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7 Ways to Unblock Creative Minds



All creative minds get blocked occasionally. Sometimes, it's just for a day or two, but for others, it's an extensive period of time, and while the longer time frames are obviously a bigger issue, the shorter ones aren't good either. Our livelihood is based on our ability to think creatively all of the time. People literally pay us for this, so if we can't do it, we're in trouble.

The biggest problem with being blocked is that it kind of begets itself. We get stuck on something simple - maybe it's how to design your mobile app's navigation. You might sit there and stare at it for a while and before you know it, an hour's passed and you haven't made any progress, nor can you think at all about how to move forward.

The harder you try, the worse it is. Your once-creative mind is essentially a barren desert. Actual tumbleweeds are making their way across your frontal lobe and gathering in a nasty pile in the far-off corner. Nothing's getting through it. At this point, the negative thoughts start rolling in and you end up psyching yourself out. Something's got to give and you really need it to be your creative side - if anything, for the benefit of your newest mobile app design.

Every creative person has tricks and tips for unblocking, but when old faithful isn't working, we have to look for new ways to get those creative juices flowing again. Here are some of our own tried-and-trues, go-tos, and a couple recommendations from friends.

Take an Exploration Break
If you find yourself staring at your computer screen for a solid thirty minutes without any kind of output, it might be time to take a little exploration break. Open up Instagram and scroll through your feed. Find some new accounts that speak to you or search for accounts of designers you admire. Pinterest can be another good source of inspiration, especially because you can create boards that cater to different projects or moods. (As a warning, limit your social media spelunking to networks that inspire creativity - in other words, don't be tempted to jump down the Facebook or Twitter rabbit hole.)

As a designer, you should be consuming fellow designers' work on a frequent basis. There's a reason writers commit time to reading others' books and film directors watch colleagues' movies - creative minds feed off of each other. It's common to find inspiration through fellow creatives, so times when you feel blocked or stifled are the perfect opportunities to do a little exploring. Lucky for us, the internet has made this task far more manageable than it was before.

Redirect Your Attention
When we're stuck at a particular point in a project, it's easy to obsess over it. We can stare at that design like those weird magic eye posters from the 90's, but if nothing comes to mind that makes any sense, it's time to change your activity. Why bother beating our heads against the wall? We know from experience that this won't produce creative minds. Let's just get up and do something else for a few minutes?

Let yourself have 10 minutes of mindless entertainment. Set a timer for yourself and open up your favorite gaming app. Watch the ESPN top ten. Catch up on SNL's best sketches from this past weekend. Watch promos for the next episode of your favorite show. If you have the time, just watch an episode (but resist a full-blown binge session).

Better yet, go take a walk. Get outside and smell the fresh air and get your blood pumping. Endorphins make people happy, right? It's not good for us to sit at desks all day anyway. Stretch out those legs with a quick trip to the coffee shop for a refill. Regardless of whether you have a creative mind or an analytical one, sometimes it takes getting away from the problem to figure out how to solve it.

This one is a particular favorite of ours because it always seems to work. Keep that problem in the back of your busy creative mind and let it fester back there while you focus on something else. The answer will come to you.

Change Your Environment - or Your Schedule
Bad Agency Chief Creative Officer Sylvia Flores is heavily affected by her environment. If she isn't in a space that inspires her mind to be creative, she simply can't be. She needs her office, the coffee shop, or the bar (yes, the bar) to feed her creativity - "Creative is what I do for a living, so the spaces I'm in need to reflect that." This is something she knows about herself, so if she's feeling stifled, she changes her environment.

This could mean physically changing locations or it could mean redecorating your space. You should do whatever it is you need to do to create a space that pushes your creative buttons. Some days, that might mean a bustling coffee shop with the smell of freshly ground beans in the air and others, it might mean loud music and red wine (we're not judging you one bit, and also, please save us a seat).

And along with that change of environment, consider a change in schedule. "Don't pay attention to that LinkedIn article that says that the most successful people wake at 5 a.m., workout, and read 15 business articles, three newspapers, while having a half a grapefruit and a cup of green tea. If you're a creative, that's likely not you, and it's okay."

We don't all function well within a traditional 9 to 5 schedule, so if you hit your creative stride at 3:00pm like Flores, sleep in and let yourself work into the evening. Creative minds have different rhythms than analytical minds - and that's alright! Again, we have to do what's necessary to foster our creative ability.

