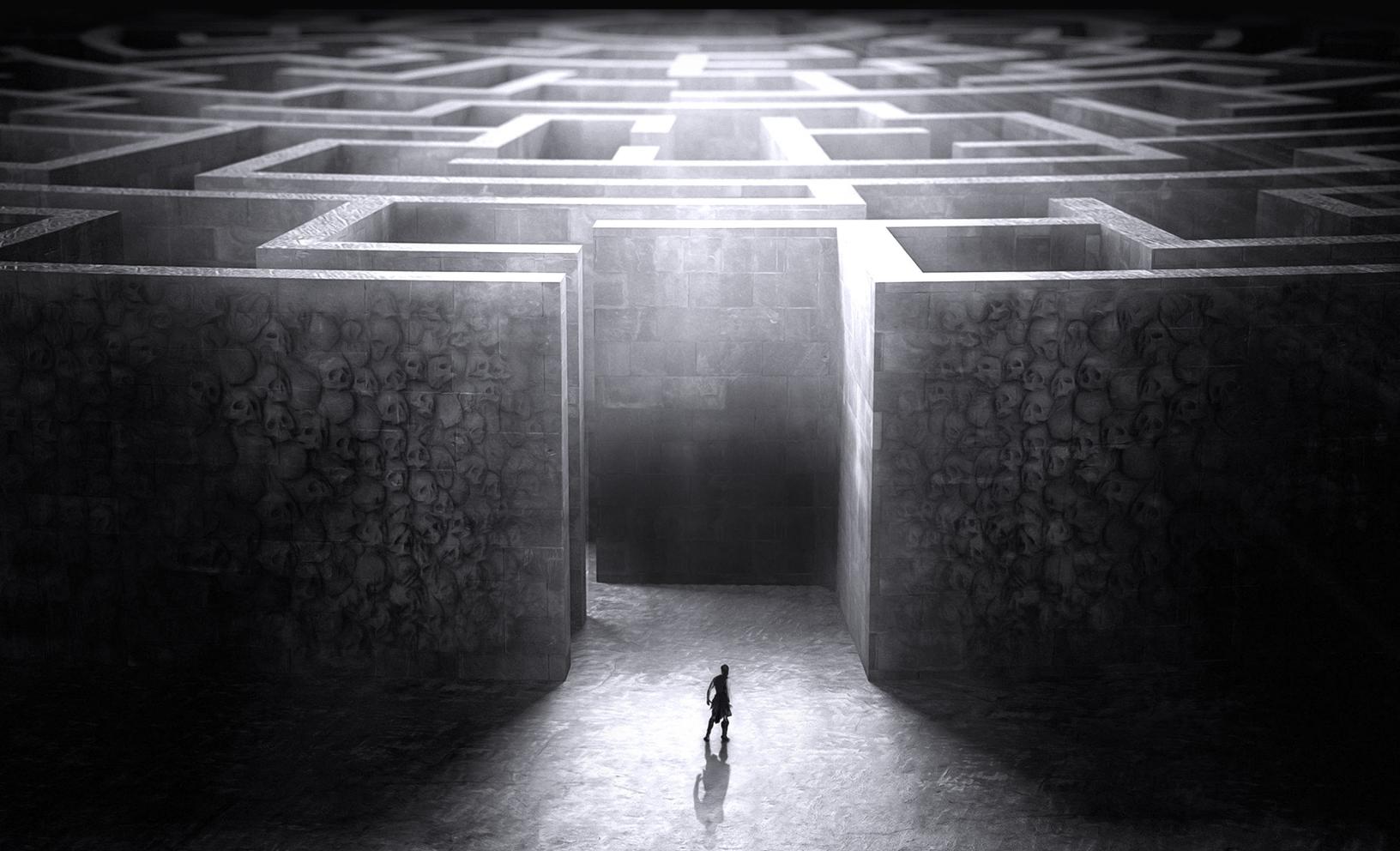


Overcoming your Creative Blocks

by Tijana Mandić, Ph.D.



44 Activities to Help You
Unlock Your Creative Potential

Overcoming Your Creative Blocks

44 Activities to Help You Unlock
Your Creative Potential

Between Sessions Resources
Norwalk, CT

Overcoming Your Creative Blocks

44 Activities to Help You Unlock Your Creative Potential

Cover and interior design by Mike Canavan

© 2018 by Between Sessions Resources

Permission is granted for the purchaser to copy these exercises for personal or professional use, but not for resale. All other rights are reserved.

Disclaimer: This book is intended to be used as an adjunct to psychotherapy. If you are experiencing serious psychological symptoms or problems in your life, you should seek the help of an experienced mental health professional.

ISBN: 978-1-947009-04-2

Published by

Between Sessions Resources

304 Main Avenue

Suite 333

Norwalk, CT 06851

About the Author

Tijana Mandić, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist with expertise in psychotherapy, psychology of creativity, psychology of communication, and peace psychology. Her main activities include teaching, and doing psychotherapy with and providing consultancy services to artists. In addition, she has extensive experience in the world of business, especially leadership training, team building and Human Resource Management. Dr. Mandić is also known for her humanitarian projects commissioned by High Neighbor, Open Society Foundation, Save the Children Fund, International Organization for Migration, International Rescue Committee, and many others.

About the Series

Between Sessions Resources publishes a variety of worksheets and other tools designed to be used as therapeutic homework. *Overcoming Your Creative Blocks* is one of a series of workbooks designed to help people practice the psychological skills they learn in therapy.

Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself; I am large—I contain multitudes.

—*Walt Whitman*

Our virtues and our failings are inseparable, like force and matter. When they separate, man is no more.

—*Nikola Tesla*

Table of Contents

Introduction	i	Facing Audiences and Critics.....	97
Understanding Your Creative Block			
Creative Block Phases	2	Comic Relief	100
Characteristics of Creativity	7	A Letter to a Critic	101
Levels of Creative Block	11	Creativity Killers	107
A Creative Block Log... and Some Suggestions	16	Psychological Aikido.....	111
Internal Drama			
Somewhere in the Present... There Is Peter.....	20	Killing You Softly	
The Believing Self.....	22	Toxic People	117
Confronting Your Negative Beliefs	24	Ahh... People, People, People...	130
Negative Belief Positions.....	31	Body Talk	
Maintaining Focus.....	34	Images Speak Louder Than Words.....	133
What Drives Human Behavior?.....	36	Relaxing with a Body Scan	137
An Emotional Inventory	49	Loving Your Body.....	142
Your Emotional Toolbox	54	About the Flow	
Developing Emotional Awareness	56	Flow	144
Your Emotional Myths	59	Keeping a Dream Diary	152
Your Internal Critic vs. Your Creative Inner Child	63	Reviewing What You Have Learned	157
"Crime" and Punishment	66	Accepting the Creative Block	161
Coping with Stress	69	Zigzag Movement.....	162
Talking Back to Your Negative Messages.....	73	Models of Change	165
Grounding	81	Abundance – Deprivation	167
Breathing Practice.....	83	Success – Failure	168
Imagining Your Best Creative Self	84	Loyalty – Disobedience	169
External Drama			
You and Your Surroundings.....	91	Revenge – Forgiveness.....	170
Inhibiting External Factors	92	Order – Chaos	171
Stimulating External Factors	95	Progressing Toward Flow	172
		The Stories We Tell Ourselves	173
		Putting Your Life on Stage	180
		Epilogue	181

Introduction

Some years ago, more than I care to remember, I was sitting in my university office, at my desk. It was exam time, and to my left there was a stack of student papers waiting to be read, commented on, and graded. The office door was open—it was always open!—so that students could feel free to come in and ask whatever it was they wanted to ask. “Right,” I thought to myself, “one more down, forty-three to go.” As I was reaching for the next paper, I spotted a pair of worn-out brown shoes standing at the door. The left shoe had a big, amoeba-shaped splash of blue paint all over it. I raised my head and saw a shabby-looking man standing there. He appeared to be older than even most PhD students.

“I’m not your student!” said the man, looking straight at me.

“Wow, what an introduction!” I said to myself, and before I could say anything, he added “I’m not your patient!”

“Well, is there anybody else?” I said jokingly, but he didn’t seem to find it funny. “Sorry, a bad joke,” I added, and before I had a chance to switch to my polite mode, he continued.

“They told me about you. I’m a painter ...” He paused and took a deep breath as if being a painter was a terrible burden to carry. I waited attentively to hear the rest. “I don’t want psychotherapy. It will kill my talent,” he said.

I was beginning to feel irritated; I had a million things to do and I certainly didn’t have time for yet another painter with strong prejudices against what I do for a living. Flipping the pen in my right hand, I replied coolly, “So you came to a dentist but you don’t want any dental work?”

Once again, he showed no sign of finding it funny. The situation was becoming awkward, and I added, “I am very much a clinical psychologist and a psychotherapist—”

“Not a good metaphor.”

“Correct me, then.” I raised my eyebrows in anticipation.

“You worked with my friend Mark for three years. And now he’s doing fine.”

“Ah! Has he lost his talent?”

“No. But you worked only on his creative blocks. And his were bad, very bad ones. None of that psycho mumbo-jumbo stuff. Just his blocks. You teach artists, you do psychotherapy with artists, and you are even married to one—”

It was my turn to interrupt. “So?”

“You might understand my creative blocks ... but *without* psychotherapy.”

Looking at him, his shoes, his posture, his unshaven face ... I kept wondering how they found me: these control-freak “painters” who have themselves all figured out, but are stuck in a creative block.

Yet he sparked my curiosity. I started explaining my MO. “First I do the tests and based on the results we agree on the aims and strategy—”

“No! None of that! Don’t be so routine. Let’s just talk for a month. I’ll come to your office.”

And that is how we embarked on our three-year journey through his extremely heavy creative blocks, control obsession, disorientation, depression.

Thinking about it now, I am grateful. The Painter taught me how to do psychotherapy without psychotherapy, that it was possible to do psychotherapy in many different ways—some of them more effective than just plain psychotherapy. As we walked, to use a metaphor, on the edges of waiting-to-happen conflicts, and paradoxical his-way-only interpretations, I learned a lot from the Painter. We walked step by step through his many and varied creative blocks, and he didn’t lose his talent. He even softened up and started using some of that psychological mumbo-jumbo he was so against in the beginning.

Creative blocks are inhibitions that prevent a person from starting, continuing, or finishing their creative projects. Some people link these blocks with shyness, reticence, and self-consciousness; they fill our minds with thoughts and feelings that make us unable to act in a relaxed and natural way. In the academic literature, creative blocks are defined as an external or internal action of inhibiting, restricting, or hindering a creative process of an individual or a group.

These blocks happen voluntarily or involuntarily, and they can be rational or irrational. Their effects range from inner symptoms—cognitive, motivational, and emotional—to external issues, such as complicated relationships, rejections, unhealthy competitiveness, and lack of financial resources.

Creative blocks have been around as long as there have been people who create. There is nothing new about them; they are not a recent invention of advanced societies; they are not exclusive in any way. Anyone can experience a creative block, anytime, and for many different reasons. Some blocks are light, don’t last long, and can be worked through easily. Others can be heavy, difficult to endure, and might last for a long time. Yet, if addressed appropriately, they can be overcome. Overcoming these blocks will help you open up to positive stimulation, create deep, meaningful exchanges with the world, and get involved in creative bonding with yourself, others, and nature.

This workbook is for creative people, those who teach or coach creative people, as well as psychotherapists who work with creative people and creativity workshops. Its goals are to offer ways of:

- becoming aware of your creative blocks and gaining insight into the nature and varieties of your creative blocks;
- becoming flexible and developing a number of choices so once you feel stuck you will have the capacity to make another choice and move on;
- achieving a harmonious relationship with your internal and external reality.

