

Mold Your Mind

TO BE

HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER

Discover the fantastic wellness payoffs of creativity—and learn why scientists agree it's an oft-ignored but critical life skill.

Hunk of clay...
or the start
of something
beautiful?

BY
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PHOTOGRAPHED BY
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► Quick question: Do you consider yourself “creative”? If you answered yes, you’re going to be thrilled about what’s to come. If you said *nah, not me*, then we have major news for you. The reality is that creativity can happen anytime, anywhere. And anyone can partake. “A misconception is that you’re only creative if you’re engaging in something artistic, and that’s just not true,” says Katherine Cotter, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow and creativity researcher in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Why this matters: “When people engage in creativity, they tend to feel more positive emotions,” says Cotter. And it’s not just about scoring an upbeat vibe; it can actually change your health status. Taking part in creativity in some form enhanced the overall well-being of study participants, found recent research. Some

experts even propose a theory that it's the final frontier of health, and one we're not paying enough attention to. "There's a malaise and lethargy that come from not doing anything creative," says Anna Abraham, PhD, educational psychology professor at the University of Georgia and director of the Torrance Center for Creativity and Talent Development. "We know it's important, but we haven't been able to capture the huge existential price of ignoring it quite like we have with our physical health. Disregarding this inward side of us is a sure path to feeling unfulfilled."

So yes, you can seek out a creative activity (highly recommended!), but you could also simply seize opportunities that present themselves. Maybe you'll come up with a new rainy-day project that prevents the kids from dismantling the house. Or hit upon a spreadsheet formula that addresses something sticky at work. Or assemble an outfit that gives you a lift. It all counts! To be clear, capital-C creativity produces the Einstein-esque, culture-changing ideas, but "it's also the little things we do in everyday life that add variety into our routines," says Cotter.

What *all* levels of the phenomenon have in common is that something novel is produced, which is what defines the concept and sets it apart from actions where the mind simply wanders, like daydreaming. "With creativity, there is always an output," says Abraham. "Even ideas are 'products'—they're just intangible." No matter your starting point, leaning into creativity will rev numerous aspects of your health. Ahead, learn to light a flame (or two) in your world with the help of experts and women we love.



What lights you up is probably different than others' go-tos.

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That's how many unrelated words participants were asked to come up with in a study that measured creativity. The more disparate the words, the better. (Cat and dog? Too close. Cat and camera? Right on.) That "semantic distance" ability ended up being a predictor of creativity. Cool!

Source: PNAS

GETTY IMAGES (SHAPES)

The Cultivation Formula

Best thoughts strike in the shower? Or maybe deadlines spur you to get sh*t done? If there's one thing experts agree on, it's that creativity is highly personal. However, these strategies are universally loved (by the pros!) for igniting a spark.

CHECK YOUR FEELS

People tend to be better at generating ideas when they're in a positive mood. Receiving negative news can hinder your creative processing, says Cotter. Makes sense: Do you feel excited about diving into a new project after you've heard about a friend who's seriously sick or going through a tough time? Probably not.

FOCUS ON FLEXIBILITY

What worked in your 20s may do nada for you now. "Creativity is fluid," says Abraham. Those who engage it regularly have experienced how it can change with age or circumstances and are able to bob and weave—and adjust their rituals accordingly. Your go-to morning coffee and journaling habit may need to become evening tea if you have a little one who's up with the sun. And that's okay. "You have to think about what will work for you now," says Abraham.

BOOK A BREAK

May seem counterintuitive to say stop doing what you're doing, but it's often the smartest step for a block. "You'll still subconsciously process that information, and once you hit pause, you're coming at it again later with a fresh set of eyes or mind-set," says Cotter. In fact, when people who were picking up a new skill (like playing the piano) took short pauses, they ultimately performed better, found research in *Cell Reports*.

JUST MOVE

Going for a stroll can help boost creative insights, says Cotter. New science takes it a step further: Vigorous physical activity—like heavy lifting or intense aerobics—enhanced divergent thinking (the ability to come up with unique solutions for a particular problem) in individuals, according to research in *Brain Sciences*. Sweat it out.

