

Stress Inventory

Look at the following list of areas in your life that may cause you stress. Put a check mark next to all that apply, and write one or two things you might do to alleviate the level of stress.

Areas in My Life That Cause Me Stress

- Finances _____
- Work _____
- Significant other _____
- Children _____
- Parents _____
- Friends _____
- Physical health _____
- Emotional health _____
- School _____
- Responsibilities _____
- Past trauma _____
- Retirement _____
- Marriage _____
- Divorce _____
- A move _____

Add your own

Now that you have taken an inventory of things that cause stress, look at the following list of ways you might deal with them. Put a check mark next to all that apply, and write one or two things you might do differently to deal with stress in the future.

Ways I Deal with Stress

- Get angry or irritable _____
- Get depressed or isolate _____
- Engage in emotional eating _____
- Act out in inappropriate ways _____

- Crave sweet or salty food _____
- Self-medicate with alcohol or prescription drugs _____
- Exercise to the point of injury _____
- Become impatient _____
- Lack ability to concentrate _____
- Binge-watch TV _____

Add your own

Next, look at this list of the areas in your body where you may feel or store stress. Again, put a check mark next to all that apply, and complete another body drawing. Compare this with the body drawing you did for the shame and guilt exercise on page 100. See how similar they are. Awareness is the first step!

Where Do I Feel or Store Stress in My Body?

- Head (headaches) _____
- Neck (stiffness) _____
- Shoulders (more headaches) _____
- Stomach (indigestion, heartburn, IBS, stomachaches) _____
- Respiration (shallow or rapid breathing) _____
- Muscular (trembling, eye twitches, muscle spasms) _____
- Heart (racing heart, palpitations) _____
- Hands (clenched fists) _____

Add your own

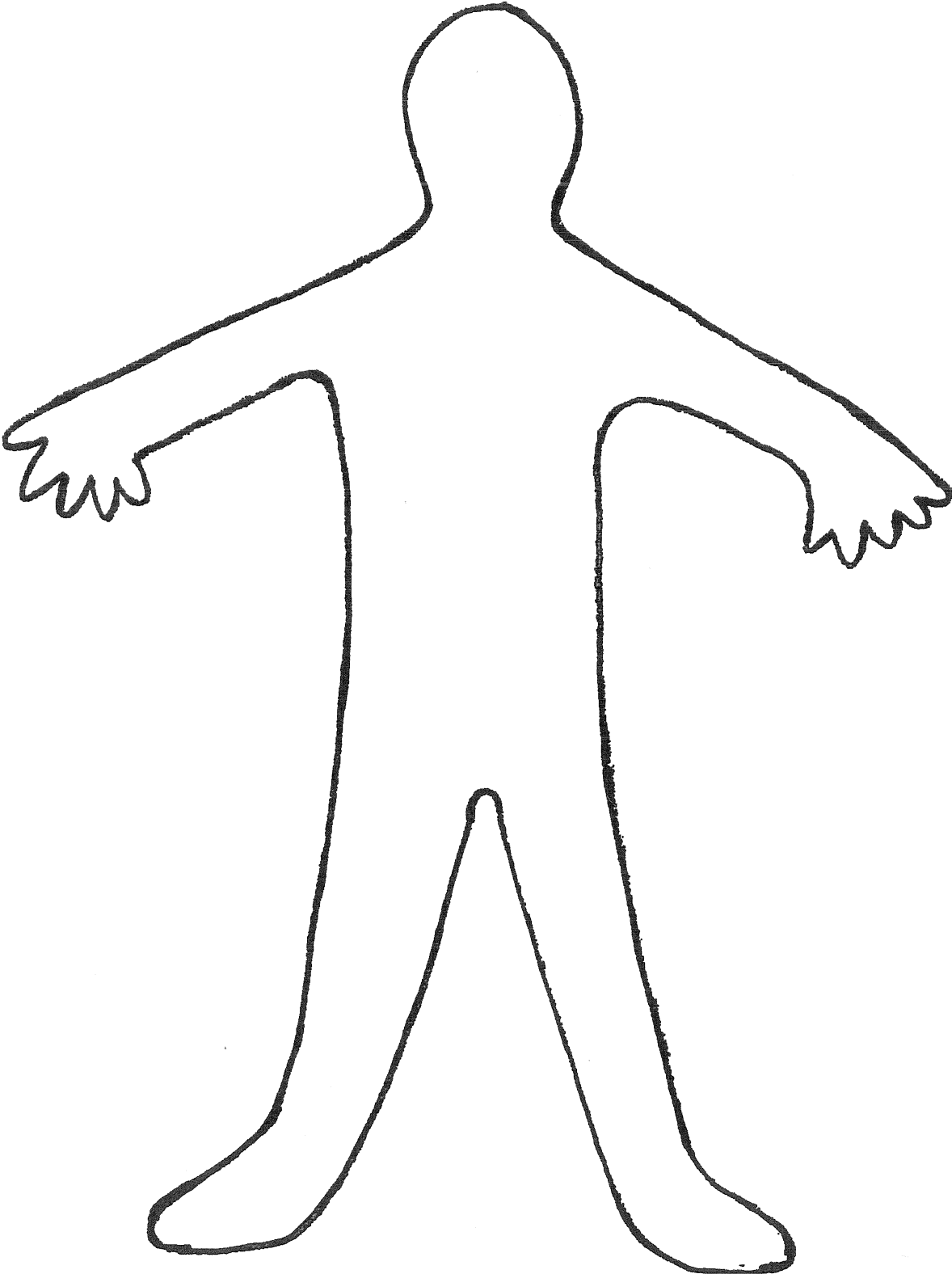
Finally, look at the following list of tools you can use to deal with stress and see which one can become your go-to tool. Try to incorporate a few of these tools into your life so you can stop the stress response before it starts. Think of this as your personal stress-relief first-aid kit.