By working through suggested worksheets, you will learn that the process of creativity, and thus your creativity blocks, can be analyzed from different perspectives. You will also learn that blocks can occur during three phases of creativity, and have four characteristics and three levels. They can be deep inside you and/or come from your environment. The activities in this workbook have been designed to provide you with simple tools you can use to describe, understand, manage, endure, or even change the dynamics of your creative blocks.

How to Use This Workbook

The forty-four exercises in this workbook are organized into six sections.

Understanding Your Creative Blocks

In this section, you will look at your creative blocks from the outside. A creative block is neither insurmountable nor a monolithic structure. You may find yourself facing it in one of its three phases, or the block may reveal that it is one of the characteristics of creativity that is temporarily affected. The block you are facing now, or the ones you have already been through, is leveled and each level affects your work differently. Giving an objective answer to the question *What does my creative block look like?* is the objective in this section.

Internal Drama

Although a lot of people will readily find excuses for their creative blocks in the world surrounding them, the truth is not so simple. The stuff that builds creative blocks is most often in the mysterious universe residing inside those who create. We have called this internal drama. The lead characters in this play are Beliefs, Motivations, Emotions, and Internal Conflicts. Each character has a part to play, and if they are not led by a calm, cool, and collected director, the play might turn into a grotesque or a tragedy. The calm, cool, and collected director is *you*. The better you know who your actors are and what they are like, the more you will be able to focus their many talents on creative use. In this section, you are going to meet your creativity's leading actors.

External Drama

Social factors play a significant role in every creative process, as creativity grows through contact, relationship, and bonding with other people, nature, and the world of ideas. Although a creative lifestyle needs to be on the move and interacting with the surroundings, you should

be aware that the surroundings could also be a disturbing factor responsible for your creative blocks. To follow the play metaphor, external drama is all about supporting roles in your creative play. In this section, you will learn to distinguish between inhibiting and stimulating external factors and how to deal with them. You will also learn how to meet your audiences, critics, and various other creativity killers in a way that promotes your creativity instead of paralyzing it.

Killing You Softly

Other people—family, friends, acquaintances, peers, respected others, idols—are vital to your creativity. Some of them, although friendly and kind, are subconsciously pulling your creativity back, holding it at a standstill, not letting it spread its wings and fly. In this section, we focus your attention on six personality types who by acting subliminally, each in their own way, can have devastating effects on your creativity. Knowing who they are and keeping them at a safe distance from your creativity, especially when in a creative block, can be the trick in overcoming your creative block.

Body Talk

Body and mind never work separately from one another. The problem is that we rarely see them as a whole. We tend to ignore the body and think of it as somehow less important than the mind. But the body reacts to whatever is happening to us, both from the inside and outside, in its own brilliant way. It remembers and sends us powerful messages. And it needs attention, care, and love the same way our personality needs them. Learning to understand and talk to your body has the power to put you into a creative dialogue with yourself and the world.

About the Flow

The holy grail of every creative process is achieving the state of flow. Unlike the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, this one is of this world and is achievable. Furthermore, it is achievable without resorting to any sort of deviant behavior. Everyone is capable of being in flow, and what this section aims at is focusing you on the things that put you in a state of consciousness conducive to creating freely and changing—the state of flow. Though experienced as pleasant and light, flow demands energy, and after a while you will likely find yourself feeling trapped in your mundane routines and tasks. This is zig. What follows is zag. Through your life, your creativity will follow this zigzag path, moving from creative block to flow to yet another creative block. This zigzagging is what enables positive change of not just your creativity but also your entire personality.

Creative blocks have a life of their own, and over time they will keep changing depending on the complex web of circumstances in which you work. You could use this workbook book several times in your life, and the answers you give might not be the same.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CREATIVE BLOCK

Creativity is experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes and having fun.

—Mary Lou Cook

Creative Block Phases

To understand your creative blocks, the first step is to determine in which phase of the creative process the block happened. As we mentioned before, this can change, though it is possible that you usually become stuck in a particular phase. Read about these phases, and think about the time when your past or present creative block appeared.

Phase 1: Blocked at the Outset

If you stumbled before you even really started, your story might be:

I got up early one day and felt ready to paint. As I approached the easel, the empty canvas stared at me. No muse to inspire, no motivation. Everything seemed to be so ordinary and boring. "What's the point of it, anyway?" I thought. "I'm not even sure what I want to accomplish." So I left the house.

In this phase, you are experiencing the lack of internal motivation, also called intrinsic motivation, and it is this motivation that is crucial for creativity. No stimulation from anywhere, no encouragement or spur, no insight. On the other hand, you expect inspiration to come to you, to come from the outside: other people, a muse, nature, or a higher power, and you might feel angry that it is not happening. Though you are feeling agitated and distracted, you remain passive and inactive. Frustrated by not being able to concentrate, focus, and apply yourself to your work, you might fantasize that you need some extraordinary experience (ecstasy), some magic ritual or substance to get you started.

Think of your past or current creativity block that appeared at the beginning of the creative process. Write down your own story. What exactly was going on in your head before you decided to give up?

Phase 2: Blocked in Process

It is possible that you went through the initial phase successfully as your idea made you excited and motivated. You formed a concept and even saw the final phase of the work in your mind,

but for some reason, in the middle of your work, you began feeling less enthusiastic. As a result, you worked less and less until you finally stopped completely.

Creative blocks in this phase are caused by myriad reasons. Here are the most common ones:

- You may simply lack energy to accomplish the task, as working on a creative project employs both mental and physical strength.
- You feel bored, fed up, turned off, and unable to endure it any longer. The clock is ticking, and you are procrastinating.
- You realize that you have bad working habits. You become lazy and come up with excuses like: *This is a waste of time; this will take me years, and I am wasting my time; or I don't find it so interesting anymore, and the idea wasn't so good after all.*

After the successful initial phase of having an idea and doing the preparatory work, creative people may have problems with working habits, or—which is usually the case—be lacking in discipline.

Think of your past or current creative block that happened during the second phase. Take time to write down your own story. What was exactly going on in your head before you decided to give up? What thoughts and feelings did you have, and what messages did you send yourself that made you stop working?

Phase 3: Blocked at the Finish Line

Though it may sound strange, people often give up at the very end. The possible reasons are numerous and individual. Here we will review the most typical ones: restlessness and perfectionism.

In the final phase, you may experience restlessness. While similar to boredom, restlessness is different in that it is associated with high energy levels when everyday activities cause the mind to race. Restlessness is an annoying state that can easily cause you to lose patience, make mistakes, and come to unexpected decisions. All of a sudden, you cannot wait a day longer to see your work completed. You cannot pause to think about the details anymore, and that makes you angry. Your rebellious inner child may awake and decide to leave the job as it is.

The reason for the block in this phase may also be perfectionism: you have come to the conclusion that your work is not good enough. If you worked for a long time on a project, you may have started thinking that things have changed and that your work is not relevant anymore. Parallel to this, you start questioning your identity and particularly your self-esteem (be it too low or too high) and even experience some physical discomfort. You might think that the work is destroying you.

In this phase, you can rage and destroy in indignation what you did, putting yourself on the side of so many artists (including famous ones) who destroyed many of their works. Were they so bad? We seriously doubt that. Most likely, the creators' lack of patience and belief in themselves and their work at the crucial moment led them to destroying their work forever.

Think of your past or current creative block that happened in the final phase. Write down what it was that stopped you from accomplishing your task.

Dealing with the Phases of a Creative Block

Carefully read the statements below. Think about each one in the context of your current creative block or a specific past one. Mark each statement with *T* if the statement is true for you and with *F* if the statement is false for you.

Statement	True	False
A. I am not inspired.		
B. The work has become boring.		
C. I can't go on.		
D. I expect other people to inspire me.		
E. I can't finish this project.		
F. I need to learn more skills to be able to continue.		
G. I am not motivated at all.		

Statement	True	False
H. I am procrastinating.		
I. When I finish, I know I will find the work useless and myself not talented, so it is pointless.		
J. I am restless and cannot concentrate.		
K. The work is not good enough to end it like this.		
L. I hesitate to try anything.		
M. I don't have patience for this.		
N. I feel physical discomfort working on this.		
O. I need an unusual experience or substance to get me going.		

Go through the statements again. In your opinion, which creative block phase does each statement refer to? Mark each statement with I for phase 1, II for phase 2 , III for phase 3

Statement	Creative block phase
A. I am not inspired.	
B. The work has become boring.	
C. I can't go on.	
D. I expect other people to inspire me.	
E. I can't finish this project.	
F. I need to learn more skills to be able to continue.	
G. I am not motivated at all.	
H. I am procrastinating.	
I. When I finish, I know I will find the work useless and myself not talented, so it is pointless.	
J. I am restless and cannot concentrate.	
K. The work is not good enough to end it like this.	
L. I hesitate to try anything.	
M. I don't have patience for this.	

Statement	Creative block phase
N. I feel physical discomfort working on this.	
O. I need an unusual experience or substance to get me going.	
<i>Add some of your own statements that describe the state of your creative block.</i>	

Reflecting on Your Creative Block Phases

Each statement refers to, describes, or exemplifies one of the creative block phases. There are five typical statements for each phase, as follows:

Phase 1: a, d, j, l, and o

How many of these did you mark as true? _____ False? _____

Phase 2: b, c, f, g, and h

How many of these did you mark as true? _____ False? _____

Phase 3: e, i, k, m, and n

How many of these did you mark as true? _____ False? _____

Which creative block phase are you in? _____

It is a good idea to think of your other creative blocks and repeat this activity for each one.

Count your *Ts* and your *Fs*. Notice whether a pattern is emerging.

Which creative block phase is most typical for you? _____

What does this tell you about yourself?

Characteristics of Creativity

Psychological research shows that researching creativity and creativity blocks is not easy. Creativity is a complex phenomenon, perhaps one of the most complex. However, complexity does not prevent study and analysis. You can study the characteristics of your creative blocks.

Creativity can be analyzed in terms of its four characteristics: fluency, flexibility, originality, and the elaboration of the ideas produced. It could be that your creative block is hidden in one of these four characteristics. For example, at the beginning of the creative process, you may have plenty of ideas, but none of them seems original enough to you, even though your friends disagree. You are so grounded in your belief that your ideas are not original that you cannot start your work. Originality characterizes your creative block.

A Brick, a Spoon, and a Bicycle Tire

Close your eyes and imagine a building brick. Get a stopwatch, and time yourself for three minutes.

What can you do with a brick? List everything that comes to your mind.

What about a spoon?

And a bicycle tire?

If you said that the brick could be used to build a building, you are right, but not very creative. If you said, for example, that you could use the brick as a doorstop, that is a little more creative because bricks are not typically doorstops; you are beginning to think out of the box. Let us suppose you wrote that the brick could be used as a base for a table lamp. That is even more creative. The further you get away from the obvious, the more creative you become.

Now, go back to your lists. Your answers can be assessed based on four different criteria:

1. How many ideas do you have for each item? How fluent are you?

The more ideas you have, the more fluent you are. *Fluency* is assessed by the total number of ideas on a given subject. It is the capacity of a person to produce as many ideas as possible within the given parameters.

2. How can you categorize your ideas (building, support, preparing food, art, tools, personal use, and so on)? How flexible are you?

The more categories you have, the more flexible you are. *Flexibility* is assessed by the total number of categories used. For example, if we were to analyze ideas about the use of a brick, we might see that it can be used to build a wall, a house, a dam, a chimney, and so on, but all these ideas fall into the same category—building. A limited range of categories points to low flexibility. Flexibility refers to the ability of a person to change or transcend the existing mind-set.

