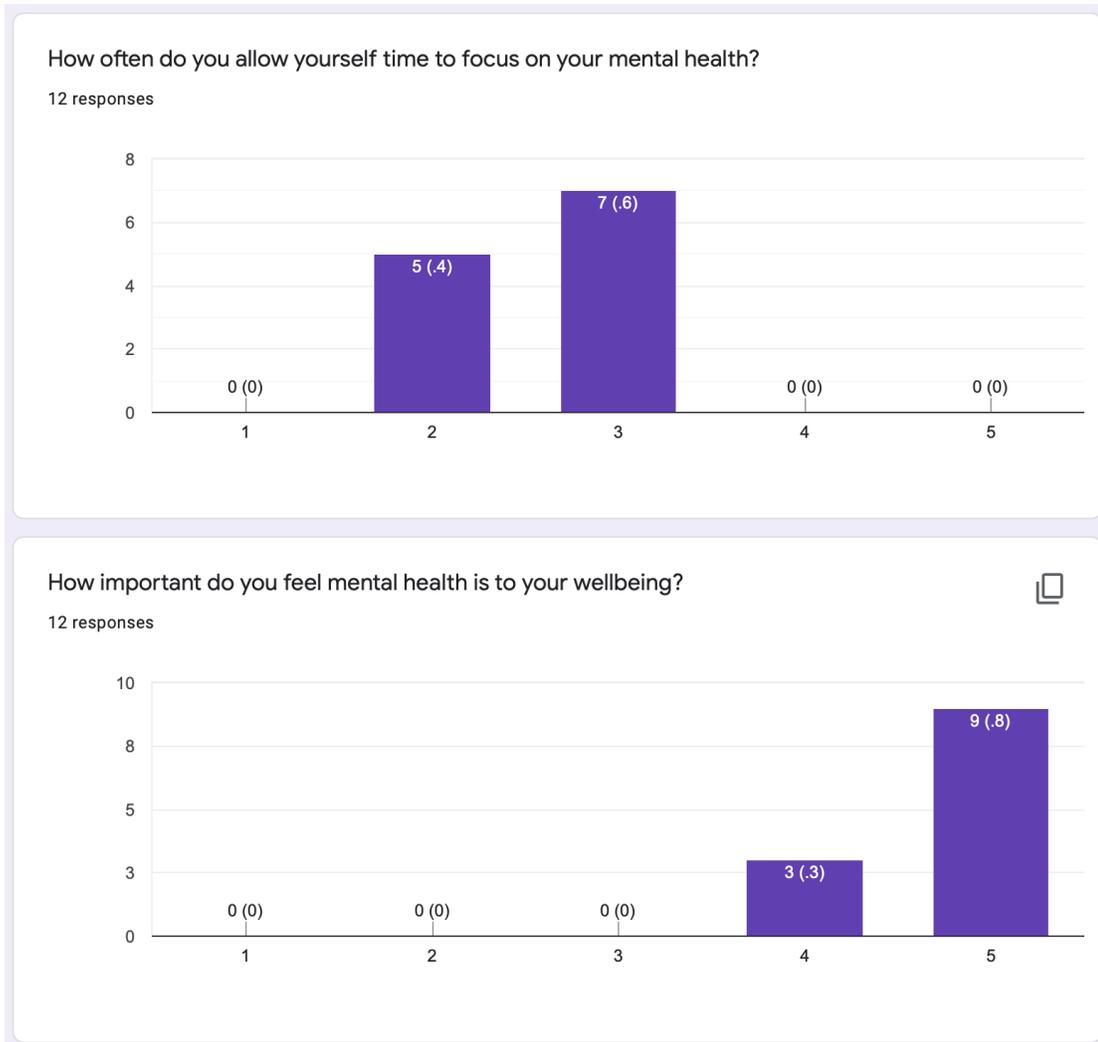


There was a clear change to the participants’ stress levels after the experience compared to what they normally feel on a daily basis. Individually, a unanimous decrease in stress levels was observed. The average individual decrease is 3.6 points while the lowest decrease was 1 point and the highest was 5 points. The overall average stress level decreased from 6.07 to 2.47 points.