Tools You Can Use to Deal with Stress

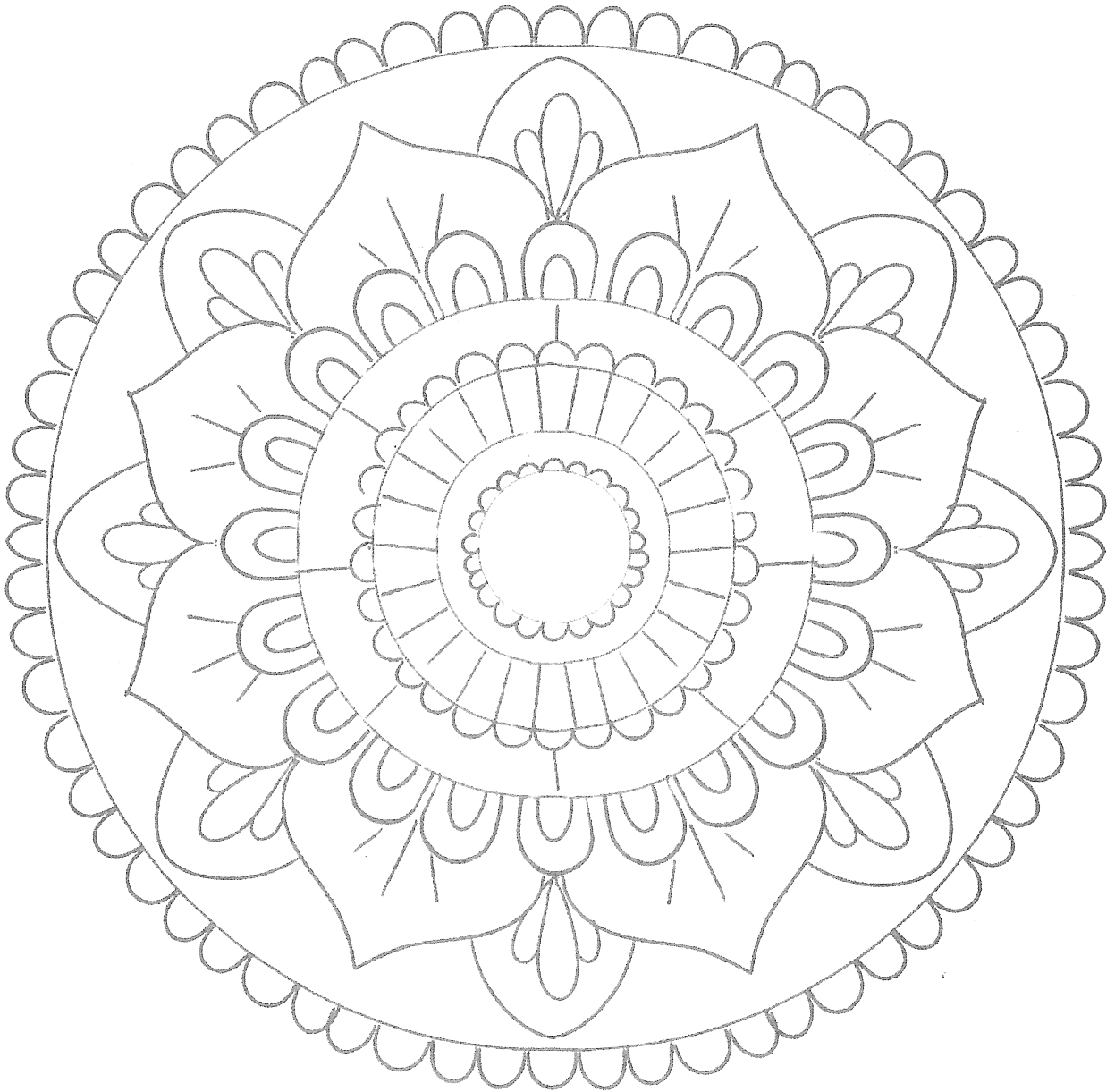
- **Belly breathing, also known as diaphragmatic breathing.** Breathe in for a count of five, feeling your abdomen expand; slowly breathe out to a count of five, feeling your belly contract. Get in the habit of doing this on a regular basis whether or not you are stressed. Belly breathing has numerous physical and emotional health benefits. The more stressed we are, the shallower our breathing becomes, which fuels the stress response. Think about the way a baby breathes—their little bellies rise and fall with each breath; this is the way we came into the world breathing, and this is the way we are meant to breathe. Belly breathing can balance the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your blood, lower your heart rate and blood pressure, and reduce the level of the stress hormone cortisol.
- **Music:** Listen to relaxing instrumental music recorded at 60–80 bpm or fewer. New age, classical, baroque, and meditation music or nature sounds are good choices. Create a relaxing playlist that you can play at the first sign of a stressful situation. Your body produces dopamine and serotonin, your body's natural Prozac, when you listen to music, helping you relax.
- **Dark chocolate:** Eat a piece or two of dark chocolate, approximately 1.5 ounces. This will help lower your cortisol level.
- **Salt:** As long as you don't have high blood pressure, an increase in salt helps when you are stressed. Salt helps your adrenal glands, which get depleted from stress. A handful of salted nuts such as almonds, walnuts, or pistachios is a healthier choice than potato chips or pretzels.