3. How many of your ideas are original (for example, using a brick as a part of a sculpture, a spoon as a coat hanger, and a bicycle tire as a cable holder)? How original are your ideas?

Originality is the ability to come up with unique and unexpected solutions. It is assessed by the total number of unique solutions in comparison with existing, average ideas.

Review the lists you made for the use of the three ordinary objects. Choose the idea that you think is the most original. Start describing in detail how you would execute it. What would the finished product look like?

4. How detailed is your elaboration? How elaborate are you?

The more detailed you are, the more elaborate you are. *Elaboration* is assessed through the number of details provided in elaborating the idea.

While doing these simple activities, you might have noticed how complex the issue of creativity is. Somebody might be extremely flexible but not original, or somebody might not be flexible at all, yet be original. Such paradoxes are common because creative work is all four at the same time: fluent, flexible, original, and elaborate.

Practice Your Fluency, Flexibility, Originality, and Elaboration

Are you a musician? Take a piece by Mozart and jazz it up! Rock it up! Make it punk! Play it in the wrong key!

Are you a painter? Do a landscape/a portrait/a still life ... in three colors.

Are you a writer/poet? Write a short story/poem without a single adjective.

Are you a sculptor? Go to your trash bin and use your garbage to make a sculpture.

Are you a _____? Take anything that is not your usual work material and do with it anything but what it is intended for.

Write down how you felt while doing this.

Did anyone see it? What did they think of your out-of-the-expected work?

Imagine the Following

New York, 1944. A rainy day. A man enters a department store and buys four pairs of identical trousers in four consecutive sizes. Why?

(What you've written here is probably the most obvious and logical response.)

Keep writing ... the not-so-obvious, more and more illogical, science-fiction ...

There is not a single right solution. A fluent, flexible, original idea without elaboration may be completely noncreative, but an averagely fluent and flexible idea with some originality and fully elaborated may be very creative.

Levels of Creative Block

There are three levels of creative block, and you can move between them.

Level 1

I can work, but with difficulty. Creative blocks appear in my work, but I don't recognize them at the beginning. However, they go away more or less easily.

At this level, continuity in your work may be elusive, but something can bring you about.

I am drifting away, hesitating, and having some reservations about my work. When I am stuck in this way, I don't experience a huge attack of negative thoughts or feelings. My sense of being stuck can go away with some consciously planned interventions, humor, or a friend's visit.

Level 2

I can still work, but I feel that it is torture for me. I am becoming influenced by my negative thoughts and feelings and losing my grounding. Sometimes my body cramps with unpleasant sensations, and I feel inhibited, distracted, and lost. My mind is rigid and repressed, and I am falling apart. I have all sorts of reservations, and I am easily discouraged by obstacles.

Sometimes it is the opposite experience.

I get rebellious. I quit everything and go walking or swimming, and I party all night. But then, when I get up, the creative block is staring me in the face. Even so, I can sometimes continue to work.

Level 3

I can't work at all, and I don't see any reason or purpose to do so. If I look back, I feel that I have wasted my time, and my work is meaningless so I'd better change my profession. The internal and external restrictions were unsolvable. I suffered too much and became destructive and self-destructive. I am not the first or the last to change careers. My self-esteem is low, and I think that this kind of creative work is an infantile joke.

What can you do? Learn how to move from level 3 to level 2 and then to level 1.

Moving Between Levels

First of all, determine your level using the descriptions you just read.

Describe it in your own words.

Overcoming a Level 3 Block

A level 3 creative block is the most devastating one. Before you decide that you are at level 3, think again and be absolutely certain that you *are* there. Make sure that you are not exaggerating, not being a drama queen.

Key words of advice for this level are:

- Stop trying.
- Stop torturing yourself.
- Change as many aspects of your life as you can.
- Travel if you can for as long as you can.
- Go for psychotherapy.

You are worth more than the work that is torturing you and pushing you into personal pain. Change will help you find out who you are and learn about your strengths and weakness. Whether your creative block is level 2 or level 3, the general suggestion is to meet other creative people who are going through their own creative blocks and help them overcome them. The rationale is very simple—by helping others, you are helping yourself.

The help you give does not have to be dramatic. Make them a meal, listen all night and be their shoulder to cry on, take them to the zoo or to see a new play. Take a painter to dancing lessons; take a writer to a pottery class; take a musician to painting lessons. Follow the famous Monty Python strategy—“And now for something completely different”—whatever the different may be. Help them understand that they could use creative blocks as a personal development strategy. Help your creative friend understand and accept that a career change is also an option.

Overcoming a Level 2 Block

If you are blocked at level 2:

- Become aware of your negative thoughts.
- Become aware of your negative feelings.
- Become aware of your body sensations.
- Become aware of how you behave and communicate with others.

Based on how you are feeling in the present moment, and being completely honest with yourself, respond to the following questions:

What negative thoughts are you having?

What negative feelings are you having?

What are your physical sensations?

How do you act and communicate with others?

The cure for a level 2 block, at least in the beginning, is other people, but not *all* other people. Make a list of the ten people closest to you.

Based on your experience, divide them into two groups: kind people and toxic people.

Kind	Toxic

Reach out to the kind ones, spend time with them, and ask them to help you. The worst thing you can do at level 2 is trying to find a solution in escapism (drugs, alcohol, and deviant sexual behavior). Instead try to create your own comfort zone, and fill it with your lucky charms, magical objects, and rituals. And protect your comfort zone—not all visitors are welcome. Be patient and stay in your comfort zone for as long as you can, or at least until you start feeling stronger. The safety of your comfort zone will help you rediscover the courage to create and reorient yourself toward your goals. Be aware that it is not an easy process.

Whatever you do, don't do things that will damage you physically and mentally.

Describe your comfort zone.

Who are your comfort people? Name them.

What are your comfort rituals? Name and describe them.

If you respond that you don't have those conditions, you are likely not being honest with yourself. Think of a happier time in your life. What rituals, people, and places did you have then? Try bringing them back in your life, and shift your frame of mind toward its more positive side.

Overcoming a Level 1 Block

If you are lucky, you have your creative block at level 1. To overcome a level 1 block, continue your usual daily routines and interests that you generally don't have problems coping with. Even better, engage in routines and interests that make you feel good about yourself.

Name at least five such routines and interests.

A Creative Block Log ... and Some Suggestions

Being blocked causes worrying, and worrying all the time is a tremendous psychological drain. Reducing worrying reduces blocks, so learn to worry less. That is not to say that you should not worry at all, but do try to be realistic and keep your worries at bay. As you begin to worry less, you will have more time and energy for your creative work, daytime leisure, and the daily tasks you might be putting off.

Are you ready to control your worrying rather than having it control you? The first thing is to record the kind of things that you worry about, what triggers your blocks, and how strong they are.

The model below provides a suggested format for a creative block log. Start with this model, and with time you can develop your own, one that will be meaningful to you.

Rate the strength of the block on the scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = a light block and 10 = a very strong block.

	Time of day	What are you worrying about?	What triggered the block?	From 1 to 10, how strong is the block?	What level is the block?
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					

Do this for at least one week. At the end of the week, do a review. You may be worrying about more things, but a few will emerge, the few that keep repeating. Focusing on those will help you gain insight that can eliminate, or at least decrease, your excessive worrying.

Some Suggestions for Overcoming Phases and Levels

By doing the activities in this section, you have placed your creative block in its proper phase and level, and identified its characteristics. Think of all the things you can do or did to overcome it. Here are some suggestions; feel free to add as many as you can of your own. Brainstorm!

- Do some aerobic physical activity outside your home or working place.
- Find a mentor, or at least someone you can talk with about your creativity.
- Travel; meet different people and see how they have different lives.
- Leave everything for a week. Don't even look at it.
- Step out of your shoes, and look at your creative block from somebody else's viewpoint.
- Take notes on life.
- Get out of your comfort zone.
- Create your comfort zone.
- Learn how to play as an adult.
- Establish a realistic working discipline.
- Force yourself to procrastinate.
- Observe the work of people who went through creative blocks.
- Watch a soap opera.
- Paint the barn.
- Find yourself a genius.
- Ask questions. Be curious about everything.
- Sit down, shut up, go offline.
- Check in to a hotel.
- Shake up your surroundings.
- Redefine the problem, and change the perspective.
- Expand your perception.
- Grab some time for yourself.
- Get enough sleep; sleep is the best creative aphrodisiac!

Add your own ideas here:

Later, you can come back to this list, reflect on, and actually follow some of the suggestions. If you don't try anything new, nothing new will happen. Dare to surprise yourself! Experiment! Play!

And be aware that the idea “*What works for me doesn’t work for you*” is a trap. We are all unique, but not as unique as we would like to think. Only after you have tried one or more of the activities above can you actually say what works for you. And this, too, will change from one creative block to the next.

INTERNAL DRAMA

Creativity requires a confluence of all components; creativity should be highest when an intrinsically motivated person with high domain expertise and high skill in creative thinking works in an environment high in supports for creativity.

—Professor Teresa M. Amabile

Somewhere in the Present ... There Is Peter

Once deep into your creative block, you will encounter your internal drama. This drama is a dialogue developing into a conflict between your different selves: your believing self, your cognitive self, your emotional self, your physical self, your behavioral self, and your communicative self. And this is normal. You will recognize the onset of your internal drama when your different selves start arguing with each other more and louder than usual.

Does This Sound Like You?

Peter is deeply convinced that falling in love will help with his creative block, so he constantly keeps falling in love. At the beginning, he idealizes his partner and feels like it is a dream-come-true relationship. But soon he develops insomnia and eating problems, and starts drinking more than usual. Moreover, he starts avoiding people. Instead of feeling inspired, he becomes obsessed with the relationship and feels that his partner doesn't understand his creativity. Heavily disillusioned, disappointed, and unhappy, he ends the relationship, and after a short while starts a new one, hoping that this one is the right one. And so he goes on and on and on and on ...

Think about Peter and name his conflicts.

What are his different selves telling each other?

Do you have a similar story to tell? Write it down.

What are your selves telling each other?

Think about your internal conflicts. What are your major conflicts?

The Believing Self

Every internal drama is based on the network of your beliefs.

Some people believe creativity is a gift from God. Others think creativity is hereditary, and both groups probably believe there is nothing they can do about it. It is a curse or a gift, and they have to live with it. Some think it is luck that might disappear one day. There are those who believe only crazy people are truly creative, so creative blocks keep them from getting crazy. On the other hand, there are those who believe that if you remove their creative blocks, they will lose their talent. Some people believe that to be creative you need to be poor or rich, happy or deeply suffering. Some take their childhood as the determining factor. Beliefs can be polarized and deeply irrational. Whatever your beliefs are, it is important to become aware of how negative they might be.

List some of your deepest beliefs about your creativity.

Here is a list of beliefs that are known to inspire creative blocks. Put a check mark if you feel that the belief listed is your own as well. The list is far from comprehensive and universal; it gives only the most common beliefs. At the end, think of other specific beliefs that undermine your creativity and add them to the list.