One of the questions in the survey was “Did you have any memorable interactions with any of the participants including the instructor? How did this affect your experience?”. A majority of the participants commented on how being able to see everyone’s work at the end was one of the most effective parts of the class. By creating a space free of judgement, participants confirmed that they felt more confident in their creations both in the process of making them and after completing them. One of the participants, who had taken the class multiple times, stated in their response, “One memorable experience I had this time around was hearing how the participants replied positively to a section of my Zentangle that I felt I slightly messed up on...Instead of it being an eyesore, the participants actually were drawn to it.” Another participant wrote “Being an artist who is used to critiques that have positives and negatives, this was the first time I created something with just positive feedback from all creators. This definitely lifted my confidence in creating work, and it’s good to have when I’m struggling to create.” These quotes reinforce the idea that the environment we were working in was one of trust and acceptance, which is essential in order to keep the process stress free.

The next question on the survey was “How often do you allow yourself time to focus on your mental health?” and this was also based on a Likert scale with 1 being “Not often” to 5 being “Very often”. Directly after that the question “How important do you feel mental health is to your well-being?” was asked using the exact same Likert scale, with 1 being “Not important” to 5 being “Very important”. The numbers did not represent any particular measurement, but was merely a general method of quantifying time. These questions were asked to test if there might be a connection between the previously determined stress levels and the amount of time the participant normally spends managing mental health issues. If people do not believe there is a

connection between these two factors, they may be less inclined to take the necessary steps to reduce stress even though it has been proven to have a direct impact on physical health as well.



The results of this part of the survey reveal that the majority of participants acknowledge that mental health is very important to overall wellness. The majority seems to spend a moderate amount of time dedicated to their mental health as well, represented by the 7 participants in the top graph in the above image that chose 3 points. On an individual scale, two out of the three participants that had put down 8 points as their level of stress put down 2 points for focus on mental health. This means that the majority of the people who had the highest indicated stress levels said they dedicate less time to managing their mental health. The other three participants

that indicated 2 points towards mental health focus all had indicated 5 points for daily stress levels, which could mean that they have stronger coping mechanisms or have much less stress in their life to begin with. These are theoretical explanations that are hard to concretely gauge since it's so heavily based on individual personalities and circumstances. The time spent focusing on mental health and daily stress levels among the participants have much less of a concrete correlation as a result.

What became apparent was Zentangle's effectiveness at helping participants escape from their normal everyday stressors. The survey asked the participants to describe how they felt when they heard the news or learned about current global events. Below is a direct screenshot from the survey's results and the participants' responses.

When you read the news or learn about current events going on in today's world (even beyond the pandemic), how do you feel?

12 responses

Powerless. Sometimes skeptical-- is it really that bad or is it sensationalism? (Or maybe I'm in denial?)

It's a mix of stressed and hopeful.

Anxious

Numb

Hopeless and frustrated

constantly stressed, scared, and often angry

I know I really can't control many things.

Sad and frustrated

Tired

I feel concerned to say the least. When the news seems to only highlight the negatives going on in the world with few signs of good things, I feel stressed and concerned that things aren't getting better.

Stressed!!!

The answers are upsetting, yet understandable. However, when given the chance to provide additional comments or feedback about the Zentangle experience, participants showed profound gratefulness for the lesson and the momentary distraction from stress. One comment stated, “This class was a welcomed change of pace in my life, especially with the current events going on in the world. It allowed me to realize how lucky I am with the ability to create, and spend time creating with others.” Creating art in a group setting seems to be very effective at enhancing confidence in the involved attendants. Overall, the project effectively provided attendees with a way to suspend feelings of anxiety and depression. Through both qualitative and quantitative means, participants have indicated that the Zentangle experience affected them in a positive way, whether it was through the artistic process or through the relaxing class format. All of the “therapeutic factors” defined in the meta-synthesis were also observed both through the answers on the survey and through class discussion. One participant even reached out and told me she was sharing what she learned about the Zentangle method with a family member. This personal exchange is an extension of what the Zentangle methodology aims to do and that is act as a catalyst for connection between people.

This project is a testament to how powerful creativity and relaxation can be when used to help heal communities. This project was never meant to completely cure anxiety or depression, but to act as an analysis of Zentangle’s effectiveness at helping to treat it and to provide people with a unique opportunity to connect during a time when social interaction is severely restricted. Stress is a complicated subject, but it is confirmed through this project’s execution that people are struggling with it and do not always have the proper time to take care of their mental health. Zentangle is just one more potential option to help alleviate some of the pressures of daily life in a fulfilling way that is easy to share with others. I personally plan to continue hosting these

events, especially during these stressful circumstances and I hope that this project may inspire others to pursue the theme of providing community aid through the use of art and creativity as a result.

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