- **Aroma therapy:** Rub a drop of lavender essential oil on the bottom of your feet or the inside of your wrists, or just take off the lid and smell it. When you breathe in a relaxing scent, the olfactory nerve in the nose attaches to areas in the brain responsible for triggering the relaxation response, thus reducing stress.
- **Gentle exercise:** Take a walk, focusing on keeping a clear mind and perhaps listening to the sounds of nature or relaxing music. Take a yoga or tai chi class, garden, swim, or dance. Any form of gentle exercise helps counter the negative effects of stress hormones and produce feel-good endorphins.
- **Laugh:** Read or watch something funny. Laugh out loud. Laughing also causes your body to produce endorphins.
- **Journal:** Get out your journal and put the stressful thoughts down on paper instead of ruminating about them.
- **Create:** Do something creative. Doodle, scribble, knit, try Zentangle (small, abstract drawings using repetitive patterns), color in an adult coloring book. Your mind cannot be in two places at the same time, so engaging in a creative activity will move you out of the stress response and into the relaxation response. Just remember, it is about the process, not the product. Your goal is not to create a great piece of art; rather, it is to relax and have fun.
- **Meditate:** Meditation will invoke the relaxation response and lower your stress level. Close your eyes and sit quietly. Try mentally saying a single word such as *peace* or quietly repeating a sacred sound such as *om*. Or simply focus on your breath. Don't make it difficult.
- **Connect with a higher power:** Do this through prayer, meditation, journaling, walking in nature, or any way that works for you.