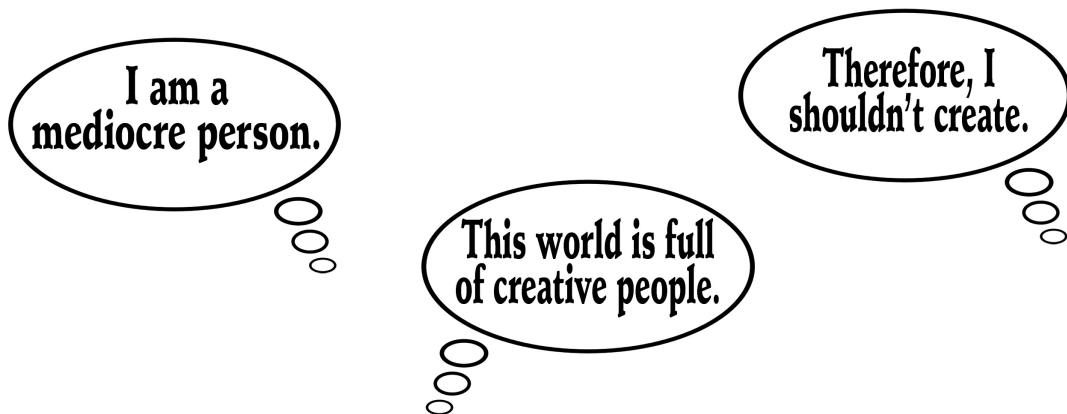
Belief	✓
I don't have the right education to be a creator.	
I am too old to create.	
I am too young to create.	
I live in a society that does not appreciate art.	
I do not have enough money to create.	
I don't have enough time to be creative.	

Belief	✓
My family disapproves of my creative work.	
No one understands my art.	
I will be lonely if I commit myself to creative work.	
I don't want anyone to know about my artistic engagement.	
I will never be able to sell any of my work.	
I cannot offer anything new.	
I don't have the right attitude.	
I cannot be successful in art without being extremely competitive.	
My ideas are too unorthodox.	
I don't have enough skills to be creative.	
I cannot commit fully to creative work.	
Other:	

Confronting Your Negative Beliefs

Irrational and rational beliefs about yourself, others, and the world you live in have the power to direct your actions and influence their outcome. What you believe, what you think or feel, and what you do can sometimes be discordant and cause you problems in realizing your ideas. The more you become aware of this, the more easily you will notice the limiting beliefs that can stop you from creating. The belief system has its internal logic.

Take Steve for example. Steve believes the following:



When Steve connects these three statements, the obvious and logical conclusion he makes is that he has nothing creative to contribute to the world, and this explains his creative blocks.

Maybe this is really true for Steve, but that is not the point. His real problem is that he is not testing these beliefs. They might appear logical and fixed, but in their true nature they are dynamic, sometimes irrational, sometimes outdated, sometimes plainly wrong, and ever changing.

As you grow, your belief system grows with you. What you believe creates your reality and heavily influences your creativity and thus your creative blocks. Your negative beliefs are especially relevant for understanding your creative blocks, so let's dig out those beliefs!

What are your negative beliefs about your creativity?

Although these statements may make some sort of sense, they have a harmful effect on your creative process. Your belief system influences your thinking, feeling, motivation, and actions. Other people react to your actions that result from the faulty belief system, and in this way your belief system is reinforced even further so that it becomes a trap for your creativity. What you believe creates your reality and heavily influences your creativity.

My Negative Beliefs: Step 1

How do your negative beliefs influence your creativity?

Negative belief	Influence on creativity

Does This Sound Like You?

Lisa started to work on an idea for a novel that had been occupying her for quite a long time. At the beginning, she was enthusiastic and excited about her work. She talked a lot about it to others and made them curious about her book. After the final phase of preparation and initial drafts and concepts, Lisa started to think about the publishing of her book. She realized she didn't have the money and connections, which in her opinion were crucial for finding a good publisher. People she talked to regarding her doubts about publishing expressed similar opinions. She began thinking about the big and demanding work in front of her, work that will probably be in vain as she certainly wouldn't be able to find a way to draw public attention to her book. She started to wonder if she could afford to focus on the book for such a long time, neglecting other things in her life, without being certain that the work would pay off eventually. She even thought about simplifying her initial idea by bringing it down to something less demanding, but that made her feel bad about herself. At the end, after she had convinced herself that the time was just not right to publish a book, Lisa gave up on her novel, leaving it for a better future time.

Of course, Lisa's story is nothing new, but it does show rather straightforwardly how beliefs shape your reality. What you believe will shape your thoughts, fantasies, feelings, and behavior. It will also initiate processes in interactions with others that will further reinforce the belief. In this way you become more and more stuck and blocked by your own beliefs.

In your opinion, what beliefs caused Lisa's creative block?

In what way did Lisa enforce the belief that caused her creative block?

My Negative Beliefs: Step 2

From step 1, select one belief that in your opinion is the main culprit causing your creative block, and write down in more detail how it makes you blocked.

In what way do you reinforce this belief, keeping it alive and strong so that it prevents you from creating?

1, 2, 3 Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3

By becoming aware of and by testing your limiting beliefs, you may prevent this cycle that keeps you blocked. You should practice recognizing your negative beliefs about yourself, others, or the world in general, as they can be a stumbling block to your creativity. And you should learn how to test your beliefs. You can do it internally and externally.

Internally

Internal testing uses your other selves (sensory, emotional, motivational, behavioral, and communicative selves) to test a belief. Remember Steve? When he says, “I am a mediocre person,” his sensory and emotional selves react; they are in conflict with that belief. His heart starts beating faster, he gets goose bumps, his hands start shaking, and he feels like crying.

To cut a long story short, this conflict between what you say you believe and what your other selves do as a reaction to that belief point to the conclusion that the belief is very likely not true.

Choose one of your negative beliefs. Keep repeating it to yourself for a few minutes. While doing this, try to focus your attention on your body, your emotions, and the thoughts that are trying to get a voice.

Now finish the sentence:

As I kept repeating “ _____,” my body
_____, and I sort of felt
_____. And there was this voice in my head that
said _____, but it couldn’t get through loud enough.

... And Externally

External testing is much simpler because it is done with other people. You need to find somebody who is willing to take the part of a demolisher of your internal logic. Find a person with clear and well-intentioned critical thinking and who knows logic. Someone who knows nothing about your field of creativity or someone who does, your mentor. By talking with you, they can try to find logic in what you are saying, they can ask questions you might not have answers to, and they can look for fallacies. Their questions will likely show the flaws in your thinking. Don’t be stubborn and be brutally honest.

Remember Lisa?

Be Lisa’s demolisher of her destructive internal logic.

What questions could you ask Lisa to help her fight against the belief(s) that prevented her from creating? Write down what you would do if you had shared her belief.

Your Turn Now

Now look at the belief(s) you have listed as the main cause of your creative blocks. Write down ideas on how you can make it (or them) weaker instead of stronger. Try to be constructive and objective.

Keeping a Beliefs Diary

Use the diary below to record your limiting beliefs and the way you handle them, just like you did in Lisa's case and with the belief you already singled out for testing. Mark the intensity of the belief on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = not that strong and 10 = very strong, and write down how it stops you from creating. Note whether you have unintentionally and unknowingly nurtured this belief, making it stronger, and what you can do to overcome it. Finally, test the belief, and rate your success by marking its intensity after the process of deconstruction.

Belief	On a scale of 1 to 10, how intense is this belief?	How does this belief stop you from being creative? <i>(Be very specific.)</i>	Have you unintentionally made this belief stronger? (yes/no)	How can you make it weaker/overcome it? <i>Test it.</i>	On a scale of 1 to 10, how intense is this belief after testing?

Negative Belief Positions

According to psychotherapist Franklin Ernst's OK Corral concept, we form our basic beliefs starting from four basic positions.

1. "I am a creative person, and other people are creative too."

This position represents people's awareness of their own qualities, as well as qualities of other people. It is the position of self-respect, self-esteem, and normal self-love. A person in this position is inventive and creative, spontaneous and capable of establishing intimate relationships, and active in solving problems. It is a position of personal growth. Bear in mind that this position is not just honey and roses. It also includes sweat and tears, pain and suffering but from a positive perspective. It allows you to be human, to be imperfect. It is a (+ +) position.

2. "I am not a creative person and not worthy, but you are a creative person and worthy."

People in this position diminish their own value or exaggerate the value of others. This position harbors feelings of unworthiness, shame, anxiety, and depression, even self-hatred. Self-esteem is very low, and it can end in depression if not confronted or worked on. It is a position of helplessness. (- +)

3. "I am a creative person and therefore worthy, while you are not a creative person and you are not worthy."

In this position, people enlarge their self-esteem sometimes all the way to grandiosity. Frequent emotions are self-infatuation and self-admiration, while common emotions toward others are contempt, hatred, envy, and irritation. If not confronted, this position might end up in narcissism, paranoid behavior, and psychopathy. It is a "me, myself and I" position. (+ -)

4. "I am not a creative person, and you are not a creative person. Creativity is an illusion; nobody is creative. I am not worthy; you are not worthy."

This position involves people devaluing both themselves and others. Such people show feelings of senselessness, helplessness, hopelessness, and nihilism. This is a position of hopeless despair. (- -)

My Positions

Imagine yourself and five other people:

- your boss
- somebody you admire
- somebody you despise
- somebody famous whose work you are not familiar with
- somebody who is a "brand" (Picasso, Mozart, John Lennon, Angelina Jolie ...)

Compare yourself with these people. Using + for “creative and worthy” and – for “not creative and not worthy,” finish the statements below:

I am _____ and my boss is _____.

I am _____ and the person I admire is _____.

I am _____ and the person I despise is _____.

I am _____ and the famous person whose work I don’t know is _____.

I am _____ and the brand person is _____.

Now count your positions.

+ + _____ - + _____ + - _____ - - _____

What is your dominant position?

Be aware of your position when you are deep in your creative block.

Your Positions Diary

Use this diary to record your position in a creative block for at least seven days.

Day	Position	Describe the internal critic who puts you in that position	Describe the thought process and name the context
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

If you keep this diary for more than two weeks, patterns will emerge. Positions might change; your personal and your professional life basic positions might be different. They might change during your growing and transitioning process. They might change in stress. They can still be useful tools in working through your creative blocks.

Think About Your Positions

How do you see your idealized position, a position you believe creative people work from?

If your idealized position is not ++, explain how having a ++ position might improve your work.

Moving to an Optimal Position

What steps could you take to move to an optimal position?

Maintaining Focus

Concentration or maintaining focus is a very useful tool for every person, especially for artists. Focusing enables us to quickly grasp information we want or need from the innumerable impressions and stimuli that invade our senses and minds every second. If you learn to focus, you will also learn to control your inner processes, as you will be able to hold your attention on a specific thought, not allowing bad thoughts or emotions to take control over you.

Practice Focusing

Focusing is a skill that needs practice and patience. The mind is in a constant quest for new impressions, and it can wander at first. You may find yourself bored, dull, sleepy, or even annoyed. Arm yourself with patience, and start with this easy exercise of focusing on candlelight. After a few days of practice with the candle, you can proceed to more complex tasks.

1. Light a candle, and sit comfortably on the floor or at a table at a distance of three feet from the candle. Close your eyes for a moment, relax, and tell yourself mentally that you are about to maintain your focus on the light of the candle for three minutes.

Open your eyes and look at the flame. Just watch it. Observe it. Your mind will start to wander, thinking about many other things, important and unimportant. Do not involve yourself in these thoughts no matter how interesting they may be. If you notice that you are thinking about something else, just bring your attention back to the flame.

Do this every day for a week by extending the period of practice for a minute every day. Use the chart below to make notes about your progress.

2. After a week, start practicing focus outside. Go to a park, a wooded area, or some other outdoor spot, and pick an object to focus on for a maximum of ten minutes.
3. Finally, try to focus on one object somewhere in a crowd—a train station, a concert or show during intermission—any place where it won’t feel awkward. Practice this for ten minutes.