A quick pause from that project may be just what your mind really needs.





ELIZABETH CRONIN

Florist, judge, visual enthusiast

“Identify Your Joy, Then Build Your Life Around It”

Why **ELIZABETH CRONIN**, founder of Asrai Garden, a Chicago-based floral and luxury goods outpost (celebrating its 22nd anniversary), and a judge on HBO Max’s *Full Bloom*, needs beautiful things—everywhere—to create dreamy, ethereal arrangements.

▶ **WHEN I WAS 20**, I took the bus past a flower shop every morning. It was the only thing that brought me joy on my ride to my bartending job at the time. I looked forward to the bus approaching that corner. (The windows were full of gerbera daisies; this was the ‘90s, after all.) I eventually got a job at that shop, and from the first day, I knew this is what I wanted to do. I founded Asrai Garden in 1999 and never looked back.

I’m a Taurus, so I need my home and any physical space I’m in to be aesthetically pleasing in order to get stuff done. (We like our environments calm and grounded.) If you stick me in a cubicle, I’m going to sit there and short-circuit. I need plants. I need windows. I don’t drink coffee, but I live on black iced teas. I even need that cup I’m drinking from to be gorgeous. If I move into a new place, I’ll clear my schedule and make it my own, *then* move forward. (People will come in and be like, “How many years have you lived here?” And I’m like, “Two weeks.”) It’s just what works for me.

If I need to ideate for a project, I’ll take a walk or look at travel photos. Maybe I took a photo of a sunset that has colors I’ve never seen in a sunset

before, and I’ll pull from that palette for an installation. Sometimes I’m *forced* to get creative. At a recent setup for a wedding, the floor plan changed without our knowledge. We arrived with plans for one thing and had to figure it out. So I went back and forth to the hardware store four times and wandered around until I saw an object in a bin that I could make work. Standing there staring at the raw space didn’t help, so I had to go look for the right things. (I told myself, *You’re an industrious lesbian—go to the hardware store; you’ll figure it out perfectly*. There’s always a solution at the hardware or garden center.)

My overall recommendation is to find what brings you joy. Want to be a florist? Buy cheap flowers and mess around with them at home. The more you can put your hands on the material and play with it, the better. I’m proud that I’ve gradually, over time, built a life that allows for constant inspiration. On my morning drive along Lake Michigan from home to my workout, there’s no traffic. It’s beautiful and empty and magical. I watch the sunrise as I go and feel fortunate I can experience life in this way.

Psyche Talk

A convo with neuroscientist Claudia Aguirre, PhD, on that hunk of gray matter in our heads

What do you wish more people knew about creativity?

▶ That it’s found in everybody; it’s just a matter of how we tap into it. Once our basic needs are covered, creativity can give you a more robust life.

And what does this look like in our body?

▶ If you image the brain, you’ll find that both artists and scientists are very active in the part that is related to creativity, which is the association cortex. More accurately, these are the “areas” that process the information between experience and behavior. A lot of people say, “I’m not creative,” but you have to think about it like a scale or a continuum. Some people are on the high end of it because they use it in their careers, while others have to seek it out. There is some difference in the wiring of brains in those who consider themselves creative and those who don’t, but the raw material is there for anyone to develop. Whether you’re a transcriptionist or a guitar player, you can “do” creativity.

Does environment matter?

▶ Putting yourself in a place where you can be inspired can lead to more creative thoughts. So find a location inspiring for you. Key word here: *you*. In general, geography and space play a big role; artificial settings are typically not conducive to creative thinking. Get to a local park or, if possible, seek a place with high ceilings so your thoughts can figuratively bounce off the walls. In a way, the more space there is around you, the more your thoughts can travel.

What works for you?