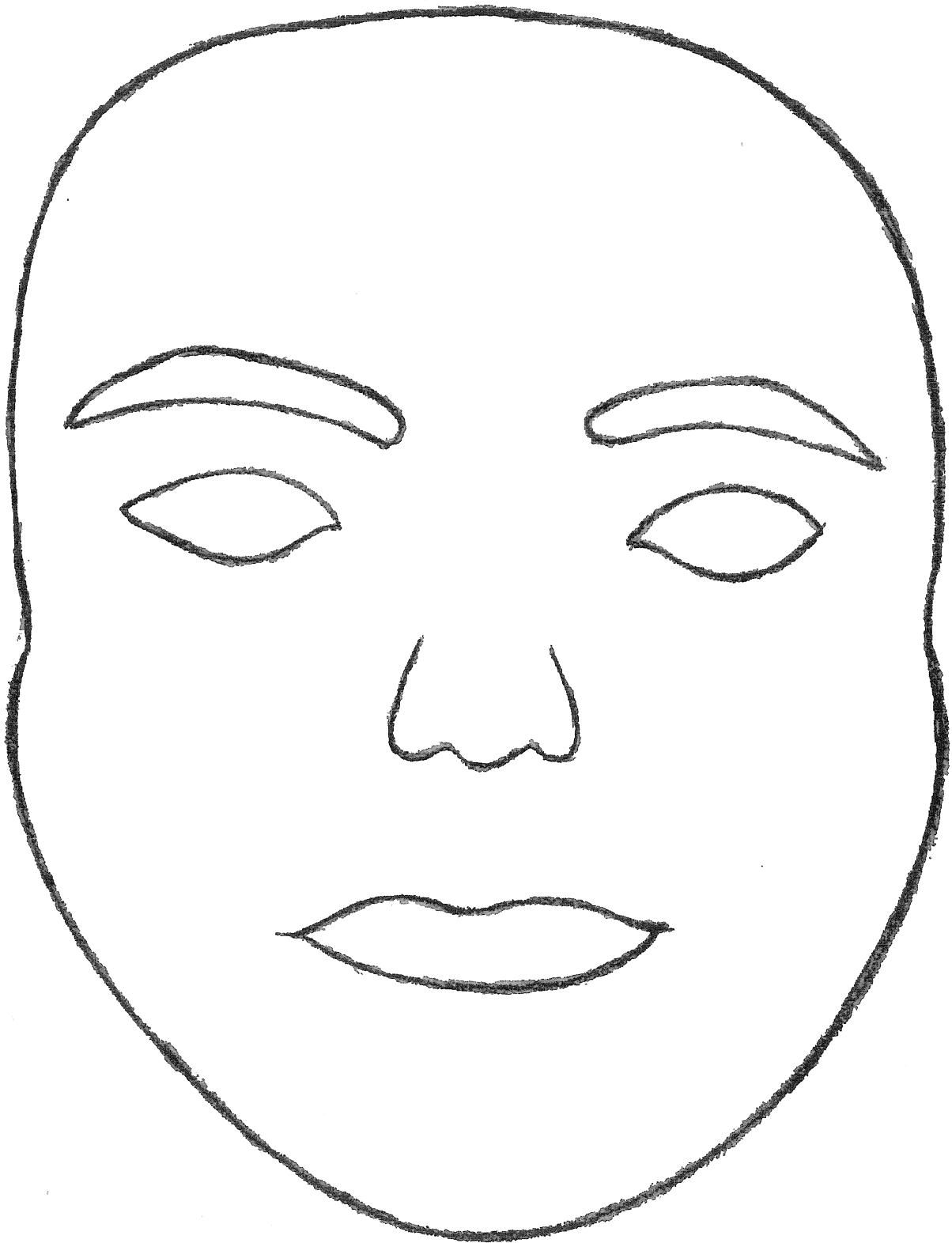
- **Prioritize and get organized:** Accept that you can't do it all, and learn to let go of the things that just aren't that important. We don't live in a perfect world; you don't have to be a perfect person.
- **Cognitive restructuring:** Find one or two small solutions to the issues that cause you stress, and write them down. Whenever you think of the stressful situation, take your mind to the solution rather than ruminating on the problem. This may not necessarily be a complete solution to the problem, but it will give you a positive thought to focus on rather than a negative one that causes stress. Try it—it works.
- **Sleep:** There are a number of things you can do to get a better night's rest. Go to bed at the same time every night. Create a bedroom free of anything with a screen—TV, phone, tablet—and turn electronic devices off one hour before going to bed. Keep your bedroom cool and uncluttered. Use that last hour, when you are not on your phone or watching TV, to take a warm bath; listen to some quiet, meditative music; pet your dog or cat; or write what you are grateful for in your journal.
- **Release judgment:** Being judgmental of yourself and others causes stress due to a disconnect between the right and left sides of the brain. When the left, analytical side imposes judgment, the right, emotional side becomes confused because of the contradictory emotional thoughts that are being released.

