

# A Stitch in Time

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At the time of writing this, we are living through extraordinarily anxious times. The never ending coronavirus commentary, uncertainty for the future and feelings of isolation are a real cause for concern to our mental health.

With this in mind, I would like to consider the gentle craft of stitching that might reduce our stress levels. As an antidote to our busy lives and calming response to a further infection deemed as the Hurry Virus (Kichbush, 2012), why not embrace this craft as a tool to slow down the pace of everyday life and influence overall wellbeing?

I must be very honest with you and state outright that I am no health or medical professional. I am an artist, maker and sometime daydreamer. I delight in peace, quiet and trying to seek the poetry found in everyday life. My practice is a way of life and I find such solace in making - it enables me to focus on the present moment.

The NHS have issued a five step plan to mental wellbeing and suggest that paying more attention to this “present moment” can improve our mental health. This awareness to your own thoughts, feelings and the world around you is sometimes called Mindfulness.

Research has shown that there are many proven benefits to Mindfulness:

A reduction in stress and anxiety levels.  
Inner doubt and turmoil can be relieved by absorbed concentration in an activity  
Improved focus and concentration levels.

A calming influence which enables us to respond thoughtfully and with less emotional reactivity to what life may bring.

A space for reflection which helps us to make sense of things.

Increased insight may lead to better relationships and understanding in one another.

Activities that absorb the mind and encourage relaxation can really help us to get into the mindset of mindfulness and creativity can make an enormous impact on it.



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To be able to absorb all concentration into a small creative task such as stitching a fabric scrap or patchwork piece may even relieve some inner angst or self doubt. What a gift! The repetitive motion of crafts such as stitch, knit or crochet are believed to bring about a mental calming likened to meditation. Indeed, proven cognitive benefits to crafting include a slowing of cognitive ageing and has the capacity to improve memory, mental agility and recall.

From direct experience I have found that the repetitive motion of handstitch has the power to calm my mind and make way for more clarity of thought. I distinctly remember stitching a small piece of fabric whilst sitting at my mothers hospital bedside some years ago. She was recovering from a mastectomy at the time and the magnitude of the situation was almost too much to comprehend. Tiny stitches marked the passing of that time and soothed my anxious thoughts.

The mesmeric immersion in stitch can provide such relief from mental struggle. Sewing is increasingly recognised as an effective way to combat depression. The absorption demanded by stitch can bring a quietude to the mind and relieve the pressure of crowding thoughts. Multitasking can be replaced with focus of one thing and result in a sense of peace.

After the First World War, medical staff encouraged shell-shocked soldiers to embroider as a way of healing mental scars. It proved a great success in steadying their hands and calming their minds. A foundation to occupational therapy was laid and remains a crucial part of medical practice ever since. Sewing can also benefit dementia patients.

Personal histories and stories can be stitched into quilts which can then become a sensory trigger to memory and reminiscence.

There is a wonderful organisation called Fine Cell Work which teaches stitching to prisoners as a means to rehabilitation. Stitching as a purposeful activity boosts self esteem, builds self confidence and has a positive impact on the mental health of prisoners who can sometimes be confined to their cell for extended periods.

The novelist Tracy Chevalier instigated an inspiring project with Fine Cell Work called The Sleep Quilt. She commissioned a quilt entirely stitched and quilted by prisoners in some of Britain's toughest prisons, exploring the theme of sleep. The result is an extraordinarily moving quilt imbued with integrity and grace.

***"It takes your mind off the painful things"***  
Prisoner, HMP Styal



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My own patchwork began as a simple cushion but unintentionally grew into a much bigger piece. It has been picked up and put down over several years. Small pieces have been carried with me and worked on in workshops, on numerous train journeys and even in coffee shops. Each scrap of fabric holds its own story – a piece of deckchair fabric from a project in Weymouth, a piece of cotton from my mother’s blouse or an embroidered remnant from an old handkerchief. Perhaps my little daughter will sleep under it one day, she already likes to point out her favourite patterns. I often recall the beautiful WB Keats poem, “He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven.”