▶ I find that interesting thinking can come from routine. So if I’m sweeping, I’m also marinating a project. Doing manually repetitive actions allows me to think and plan and execute them in my mind. So you might do housework while you incubate your thoughts. Or go for a run. I also like to bike on the beach, and when I’m on the path, it’s almost as if the wind is clearing my mind as I zoom along.

PROP STYLING: J.J. CHAN/BERNSTEIN & ANDRIULI; MOLL JEAN (CRONIN)



This Is Your Brain on Creativity, For Real

- No, it doesn’t involve the right side versus the left side. The concept that certain people are more “left brained” than others is actually a total myth, and one that pros wish would go away—stat. “A bunch of regions work together on different parts of the creative process; we call these ‘brain networks,’” says Cotter. There’s the default mode network, which helps with brainstorming and idea generation. Then the salience one, which is where you sort through ideas and identify important ones. And finally, the executive network, which zeroes in on worthwhile ideas and discards others that aren’t useful, explains Cotter. In other words, the magic happens *all over your brain*—picture it sparkling like a bunch of twinkly lights as the networks do their thing. Ahhhh, much better.

NATASHA ROTHWELL

Actress, writer, producer



“Be Prolific, Not Perfect”

How NATASHA ROTHWELL (you’ve watched her on *The White Lotus* and heard her scripts on *Insecure*) generates entertainment that surprises, delights, and moves.

► Creativity has always been innate to me. However, as with a fire, there are things I do to stoke it and things that try to extinguish it. Art, music, and, of course, TV and film are the “logs” I most often throw on the flames. I also love going to museums, concerts, and the theater. I typically find myself drawn to things that display, and subsequently provoke, vulnerability. When something moves me emotionally, I’m often moved to write.

Where and when I write deeply affects how I write too. The first step in my process is curating a space that is conducive to creativity: natural light, candles, a project-specific playlist to set the

mood, sweats, some form of caffeine, and Jolly Ranchers. Sometimes I’ll turn on the TV too. (I recently wrote a movie that was basically a love letter to the ’80s, and I played John Hughes movies in the background while I worked.)

I’m also not a quiet writer. I constantly read aloud. Hearing how the words sound is one of the best ways to see if they’re working—both as a writer and as a performer. Getting trusted eyes on your work is illuminating as well. When something goes from inside my head and onto the page, it still doesn’t feel real until it’s in someone’s inbox. It’s a great way to test the efficacy. It also helps me not to be so precious about it.

I can fall into the trap of line-by-line perfectionism, but I’ve found freedom in throwing words down on the page, like spaghetti against a wall, and seeing what sticks.

My advice for those wanting to pursue writing: Be prolific, not perfect. The more you write, your bad gets good, and your good gets better. It’s in the doing that you become. So write, write, and keep writing. Don’t wait for someone else to call you a writer before you give yourself permission to own it. Discover your unique voice. What do you have to say? How do you want to say it? You owe it to yourself to find out. Trust the process, give yourself grace, and never ever give up.

Tracking your cycle may be a direct route to living boldly.



When It All Flows

• One more reason to keep tabs on your cycle: You might be able to zero in on the time of the month when you’ll have the best ideas. *Say what?* The higher the probability of conception, the more “original and flexible” the thinking was for participants, per new research. As in, the closer you are to your most fertile days, the more innovative you may be. “Around ovulation, when our estrogen level increases—and before it drops—our physiological processes are our allies,” says study coauthor Katarzyna Galasinska. “Sex hormones act as a mood enhancer.” Also, at this time, women tend to take more risks and feel a little more courageous (all good changes for creativity!). So if you’re extra zingy during that window, now you know why. Use it to your advantage!

ROZETTE PAGO (ROTHWELL); COURTESY OF MICHELE CROWE/CBS (O'DONNELL)

Technical Reflection

Fitness or health-care pros may have more clinical elements in their fields, but that doesn’t mean they’re not also imaginative. Proof positive...