Make a copy of the focus diary that follows, and write down the results of all three practices. For example, on Monday you might practice with a candle, on Tuesday in a store, on Wednesday with the candle again, on Thursday in a park, and so on.

	Duration of the exercise	What did you focus on and where?	On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not difficult at all and 10 = very difficult), how difficult was it to maintain focus.	Write down any particular thoughts or emotions that constantly or repeatedly interrupted your focus.
Monday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Tuesday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Wednesday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Thursday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Friday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Saturday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
Sunday			1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	

What Drives Human Behavior?

There are a multitude of motives that drive human behavior—biological, social, personal, and spiritual, among others. Some of them are conscious, and some are not. Some unconscious internal drivers that make us feel and behave in certain ways are inconsistent with attaining creative results. Some motivation comes from the inside (intrinsic motivation) and some from the outside (extrinsic motivation). According to psychologist Taibi Kahler, the following drivers are the most destructive, sabotaging creativity and maintaining creative blocks:

To be perfect—urges people not to be human but to become gods, or machines that never go into a glitch. “Be perfect” people are never pleased with anything and deeply believe that they will not resolve their creative blocks until they become perfect. As perfection is impossible, at a certain point they experience real or imaginative failure. They get stuck, are sometimes depressed, and feel guilty and inferior. They have to learn that mistakes are an integral part of any learning process, and that everybody makes bad choices sometimes. They have to learn to work on their projects as they are, not wait until they become perfect.

To be strong—urges people to behave as isolated machines or superhumans, without weaknesses. “Be strong” people deeply believe that they will keep ending up in creative blocks unless they become strong. However, this superhuman strength never happens. In the worst possible case, they never stop trying. The first time they experience “weakness,” such as being tired or coming down with a cold, will leave them stuck and desperate. They have to learn to accept their vulnerabilities, to stay with people even if they feel weak, and to ask for help. Some elements of a creative block are best broken in teams.

To please others—urges people not to care not about themselves but about others’ ideas, goals, and needs, thus making them completely neglect their own projects and needs. These people deeply believe that they will resolve their creative blocks only after satisfying other peoples’ needs. Such a motivation is irrational and “pleasers” will inevitably reach a point of misunderstanding unless they face their inability to satisfy others. They will get stuck and be angry and depressed, feeling unloved. They need to learn how to handle rejection, because it is impossible to be fully accepted all the time.

To try hard—urges people to insist on solutions that don’t work. “Try hards” deeply believe that persistence is the key to success, and they will keep trying over and over, never actually overcoming their creative blocks. At a point of losing hope, they start feeling like failures, believing they will be failures all their lives. “Try hards” need to learn how to be flexible, how to give up and let go of futile attempts. They need to learn how to accept success.

To hurry up—urges people to ignore normal, natural biological and social rhythms. They believe that they have to think, feel, and act at full-speed-ahead mode. These people believe that they will either never get there on time or will miss their moment by only a minute. Being constantly

in this mode, they eventually do get late or behind, at which point they become desperate, don't see the meaning in their project, and give up. The "Hurry ups" have to learn how to be in touch with their own physiological rhythms, to empathize with other people's rhythms and, most of all, to find harmony. They also need to learn how to say *we* in a creative project rather than just *I*, so that others can help to slow them down.

Does This Sound Like You?

Jane was on her third year as a liberal arts student. She wasn't the best student, but she was trying hard to become perfect, never to make a mistake, to try harder and harder every day, to please her supervisors and professors. Sometimes she would succeed. Sometimes she would not. The more she tried, the more she was in her creative block, finding herself unable to finish a paper or a project, anxious and depressed each time she made a mistake, convinced that she would never please the authority figures whose approval she craved. She would feel unappreciated by them, unloved and rejected. Eventually, she would start thinking about quitting.

The combination of Jane's drivers has its internal logic. The harder she tried, she believed, the more she would become perfect and please others. It seemed to her all her professors and supervisors saw were her failures, as these were always pointed out to her. She could not remember any praise for her work.

What do you think Jane's drivers are?

(Answers: please others, be perfect, try hard)

What Are Your Drivers?

Rate the severity of your sabotaging motivation on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = I don't have this driver and 10 = This is my main driver.

Be perfect

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Be strong

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please others

1__2__3__4__5__6__7__8__9__10

Try hard

1__2__3__4__5__6__7__8__9__10

Hurry up

1__2__3__4__5__6__7__8__9__10

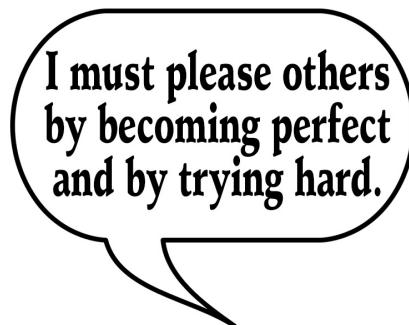
Write down the three strongest:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

To find the internal logic of your drivers, start by looking back at Jane's drivers:

Please others Be perfect Try hard

And this is what Jane keeps telling herself:



Look back at your three strongest drivers. Write a sentence connecting them.

Keeping a Driver Diary

You can identify your drivers easily if you make a diary with structured activities for a part of your day. For example, on Monday, your diary might look like this:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 9–10 a.m. | Take shower and eat my breakfast |
| 10–noon | Do some research for my article till noon |
| Noon–3 p.m. | Take a break; have lunch and go for a walk |
| 3–6 p.m. | Resume work on my article |
| 6 p.m. on | Free time |

During those times, notice which driver is motivating you. Be open to surprises, like having no creative ideas during working hours, with some popping out during your shower or walk.

Date and time	Activity	Driver

Date and time	Activity	Driver

Nobody is perfect, and we all have drivers. It is very important to discover them and for a while just follow them. You might have different thought and feeling processes but becoming aware of your most powerful drivers is crucial.

Putting Yourself in the Driver's Seat

If you saw yourself reflected in Jane's story, do not despair. We all have such drivers. The best thing about drivers is that you were not born with them. In fact, you have learned them, which means they can be unlearned. Once you become aware of your drivers, it is important to know that you have choices. It is you who are in control; you are the one who gets to decide what to do.

Do As You Are Told

You can obey the driver and adapt to it, or be passive, letting the driver continue and watching the consequences. Let's say your driver is "Be strong," urging you to be stronger, to endure and be tough in all your selves. And what do you do? You strain your physical self, believing that this is the only way to behave during a creative block. You feel proud of what you are doing, and you don't let anybody distract you from your path. You work more and more, thinking you will become a rock. After all, to paraphrase the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "What doesn't break you will make you stronger."

You can do something drastic. Put yourself in your safe place. Tell yourself you are trying to be perfect. Change your chair. This will not be the only solution, but learn to stop.

Then stop.

Question the Driver

You can minimize the strength of that motivation. To achieve this, do the opposite of what the driver says. When you become aware that the driver "Be strong" is pushing and pulling you, relax your body, and save some energy. Start questioning yourself and the driver. Is being strong really the only way to go through a creative block? Consider other feelings. Who says you have to work and live this way? Are you angry? What do other people do in a situation similar to yours? Are there other drivers? Start thinking, and let other people distract you. What happens if you stop being a rock?

Rebel Against the Driver

You can refuse to follow the driver. Say "No!" to the impulses of "Be strong," to being a rock, and refuse to push yourself. Remember your rebellious days. Let this aspect of your personality give you some suggestions. Which of those rebellions would be appropriate now? Rebel safely and then stop. Now you have a polarity in your mind: obeying and rebelling. Is there something else between the two opposites?

Run Away from the Driver

You can let go, at least for a while, and do something else. Detach, disengage, and isolate yourself from the creative block and the driver creating the block. Grab some time for yourself and do something completely different. Sleep enough and read as much as you can. Watch a stupid soap opera. Realize that all great creators went through big struggles. So will you! Have faith in yourself.

Be an Adult About It

You can parent yourself with positive messages. Since birth, you have undoubtedly been bombarded with different messages from different sides. Some of those messages got internalized and became a big part of you. Some of those messages are old and need to be updated. Some are helpful, some toxic. To parent yourself, use the five mirror exercises that follow.

For example, if your blocking driver is “Please others,” look in the corresponding mirror and see what is behind it. After a week of using the mirrors every day, choose the three that are most effective for you and don’t hesitate to use them when needed.



PLEASE ME

You can never please everybody.

Learn to please yourself.

Some people will love you for who you are.

It's OK to take care of yourself as well as others.

It's OK to respect yourself even if you are not pleasing people.

Rely on your own judgment and be assertive.

Learn to handle rejection.

You are not in control of people rejecting you.



BE PERFECT

You are good enough as you are.

Everybody makes mistakes and fails sometimes; so can you.

It's OK to be yourself; you are different and that is great.

Learn that there's a difference between relevant and irrelevant.

It takes courage to acknowledge a mistake.

Instead of *perfect*, use the words *excellent* and *high quality*.

Praise yourself, especially for less than perfect.

Be very specific when you criticize and praise yourself.

Learn to be pleased with your achievements.

BE STRONG

Only strong people can allow themselves weakness.

People have both weaknesses and strengths.

It's OK to be weak sometimes and ask for help.

Weakness does not mean that people are inferior.

Have empathy with people who show their weaknesses.

It's OK to be angry, but control that anger
when you are frustrated.

Be in touch with yourself, and express
your needs and wishes.

Learn to accept your vulnerabilities and
to stay with people.

Don't blame yourself for sometimes being
tired, lazy, or not motivated.



TRY HARD

Sometimes when you are in a creative block,
simply do it—improvise.

It's OK to be successful.

Learn to stop doing things that don't work.

Find people who have succeeded, and learn from them
how to be successful.

Understand that some problem-solving strategies don't work.
It's OK to finish what you have started.

People lose some and win some, and so can you.

Learn to let things go.

HURRY UP

Take your time.
Ground yourself; live here and now.
Learn to be in touch with your own rhythm.
Learn to notice natural and social rhythms.
Learn to sit quietly and appreciate it.
Learn to have a break when it is appropriate.
Take care to think before you act.
Learn to use the word *we* as often as *I*.
Listen to the music with the rhythm you like.

Select the driver which you feel is most blocking, and write it here: _____

Which of the options have you chosen in the past?

Which option have you never used?

Which option would you use now?

An Emotional Inventory

Emotions are internal experiences that enable us to understand, act accordingly, and if possible change the internal and external world. An emotion is an action or reaction to inner or outer events perceived as significant. Emotionality is a complex part of humans' total experience, and it is closely intertwined with values, perception, cognition, and behavior.

Take time to read this list of thirty-five common emotions. It is important to distinguish between different emotions and not confuse them.

1. **SATISFACTION** is a pleasant emotion that occurs when we fulfill some important wish and confirm an important life premise. We feel satisfaction when connected with other beings or nature and when our lives grow into an integrated, meaningful human existence.
2. **CALMNESS** is an emotion related to the fulfilling of our needs. It usually occurs after some vital need has been resolved, and it expresses a kind of a safety. It comprises undefined certainty that we have found some relatively peaceful place in the world and among other people.
3. **SAFETY** is an emotion that appears as a result of our certainty that we know how events in our lives will unroll. We can be sure of ourselves (self-confidence) or sure of somebody else (trust).
4. **TRUST** occurs when we estimate that another person is well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy. We should also have trust toward ourselves. We expand our experiences of trust from our childhood to other chosen human beings and life in general.
5. **GRATITUDE** is an emotion that appears in relation to people who take care of our basic needs and desires, and who accept us the way we are. Gratitude offers the possibility of accepting diversity without feelings of threat. It gives us the right to be different and permission to freely express our own uniqueness. Some psychotherapists see gratitude, toward life, parents, and people around us as the final point of psychotherapy.
6. **PRIDE** occurs when we estimate that our actions, characteristics, or complete personalities have achieved recognition from another important person or social group. Pride can also be directed toward ourselves as the result of an inner accomplishment.
7. **HOPE** is the anticipation of a pleasant feeling that arises when we believe that certain wishes will be fulfilled in the foreseeable future and that life goals will be accomplished. The emotion of hope can be related to realistic expectations when we are taking action to achieve our goals, or it can be unrealistic if we are passive.

