Quick question: Do you consider yourself “creative”? If you answered yes, you’re going to be thrilled about what’s to come. If you answered no, then we have major news for you. The reality is that creativity can happen anytime, anywhere. And anyone can participate. “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. Scientists agree it’s an oft-ignored but critical life skill.

Discover the fantastic wellness payoffs of creativity—and learn why scholars agree it’s an oft-ignored but critical life skill.
What lights you up is probably different than others’ go-tos.

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

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 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 mindset,” 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.

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.

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.
“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.

W I N S T O N  S O R R O S

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 starting 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 four times and wander around until I saw an object in a bin that I could make work.’)

My overall recommendation is to find what brings you joy. Want to be an artist? 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.


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.

D o e s  e n v i r o n m e n t  m a t t e r?

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.


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Does environment matter?

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What works for you?

I find that interesting thinking can come from routine. So if I’m sweeping, I’m also brainstorming 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 love listening to the radio and when I’m on the path, it’s almost as if the wind is clearing my mind as I zoom along.

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 sparking like a bunch of twinkly lights as the networks do their thing. Ahhh, much better.

Psyche Talk

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

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“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 essential to me. However, as with a fire, there are things I do to sustain it and things that try to extinguish it. Art, music, and, of course, TV and film are the things I must often throw on the flames. I also love going to museums, concerts, and the theater. I typically find myself drawn to things that display, draw me emotionally, I’m drawn to things that do exactly that. I have my go-to things. I listen to a specific playlist to set the mood, sweat some form of exercise, and Jilly Hughes movies. Sometimes I’ll turn on the TV, too. (I recently wrote a movie that was basically a love letter to the 80s, and played John Hughes movies in the background when 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. It’s a great way to test the efficacy. It also helps me not to be so precise 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, the better you get and your work gets better. It’s in the doing that you become. So write, write, write, and keep writing. Don’t wait for someone to call you before you give yourself permission to do 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.

When It All Flows

• I can’t stand that doesn’t cause me anxiety and fear. I’ve learned to let it. I’m so obsessed with what I do, and that passion translates directly into creativity. I liter- ally can’t go to sleep at night because my mind is dancing with ideas and a deep desire for the next step. It comes as I can best put them into action.

• For me, exercise is a superpower. I do exercises through a program called Lumin. (I am an ambassador and co-founder of Lumin.) If I can’t fit in a full workout, I go for a run. It all becomes a superpower.

• I tend to exercise with someone else, whether it’s my trainer, Kira Stokes, or a close friend. 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, brainstorming 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. It certainly feel like I’m running 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.

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...