I Lean Into My Emotions

► “When I was first starting out as a trainer, I was terrified to be honest about my struggles. I was afraid to be the superhero with all the answers. But over time, I found that when I was raw, outrageous, awkward, and funny, I had the deepest connections with people. Being an entrepreneur sparks a lot of self-doubt. While I can’t say that doesn’t cause me anxiety and fear, I’ve learned to let it be my muse. I’m so obsessed with what I do, and that passion translates directly into creativity. I literally can’t go to sleep at night because my mind is dancing with ideas and a deep desire for the next day to come so I can begin to put them into action.”

—Lauren Kanski, CPT, WH advisor, founder of *Body & Bell*, a kettlebell training program available through the *Ladder* app (@lauren_kanski)

I Actively Pursue Ingenuity

► “Life is full of content, but you have to let go of the idea that inspiration will strike, and go out to look for it if you can’t find it. I check TikTok’s For You page often to see if there’s a trend or something I want to try on social media, where I post daily. I get ideas from client convos. A recent Instagram reel was based on a comment someone made to me about feeling nervous

to see friends again after weight gain, but then realizing she was so much more than her body. I thought it was so powerful. Maybe your backdrop isn’t the ideal setting—who cares? Just get your message out there. I rethought my standard of what I consider “amazing content.” Even if it doesn’t resonate with everyone, it’ll resonate with the right people.”

—Sohee Lee, CSCS*D, exercise expert, WH advisor, and founder of *Lift with Sohee* (@soheefit)

I Individualize My Ideas

► “I have to be creative with how I speak to my patients and the language I use. Medicine is an art! The way I phrase a question can impact how they react. Some people want a no-nonsense approach, so I’m frank with them. I know that’s not going to work for others, so I tailor my tactics to spur them into action. Health is not one size fits all. I also got creative with how I give recommendations; I use a paper prescription pad to prescribe lifestyle changes in the form of microgoals. So I’ll write down ‘3x a week, 10 minutes a day, do a workout you love’ or ‘download the 7-minute workout app, do it regularly.’ For many, seeing it on classic Rx paper makes it feel more urgent and necessary. Every day, I’m thinking about how I can be a stronger, more effective doctor, and so much of that is dependent on creativity.”

—Navya Mysore, MD, primary care physician (drnavyamysore.com)

NORAH O'DONNELL

Anchor, mom, health advocate



“Let Curiosity and Collaboration Lead”

What NORAH O'DONNELL, anchor and managing editor of the *CBS Evening News*, taps to find inspo and ideas—and how she brings everyone, including her trainer, along for the brain-boosting ride

► **TO BE HONEST**, I don’t think of myself as a creative person. I wasn’t the best artist in school and I’m not the best with crafts, but I do think I’m one of the most *curious* people. To me, there’s a close connection between curiosity and creativity. What led me into journalism was an interest in people and issues happening around the world. A curious mind is expansive and boundless. Some of the best advice I’ve gotten (from a producer) is to follow your curiosity, because that’s going to take you to a great place.

That’s why the first thing I do every morning is vacuum up as much information as I can. Three hard-copy newspapers arrive at my home, and several more come to work. I consume a lot of online material too. We have a news meeting at 10 o’clock in the morning where we pitch ideas. It’s collaborative, as we’re aligning and deciding what’s going to fill the prime-time news broadcast that evening.

Also, I do so many interviews, ranging from presidents and prime ministers to moms struggling with childcare. At the end of the day, a great interview is part partnership and part preparation. I spend an enormous amount of time prepping for an interview with my team, bouncing around questions and ideas.

Exercise is my other creative stimulant. First, because of the well-documented physiological benefits, like increased blood flow to the brain and endorphins that make you mentally sharp. (I certainly feel like I’m firing on all cylinders after a workout.) But also, I tend to exercise with someone else, whether it’s my trainer, Kira Stokes, who happens to be an avid news follower, or my morning running buddy, Carrie, who’s up on the latest trends in health care and education. The whole time we’re working out, we’re talking. So I’m coupling exercise with brainstorming; it all comes back to curiosity and collaboration.