8. **LONGING** is an emotion related to some desire or some need we expect to fulfill. We long to see things happening the way we imagine. Longing is an active mental desire, passionate and specific. If it lasts too long, it can become desperation or a game in which we are aware that we are running away from reality.
9. **COMPASSION** is an emotion that appears when we observe, understand, and emotionally participate in others' experiences. It involves being positive and helping in accordance with our objective possibilities.
10. **RESPECT** is an emotion that we have toward others or toward ideas that we consider as possessing high value. While love implies accepting others in their totality, respect demands certain evaluation of a specific characteristic. We can respect someone's capability to do great work without valuing them as total people.
11. **ADMIRATION** is stronger and more passionate than respect. We can admire nature, sunset, and exotic animals, with hardly a rational explanation for the emotion. Mature admiration is capable of perceiving uniqueness and participating in the phenomenon of beauty without feeling the urge to exploit it in any way.
12. **Joy** is related to fulfillment of our desires or hopes, or to fulfillment of the desires and hopes of our dear ones. While satisfaction is an emotion we feel when our desires are fulfilled, joy implies continuance of pleasant events and anticipation of pleasure in the near future. Joy connects people. It can also express purity in the game of life and participation in others' lives.
13. **HAPPINESS** is more intense and more complex than joy. It underlines the importance of desire fulfillment as well as the place of that desire on our priority lists. It is experienced when we achieve goals that are very important to us personally. It confirms that we have shaped our identities and found closeness with ourselves and with others.
14. **LOVE** is an extremely complex emotion that has many aspects and forms of expression, but most directly it is related to another person. Depending on time and culture, we speak about different love ethics, aesthetics, and rituals of courtship, and giving and receiving love. Love can be felt toward fellow human beings (agape), toward ourselves (healthy narcissism), and toward humanity (philanthropy). We can feel merciful love (*caritas*), friendly love, infatuation, platonic love, and sexual love. Love enables development of other positive feelings—trust, joy, respect, admiration—and makes us more tolerant to occasional frustrations.
15. **Ecstasy** is the highest form of positive human experience that exceeds biological, social, and psychological levels of enjoyment and reaches the spiritual domain of unity with everything existing. Mature ecstasy demands the existence of flexible identity borders in a free, integrated individual with a defined lifestyle.

16. **DISCONTENT** is an emotion that occurs when we don't fulfill some of our important needs and desires, or fail to affirm vital premises of life. The emotion of discontent also occurs when we stagnate in life.
17. **STAGE FRIGHT** is a form of fear that appears in relation to some future situation that we perceive as too demanding. It can be related to perfectionistic expectations of ego (ideal) when it is inhibitory, but it can also be very stimulating.
18. **ANXIETY** is a form of irrational and undefined fear or worry that appears when we perceive that our complete life situations exceed our abilities. The emotion of anxiety is an experience of isolation, abandonment, and helplessness in a potentially dangerous world.
19. **WORRY** is a form of anxiety that occurs when we do not have control over something that might happen and might endanger us. The function of this emotion is to mobilize us and prepare us to act in order to prevent possible unfavorable circumstances.
20. **BOREDOM** is a reaction to the frustration we experience when we perceive some situation as inadequate for fulfilling our needs and desires. While in apathy we destroy our desires, in boredom we only postpone them.
21. **SUSPICION** is an emotion we have when we believe that the other person is unreliable, is lying, or has hidden or vicious intentions. Suspicion should alert us that things might not be completely favorable for us even though the other person claims differently. Suspicion can also be feedback based on our previous experiences.
22. **JEALOUSY** that occurs when others try to steal our partners or jeopardize our relationships in some other way.
23. **GUILT** is an unpleasant emotion we have when we estimate that we have done something wrong, causing hurt to somebody and deviating from our moral norms. The experience of a "moral mistake" enables us to realize where we went wrong so that we can repent and correct ourselves.
24. **SHAME** is a form of fear that occurs when we believe that we have created a negative image of ourselves in front of the people who are important to us. The function of shame is to help the processes of socialization and to protect intimacy.
25. **OBSTINACY** is an emotion we have if we feel that others have unjustified and overly large demands or a wrong attitude toward us. It is a form of hidden fighting against underestimation, bullying, and mocking.

26. **CONTEMPT** occurs when we estimate that someone has depreciated a value we strongly believe in. It differs from hatred because, when feeling contempt, we don't think of others as evil nor do we want to destroy them; we simply judge them as unworthy of our attention.
27. **ENVY** is an emotion we have when we judge that someone possesses something more valuable or is worthier than we are. Sometimes it can point to some hidden, suppressed, or neglected desire of ours.
28. **DISAPPOINTMENT** is a feeling we have when someone does not behave in accordance with our expectations. These expectations can be realistic, based on mutual giving or exchange, or unrealistic when we expect others to fulfill our needs and desires.
29. **DISGUST** appears when we reject something or someone toward whom we feel aversion, and we desire to withdraw from them, but we are not powerful or brave enough to oppose them.
30. **FEAR** is an unpleasant emotion that we experience in situations of danger when we expect to be attacked. In a biological sense, it helps us survive and protect ourselves as it is the expression of desire to live and to be safe.
31. **REJECTION** occurs when we are confronted with disapproval or a lack of acceptance or understanding from those we consider to be important. When it affects our whole personality, it is extremely hard to deal with it.
32. **FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT** appear when someone physically leaves or deserts us, and we lose hope they will come back. Abandoned people fear that they will never be able to accomplish satisfying relationships.
33. **ANGER** appears in situations when we have an impression that we are attacked and threatened and when confronted with injustice. Anger implies not being powerful enough to correct that which angers us. When it appears as an affect, it is called fury, and as a mood, it is known as bitterness. Anger has many functions, from protecting and defending identity to giving us the feeling of personal importance and power.
34. **SORROW** occurs when we lose something important and valuable. Its function is to reorganize the personality through the process of grieving—shock, the unrealistic struggle to regain what has been lost, fear, anger, acceptance, the reexamination of our will to search for something new, affirmation of our ability to move on and create and find anew.
35. **DESPERATION** appears in tragic circumstances that exceed our capability of handling. When in desperation, a person loses all desires and hopes and gives up on living. It represents the annihilation of a person's basic life premises.

36. Describe any other emotions not mentioned above that you consider important.

Think about your current or past creative block. What emotions did you experience during the block? List them here.

Your Emotional Toolbox

Contrary to popular belief, emotions can be controlled, although not before you become fully aware of them. Once you bring your emotions to awareness, there are a few tools you can use to deal with them.

- Awareness—Become aware of where the emotion is being held in the body.
- Observing and naming—Give your emotion color, shape, size, and texture.
- Control—Your thoughts are crucial to maintaining control. The road connecting your emotions and your actions is a long one. You can just feel an emotion without traveling the road to action. You can choose how, when, and to whom you will express it.
- Curiosity—Ask yourself what the feeling is trying to tell you. There is no right answer; it can be anything.
- Grounding—Breathe into the emotion. Let yourself feel it deeply, as it is, without pushing it away or acting on it.

Choose one of the emotions you listed as experiencing during your creative block. Write it down here: _____.

Where is the emotion in your body?

What color, shape, size, and texture is the emotion?

If this emotion were a person, what would it say to you?

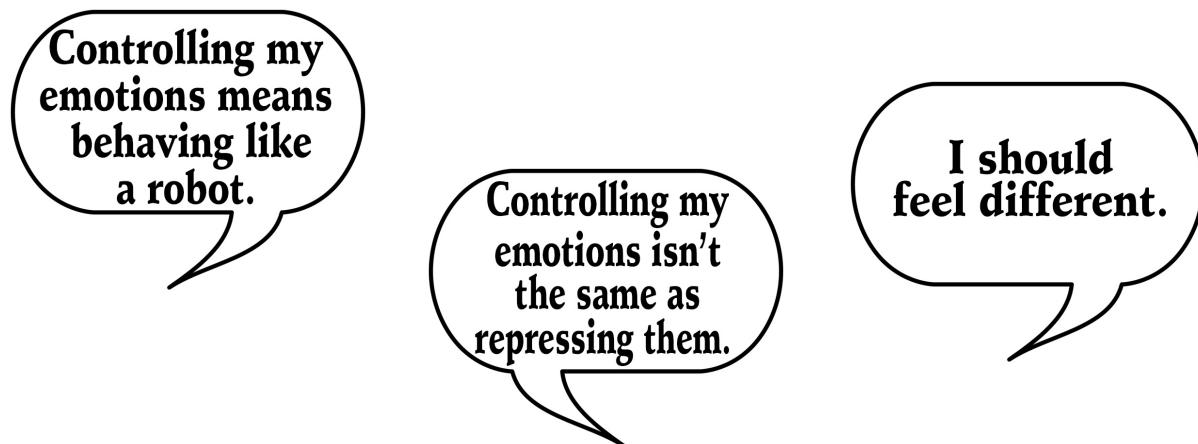
Close your eyes and breathe into your emotion, and allow it to integrate with the rest of your body. Connect it with your thinking process.

Developing Emotional Awareness

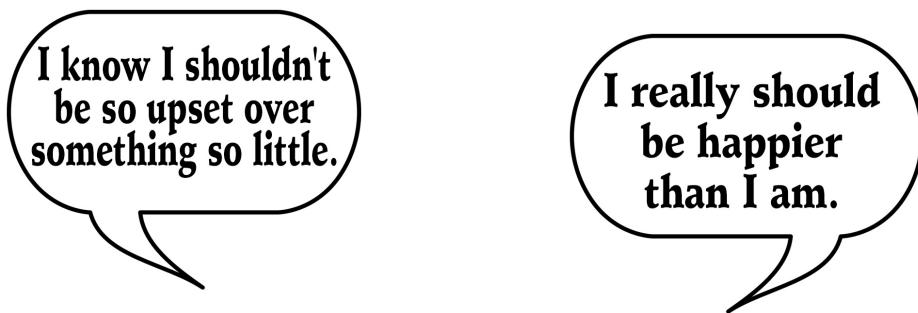
Be aware of what you feel, and keep in mind that there are a lot of myths about emotions.



In an emotional moment, you might think that you don't have control over your emotions. But you don't have to be passive; you can learn how, when, and to whom to express your emotions. If you want to change the way you feel, change the way you think and the way you behave.



Somehow you believe that your feelings are wrong. Nobody can tell you how you should feel; your emotions are your internal, authentic responses in life.

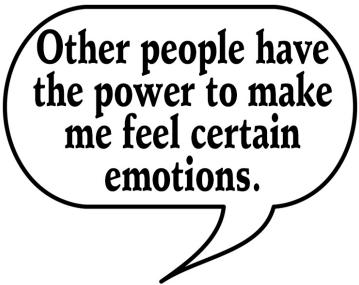


Rather than wasting energy beating yourself up over how you feel, accept that you feel a particular emotion at a particular moment, and remember that you have choices in how you react to it.