Meditate
Meditation isn't a new thing - it's been around for millennia, but it's kind of trendy at the moment thanks to celebrities speaking publicly about its benefits. Creative minds often find the stillness of meditation to be both inspiring and healing, but it's hard for those who've never tried it to wrap their minds around the concept. If it seems too far-fetched for you, the most important thing you need to know is that meditation can take many forms.

Professional dancer and choreographer Noelle Rose Andressen believes that "being uptight is a creator's worst enemy," so she turns to a type of meditation that has proven very helpful for her creative mind. "I lay on the floor and completely relax into the surface then tighten every muscle in my body. I hold my breath for ten counts then completely release. I repeat this several times until I feel all the tension leave my body. This relaxing is a form of meditation and allows my mind to rest."

Our creative minds can't produce quality designs if they're completely bogged down with stress and anxiety. For many of us, cluttered minds are prohibitive to creativity. We need to be relaxed. Even those of us that work well under pressure need to rest sometimes and that's the perfect time for meditation. It doesn't have to mean chanting or dinging bells or essential oils (not that there's anything wrong with any of those things), but simply closing your eyes for a few minutes and taking deep breaths can have a restorative effect on anyone.

Get to the Root of the Problem
If you're finding your creative mind is chronically blocked - as in, more often than not, or you're experiencing it far more often than you used to - it might be time to seek a psychoanalytical approach. According to licensed therapist Hannah Weiss, "Artists and other creatives are often unaware of the underlying reasons for their creative blocks."

Weiss firmly believes that "by becoming increasingly aware of unconscious factors which inhibit your ability to creatively think and express, you can open up potential space for authentic and enlivened self-expression."

Perhaps a parent or past colleague's harsh criticism is preventing you from having the confidence you need to become the designer you want to be. It's possible that the tiny kernel of self-doubt that initial moment (and ongoing reiteration) implanted in your brain is festering its way to the forefront of your mind and is wreaking all kinds of havoc on your new mobile app design. We're not saying that every blocked creative mind is in dire need of therapy, but if this has been a problem for an extended period of time, it may be something you want to consider.

Write Some Morning Pages
Writer Julia Cameron believes that writing is the best way to unblock a creative mind, no matter what kind of art one creates. In her book *The Artist's Way*, she details a twelve-week program for breaking through creative block, and at the heart of it is what she calls "morning pages." She says that artists (a word she is adamant about) should all begin their days by writing three pages of stream of consciousness thoughts down on paper. Don't edit, don't worry about spelling or grammar - just write until you get to the end of that third page.

She says it should take about 30 minutes, but if you're a slow writer, perhaps 45. We're not exactly morning people, so ours don't necessarily get done in the morning, but we're willing to bet Cameron would be okay with that - as long as they're getting done. If you are a morning person, all the better, since the point of doing it in the morning is that you're starting off your day with the intention of feeding your inner artist.

We're fully on board with the morning pages because, as Cameron promises in the book, they just work. Many times throughout the twelve-week course, she states that if you're doing the morning pages, they're working, even if it's deep down in your subconscious and you swear you can't feel it at all.

Unblocking a Creative Mind: Avoid the Negativity Spiral
Whatever method you choose for unblocking your creative mind, do whatever you can to avoid going toward the downward spiral of negativity. Kate Sullivan, managing editor of TCK Publishing, talked to us about this spiral. She said it's easy to "get frustrated because you're not doing something creative or being productive, which deepens your block, which makes you even more frustrated, and down you go."

Once we start thinking negative thoughts (I'll never finish this project. I'm going to be stuck here forever), we are actively taking steps backward from creativity. We're literally sabotaging ourselves when we get into this path of thinking. So when you start to feel those thoughts coming on, stop yourself and make yourself think a positive thought, instead.

I am a good designer and I will come up with a creative idea. I have been frustrated before and I get through it, just like last time.
Positive affirmations can be very effective - even if you don't believe them at the time you say them. Say them out loud to yourself alone in your office (or to your cat at home) if you have to, but it's important to break that cycle before it becomes a spiral.

So if you're fighting your creative mind today, go for a walk, check Pinterest or Instagram, or try meditating for a few minutes. It's important to remember that you will get through this block - you just need to have a little faith in yourself and your abilities. Before you know it, you'll be finished with this project and on to the next.

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