

HOW TO ENCOURAGE MORE CREATIVE THINKING [2]

“Creativity comes from looking for the unexpected and stepping outside your own experience.”
(Masaru Ibuka)



Think about some of the most creative people you know (yourself included!)... chances are, they would be described as somewhat “weird” when compared to less creative people.

According to the research, the cause of this is often that these people have had abnormal things happen to them, or they pursue different experiences outright (maybe those two things are correlated?). Researchers have found, for instance, that creative people tend to have had a traumatic event occur in their lives (such as parental loss, as noted in this study). But you don’t need to worry about needing a tragic event to be creative! Researchers have also found that creative people are more likely to *pursue* strange experiences as well, such as this research that reveals that living abroad is linked to creativity in the general population.

In a more recent study (2012) on creativity, the lead researcher concluded that...“...*diversifying experiences help people break their cognitive patterns and thus lead them to think more flexibly and creatively.*”

A belief that many people hold, but now there is empirical proof: comparisons with various control groups have shown that a diversifying experience — defined as the **active** (but not vicarious) involvement in an unusual event — increased cognitive flexibility more than active (or vicarious) involvement in “normal” experiences.

Why is this the case? The answer isn’t totally clear, but some research points to things like habituation and stagnation as being creativity killers, and these two things are generally “fought” with novel and unique experiences. *An important consideration then*, is what constitutes “weird” for each person? The research at this point seems to indicate that it is more about the weirdness in relation to the person at hand, or that doing things outside of your normal habitual patterns can be enough to stimulate creativity, rather than there being a set of “weird” things to do that work for everyone. So be sure to go out there and push your comfort zone... just don’t get *too* weird!

Can You Increase Creativity by Thinking About Others? One interesting paradox in the realm of creativity seems to be what most of us would call, “*beginner’s luck.*” In fact, a few studies have hinted that one factor that often blocks people’s creativity is their **existing knowledge**.

If, for instance, you are writing a song, you are likely the kind of person that *saturates* themselves with the particular style of music you create. This familiarity is often at odds with “originality,” as your head is filled with melodies and you tend to feel that, “*This has been done before...*” when trying to create something new.

Many creative people struggle with this problem, *but what can be done about it?* According to research surrounding the *Construal-level theory of psychological distance*, the answer may lie in thinking about the creative process in more “*abstract*” terms rather than in concrete terms.

In other words: Instead of getting down to the “*nitty-gritty*” when trying to be creative, you should try to distance yourself from the problem you are solving. This coincides with other research that seems to point that coming up with “decisions” for others often results in more creative answers than when making decisions for oneself. For instance, in one study on the matter, researchers had individuals perform a variety of creative tasks while varying the *psychological distance* between the task by having them either perform the tasks while thinking of themselves, or perform the tasks while thinking of others (the researchers used both creative & logic problems in this test).

As an example, it’s known that most people are notoriously bad at creating “*unique*” **aliens** because they often just mimic animal parts. When asked to draw an alien for a story that *someone else* would later write, the subjects were more likely to create **novel** traits (evaluated by independent raters) than their counterparts. Other research in this area has found similar results, with a variety of different logic tests as well, thus making a strong claim that the phrase...

How to Break Through Creative Block. Running into a “*creative block*” is extremely frustrating for *anyone*, but especially so for those people who regularly do creative work (or whose jobs depend on their creativity). There is definitely a feeling of helplessness when you need to make

progress with an idea but you just can't seem to do it. I know I feel extremely jealous when I come across quotes like this (from author James Dickey). I don't understand how a writer could ever get writer's block, so-called. My problem is having too much...and being unable to get it all down.

I wish I had that problem! For the rest of us, whether you're swamped with too many options at once, or worse, you can't conjure a single creative idea at the moment to save your life, mental blocks can really put a damper on your creative efforts. The crazy thing is this... we often find a solution when we simply *step away from the problem* and come back to it later. Younger me would always do this with tough video games, and these days I find the same thing happens when I'm stumped on a new article or project.

You've likely had this happen too, and you come back wondering, "*Why couldn't I get this the first time around?!*" It's due to an amazing process in the brain called the incubation effect, part of the 5 proposed stages of creativity:

- Preparation
- Incubation
- Intimation
- Illumination or insight
- Verification

The problem with these stages is that the one used to break through creative block (Incubation) is somewhat mysterious and vague; we know taking a break is apart of it, but what else is there?

One thing is for certain: it definitely works. Around ~50 separate studies on Incubation + creativity have been conducted, and over 3/4 of them have found a major effect (others found smaller effects on creativity or no effect, but that is to be expected).

In addition, recent research (2012) has revealed that when people are interrupted while doing a creative task, they are much more likely to produce creative ideas when they resume the task if they've been *told* that they will need to do it again.

What this means: Those people who were interrupted during the creative task and *not* told they would have to do it again were unable to produce many creative ideas. Conversely, those people who *were* told they would resume the task came back with **more** creative ideas. Researchers concluded that perhaps planned breaks allow people to unconsciously work on tasks, leading to the "*Aha!*" moment that we all know and love, which often comes out of nowhere.

This means that beating mental block takes more than just a random break, and that creative people may benefit from having planned breaks

where they are motivated and *know* that they will be tackling the problem again.

In other words...To come up with creative solutions to problems, your chances are increased by incorporating breaks into your work-flow. Sound familiar? Regular Sparring Mind readers will recognize this...

It is the **exact** same thing I mentioned in my "*Science of Productivity*" article, where researchers found that planned breaks from intense work sessions improved awareness and focus.

Now it looks like it also improves creativity! So, to maximize the effectiveness of your incubation periods and to spur on more "*Aha!*" moments, try not to let yourself get mentally fatigued by taking *planned* creative breaks to let your unconscious work on the problem that has you stumped.

How to Kill Creative Thinking. Although many people *say* they want to foster creativity, it is often the case that employers (or other authority figures) will unintentionally stifle creativity by placing too many restrictions. This is important to consider when evaluating how we might **kill our own creativity** because of the restrictions we tend to place on ourselves to appeal to the norm.

References

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