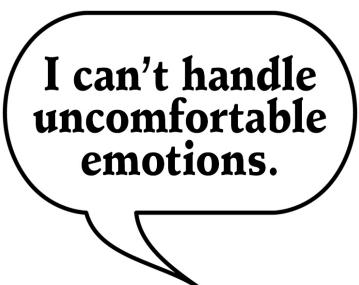
**Venting will
help me
feel better.**

Venting about your bad day or your mean boss won't make you feel better. In fact, research shows the opposite is true: talking about all the things that contribute to your emotional state adds fuel to the fire. So don't call your friends to complain, and stop telling others to get their feelings out by punching pillows. Acknowledge your emotions, label your feelings, and move on if you want to feel better.



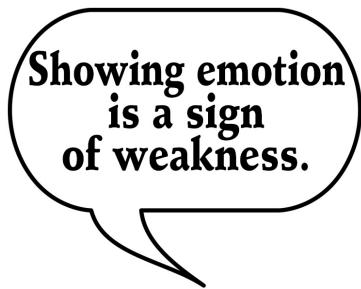
**Other people have
the power to make
me feel certain
emotions.**

Your boss can't make you mad, and your neighbor can't make you feel insecure. No one can make you feel anything. Clearly, others can influence your feelings. But they can't control them. It's up to you to be in charge of the way you think, feel, and behave.



**I can't handle
uncomfortable
emotions.**

Doubting your ability to deal with uncomfortable emotions, like anxiety or sadness, can lead to avoidance. And the more you avoid discomfort, the less confidence you'll have in your ability to deal with hardship. Although some emotions are uncomfortable, they're tolerable. Allowing yourself to experience those emotions can be part of healing, and they can be the key to creating the best life for yourself. So give a speech even though you're nervous, speak up when you're afraid, and say good-bye to someone even when you feel sad.



While it is healthy to be able to behave professionally even when you're not feeling at the top of your game, letting your guard down isn't a sign of weakness. In fact, being aware of your emotions and making a conscious decision to share those emotions with others—when doing so is socially appropriate—can be a sign of strength. Expressing emotion also signifies a certain level of trust in a relationship. Telling someone you feel angry or sad shows that you are willing to be vulnerable.

You're capable of experiencing a wide range of emotions, but you don't have to be controlled by them. Emotion regulation is a skill that can help you build mental strength. The more you learn about how to cope with your feelings in a healthy way, the better equipped you'll be to heal from emotional pain, turn your feelings into productive action, and make the best choices for yourself.

Your Emotional Myths

Everyone has emotional myths. Some of those we share, like the ones we have just deconstructed. And some are our own personal property.

What are your own emotional myths? Name them.

Read through your myths, and ask yourself how plausible they are. If you keep thinking logically and rationally about your emotional myths, you will start seeing them in a new light, as funny little stories you used to believe in.

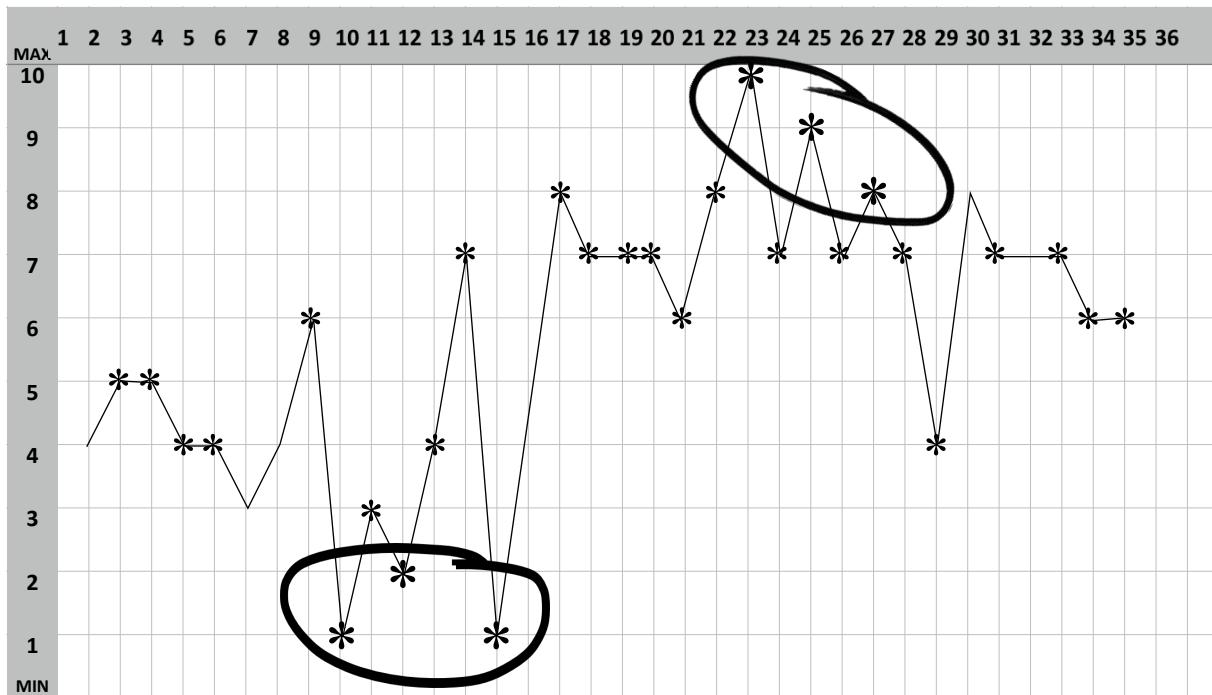
Keeping an Emotional Diary

For the next week, keep track of the emotions that go with your creative blocks, and what you have done about them.

Week of _____	Creative block emotion you feel	What you have done about it
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

Creating an Emotional Self-Portrait

We asked Emma to rate her emotions during a creative block, and this is what she did:



The numbers along the top axis relate to the numbers assigned to different emotions in the inventory on page 49. While in her creative block, Emma's strongest emotions are jealousy, contempt, and envy.

Commenting on her profile, Emma says she feels extreme jealousy about other people's positions in life. Her boyfriend is an artist too, and she feels that other people in his life will take him away from her or jeopardize their relationship in some way. She feels she is a victim and that other people have it "easy." As her feelings overwhelm her, her throat becomes dry, and she can hardly speak. She cannot watch or attend any ceremony where awards are given, so she avoids them. Nor does she watch sports. She wants to be left alone, and she feels unable to work in that state. She feels that life is not just to her and has deep contempt for people who have made it in her field, believing that they are selling themselves and devaluing the arts.

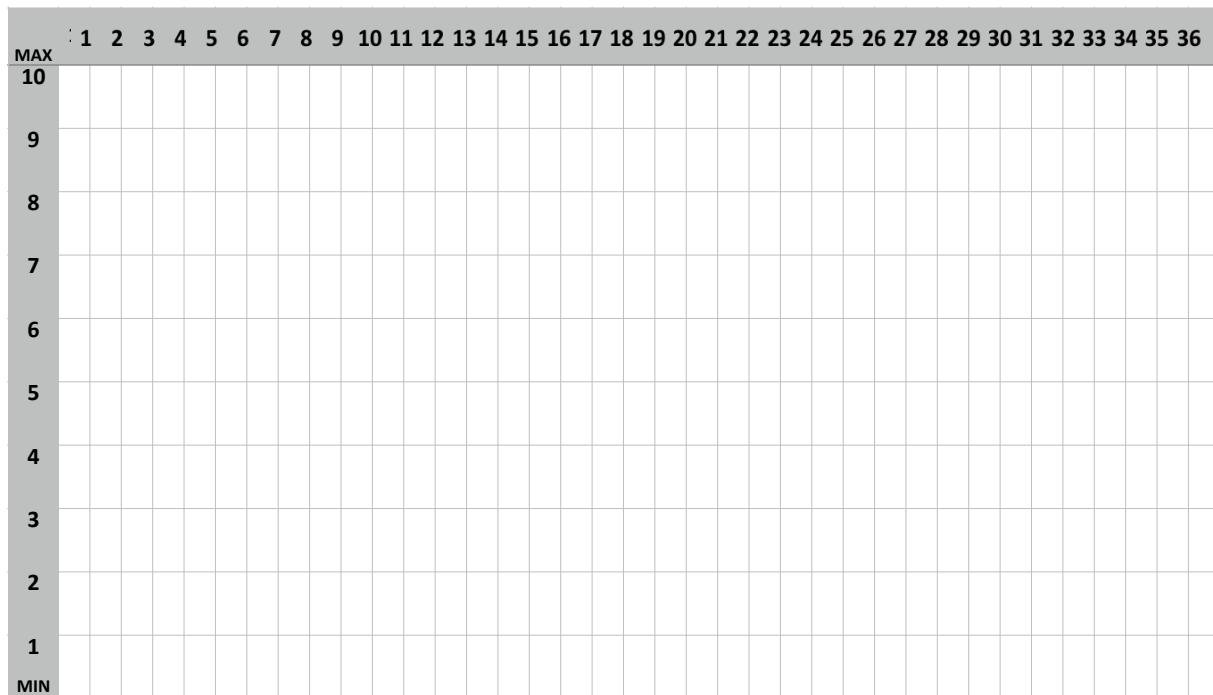
Her weakest emotions are respect, joy, and ecstasy. She reports that only a few times in her life has she felt authentic respect toward herself or someone else. She felt good about it, as she felt she was sharing some important ideas with other people. The same goes for joy. On very rare occasions, she felt joy and shared it with a close person, feeling full of hope and a sense of belonging to this world. She remembers feeling ecstasy only once, and that was at a spiritual retreat.

Putting all this together, we can see what Emma needs to do:

- Become aware of emotions in her creative block.
- Learn to give them a name.
- Learn to understand how her body behaves under those emotions.
- Learn how to control her creative-block emotions, and emotions in general.
- Learn how to minimize those that inhibit her.
- Learn to maximize the ones that make her feel inspired.
- Remember what she has learned and plan actions based on that learning.

To make your own emotional self-portrait, you need the list of 36 emotions. Read through the list again and try to relate the emotions to your current or past creative block. What emotions do (or did) you have during the creative block? How strong are (or were) they?

Use the chart provided and mark the intensity of each of the thirty-six emotions with an X in the cell with its number on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = *I don't feel this emotion while experiencing creative block* and 10 = *This is my strongest emotion while in creative block*. Connect the Xs to make your emotional profile. Circle in red the three highest points, and the three lowest points on your profile.



According to my emotional profile:

My strongest emotions in a creative block are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

My weakest emotions in a creative block are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

I need to learn

And in the next creative block, I will

Your Internal Critic vs. Your Creative Inner Child

Conflicts are a normal part of the dynamics of life. They are clashes, more or less intense and deep, between different value systems, thinking processes, motivational desires, emotions, and behaviors. Conflicts occur within a group, between individuals, and within a person. They vary in nature, intensity, circumstances, motives, length, and other factors and are everything but rare.

Conflicts within a person, or internal conflicts, happen practically all the time and to everyone. This is because personality is not a monolithic or linear structure, but rather a dynamic and dialectic one. As mentioned before, there is our physical self, our believing self, our thinking self, our motivational self, our feeling self, our behaving self, and our communicative self. All our selves are not always in harmony. Sometimes they are opposed to each other and act in a way that can produce conflicts.

Does This Sound Like You?

Daniel started his creative project, and at some point while working on the project, he realized he was facing a creative block in the form of an internal critic. He knew far too well that he should finish the project that night because the deadline was the next day. Rather than focusing on what he should be doing in this project, he started getting lost in his internal drama where his internal critic played the lead.