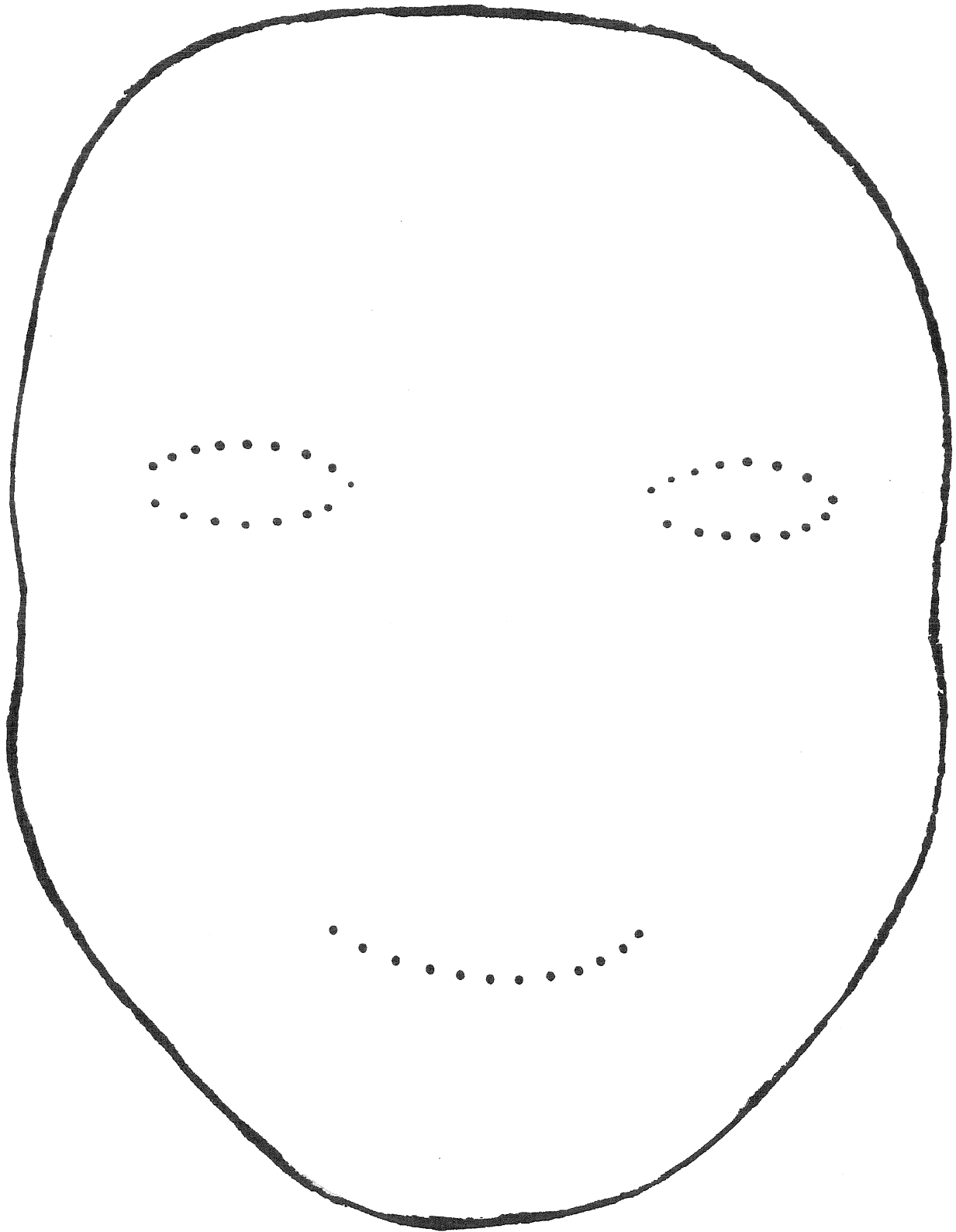
Body Drawing



A Healing Mandala







Breaking Patterns