*Had I the heaven’s embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light;  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*



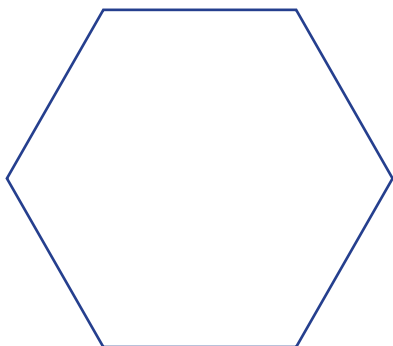
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## Hexagon Patchwork

Let us embark on a very simple stitching project with intention and thoughtfulness. This project is designed for the absolute beginner and is small in scale. Although it could also lead to more ambitious undertakings, or even go on to create a future heirloom. We will use the technique of English Paper Piecing with hexagon shapes as they possess a wide angle which are easier to work with. A "rosette" can form a sweet pincushion, or can be repeated to create a coverlet or quilt.

### Step 1

Take a master template of a hexagon and make seven paper templates. Take care that each template is exactly the same size.



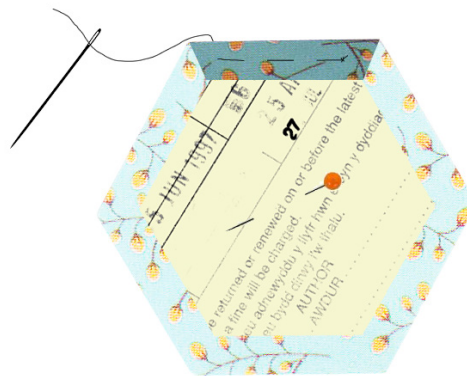
### Step 2

Lay a small piece of fabric right side down and pin one of your paper templates to the centre. Cut the fabric larger than the paper – leave about a 6mm seam allowance.



### Step 3

Fold the fabric seam allowance of one of the straight edges over the paper template. Make a knot in your thread and tack through the fabric and paper.



### Step 4

Fold the fabric over the next edge and tack through the corner before continuing like this right around your first patch.



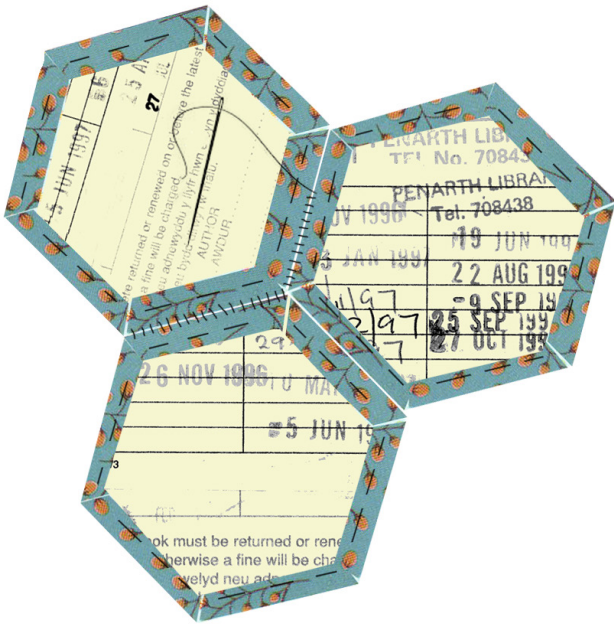
### Step 5

Make a further six patches and then press them flat which will make the stitching of the patches together a little easier and give a nice neat finish.

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## Step 6

Overstitch the patches with the right sides together.



## Further reading:

*Mindful Stitch: Generating dialogue in and around the threads of well being.*  
Emma Swinnerton

*The Sleep Quilt by Tracy Chevalier and Fine Cell Work*  
(Pallas Athene)

*Threads of History A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle*  
Clare Hunter (Sceptre)

*The Last Runaway Tracy Chevalier*  
(Harper Collins)

*Patchwork For Beginners*  
Sue Pritchard (V&A Publishing)

You have made your first hexagon rosette!  
Remove the tacking and paper templates if so desired. Have a cup of tea and be well!