The conflict that is of most relevance in understanding and overcoming creative blocks is the conflict between the internal critic and the creative inner child. The creative inner child wants to express itself freely in a spontaneous, artistic way, and the internal critic does everything in its power to sabotage, inhibit, and punish it.

Your internal critic may, for example, give an order to your creative inner child in the form of a remark like this: “*You shouldn’t be lazy; you should work day and night if you want to achieve something.*”

The creative inner child has at least two options: to obey and force itself to work even though it feels frustrated by this demand, or to disobey and face the internal consequences and punishment. The workings of the internal punishment mechanism become evident when you start having negative thoughts and feelings about yourself. You may start feeling guilty, sad, angry, or frightened, and generally bad about yourself, which in the long run can result in anxiety, insomnia, food issues, and a host of other disorders. This will surely spoil your enjoyment in freedom to choose the way you want to express yourself.

It is possible for the creative child to stand up for itself and refuse to obey the internal critic. It may, for example, answer like this: “*No! I will not work all the time. I will take a break and go for a swim.*” This response will at first bring relief, but soon the person will fall into the trap of his internal critic, waiting ready to punish the disobedient creative child. Also, during the activity

that brings relief, tension and doubt will arise, making the person feel guilty or frustrated, again locking the creative child into the state in which it won't do anything—neither create nor relax. The state of creative block.

These conflicts will certainly invoke identity questions and dilemmas. In such states of mind, creative people will, for example, start to reexamine their life decisions and their success, wondering if they are really doing anything that justifies their creative personality. The inner punishment will work in the direction of diminishing the value of their work and themselves, giving way to fears of failure that will naturally block all their creative potential.

There is nothing inherently wrong with conflicts. The main issue is not that you have a conflict, but how you handle it. If you realize, or other people are telling you, that you have become destructive or self-destructive, then it is time to consider going for psychotherapy.

Conflicts do not necessarily have to be a negative, frustrating, and losing experience. They can have constructive and positive outcomes. Here we will introduce some useful strategies and techniques for achieving such outcomes. These techniques aim to increase our awareness and ability to shift to a more appropriate attitude. By practicing them, we can drastically reduce emotional distress and turn a conflict into a situation favorable for us.

Think of an internal conflict you have experienced recently.

What was the conflict about?

What was your creative inner child's position in the conflict?

What was your internal critic telling you?

What did you actually do in an attempt to resolve the conflict? Did it work? If not, why do you think it didn't work? How did you feel afterward?

In hindsight, what could you have done? Why would it have been better?

“Crime” and Punishment

When the inner creative child wins in a conflict, there may be some punishment from the internal critic—for example, feeling guilty, inferior, bad, sad, or incompetent. Externalizing your thoughts and feelings might be a helpful technique in resolving the conflict. Take charge of your punishment. Make it concrete and practical.

Note: For this exercise to be of real benefit, you have to do it for at least a week.

Think of your current creative block.

List at least five things you should do to finish your project. Be as concrete and precise as possible.

List five things you hate doing around your home (for example, dusting, ironing, washing dishes). Be as specific as possible.

Over the course of the next week, every time you should be working on your project but can't because you are in a creative block, do one of the hated activities for approximately the same amount of time you would spend on the project. Keep a log.

Crime and Punishment Log

After a week or two or more, you might realize that you are torturing yourself. And this is exactly how you should feel! The more you realize that you are torturing yourself, the more you will want to go back to your creative project or to decide to quit the project and move on. Either decision is OK as it is taking you out of your creative block.

Rotate the page to see how this works.

to be fair and just. And this is exactly what your internal critic should be.
Another less obvious benefit is that during the process you will be retraining your internal critic up and move on.
By playing this trick on the trickster, you are gradually bringing yourself to the point of deliverance. Once you reach that point, you will be free to either continue your project or give it inside, you need to push it out in the open where it cannot harm you physically or mentally. Hated activities around your home are hated but safe.
The very real world of your home. Rather than letting your internal critic punish you from the idea behind this exercise is to commit a "crime" and externalize your internal drama into

Coping with Stress

Stress is an unpleasant experience of strain and pressure triggered by an external factor (stressor) that can change your mental function and performance. A certain amount of stress in life is inevitable, and a small amount can keep you alert and motivated. But strong and prolonged stress may seriously damage your health and hinder your abilities.

On the next page, you will find a scale developed in 1967 by psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe. The scale is still widely used as a basis for psychological studies of stress. Use it to see how many of the stressors you have experienced in the last year, and determine how high your risk of becoming ill is. Circle the “life change units” associated with each stressor you have checked and add them up. At the end of the scale, you will find a description of how to interpret results.

Check if appropriate	Life event	Life change units
	Death of a spouse	100
	Divorce	73
	Marital separation	65
	Imprisonment	63
	Death of a close family member	63
	Personal injury or illness	53
	Marriage	50
	Dismissal from work	47
	Marital reconciliation	45
	Retirement	45
	Change in health of family member	44
	Pregnancy	40
	Sexual difficulties	39
	Gain a new family member	39
	Business readjustment	39
	Change in financial state	38
	Change in frequency of arguments	35
	Major mortgage	32

Check if appropriate	Life event	Life change units
	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
	Change in responsibilities at work	29
	Child leaving home	29
	Trouble with in-laws	29
	Outstanding personal achievement	28
	Spouse starts or stops work	26
	Begin or end school	26
	Change in living conditions	25
	Revision of personal habits	24
	Trouble with your boss	23
	Change in working hours or conditions	20
	Change in residence	20
	Change in schools	20
	Change in recreation	19
	Change in church activities	19
	Change in social activities	18
	Minor mortgage or loan	17
	Change in sleeping habits	16
	Change in number of family reunions	15
	Change in eating habits	15
	Vacation	13
	Christmas	12
	Minor violation of law	11

Total: _____

Interpretation: Score of 300+: At risk of illness

Score of 150–299+: Moderate risk of illness (30 percent less than a score over 299)

Score 150-: Only a slight risk of illness

Reducing Your Stress

Even though you cannot eliminate all the stressors in your life, you can reduce the level of stress you are experiencing by practicing activities that make you more relaxed, balanced, and content. The worksheet that follows suggests some activities that usually reduce stress. Put a check mark by the activities you are most likely to do. See if you can find one activity to do in each category. If you do not find activities you like or if there are others that have helped you in the past, use the spaces marked "Other" to add your own ideas.

Then estimate the amount of time you will do the activities each day. Finally, put a check mark when you have accomplished this activity each day in a week. Keep this chart for three weeks.

Week of _____ (Date)

Activity	Check if likely to do	Estimated amount of time per day	Activity done (put one check mark for each day)
Scheduled Relaxation			
Deep breathing			
Meditation			
Visualization			
Relaxing with quiet music			
Yoga			
Other:			
Self-Care			
7–9 hours sleep			
Good nutrition			
Minimum half hour exercise			
Massage			
Other:			
Social Activities			
Meaningful conversation(s)			
Fun activities with family or friends			
Meals with family or friends			
Spiritual activities with others			
Other:			

Activity	Check if likely to do	Estimated amount of time per day	Activity done (put one check mark for each day)
Time Management			
Setting goals and steps to achieve them			
Realistic to-do list			
Delegating appropriate responsibilities			
Realistic scheduling and planning			
Other:			
Creative and Fun Activities			
Journaling			
Hobbies			
Time with pets			
Play			
Other:			

Talking Back to Your Negative Messages

Psychologists Robert and Mary Goulding compiled a list of negative messages we send to ourselves and others. Listed below are several typical messages that you might have heard and adopted from others over time. Perhaps you often hear them now in the form of an internal critic. These messages create inner tension and inhibit self-communication. Learn to see through these limiting messages and to respond constructively to them. Write how you would talk back to the messages in the speech balloons.



Some people believe that art and creativity are all about emotions, so thinking won't help solve problems in creative tasks. You may hear a "comforting" voice telling you it is not your job to think, that your job as an artist is to feel and create. The voice may urge you to relax and not think, as thinking will only distract you from creating. After all, you are an artist, not a philosopher.

Don't feel.

Some people irrationally think that feelings have the magical power to ruin everything. As an artist, you may often confront this limiting belief that having an artistic nature necessarily involves suffering from intense emotionality and irrationality. This message tends to prohibit all deep emotional experiences crucial for living and creating, making you feel guilty or weird because of them.

**Don't be close
to others;
don't trust
others.**

This is a belief that people are the cause of all our problems and that the best solution is to be apart from them, especially when we have a creative block. Do not trust or think that they really care for you. People hate when someone is successful. Besides, they will probably steal your ideas or try to confuse and discourage you.



Some people misunderstand modesty, believing that expressing satisfaction with ourselves or something we have done is a mark of conceit or narcissism. The belief may manifest in a judgment: you would do better by not bragging and acting as if you have done something extraordinary, because people hate that.



What it means to be grown up is another message that is often misunderstood. Many people believe that it means becoming rigid, stressed, preoccupied with trivial or boring things, losing spontaneity and enthusiasm. You may hear a voice that will try to persuade you to remain immature, telling you that if you grow up, you will become dull and lose your creative ideas, and that people will turn away from you because, as a grown-up, you are good on your own and don't need anyone to take care of you anymore.

Don't be you.

It is possible that you will come across a belief that being yourself implies being selfish, unrealistic about life, immature, and naive. Some people believe that we are not born to be who we really are, but who we *should* be, according to others' expectations. Being you means you are irresponsible and don't care about what other people need from you.

Don't be a child.

By sending this message, the internal critic wants to forbid you to enjoy yourself and have fun. It will accuse you of irresponsibility and demand that you be serious and strong by not showing emotions or expressing how you feel.



This inner command might be heard in statements such as “Caring too much for your health and your body is a mark of superficiality.” The belief is that healthy people do not feel life in all its intensity, and that is why so many famous artists suffered from some ailment—because they were not sparing themselves and sacrificed everything for art.



Some people think that it is good to avoid association and community. When it comes to art, it is possible to confuse authenticity and originality with not belonging to anything or anyone. The idea is: Stay alone, act by yourself. I think this should read “You don’t need others to confuse you with your country or cultural origin; you are above that and better off on your own.



Don't succeed.

The internal critic may reflect a belief of some people that it is safer and better not to be better than others, that it is better not to achieve success. If you succeed, you will make people feel bad and not good enough, and they will not like you.



Don't be.

The internal critic may use harsh accusations that carry extreme and dangerous demands rooted in the feeling of guilt or shame. Some people believe that the behavior they consider unacceptable must be punished, and this leads to judging others and themselves severely. The thought is that if you are not capable of being useful to others, it's better that you don't live at all.



Don't do.

There are people who believe that it is wise not to act, that it is better to be passive and avoid inevitable negative consequences. The world is full of danger and unpleasant things; don't engage in it. You are safer here where you are.



Don't be creative.

Some people believe that creativity is not a special quality and that it shouldn't be praised. Instead they value only what is practical. The internal critic may confront you with this belief in the form of a statement: it's better that you do something useful and practical instead of caring about your ideas and creativity, which are of no use and won't pay the bills.

Negative Messages Diary

Use the table below to keep a record of your internal critic. Note how intense (1 = slightly intense, 10 = very intense) and how often the limiting voice appears. Write down how you respond to it, what you think, and how you feel.

Grounding

Grounding techniques are a set of tools used to help people stay in the present moment during episodes of creative blocks or other strong frustrating emotions. Staying in the present moment allows us to feel safe and in control by focusing on the physical world and how we experience it.

Grounding is not a difficult technique. It requires you to focus on some aspect of the physical world, rather than on your internal thoughts and feelings, to focus on the present rather than the past. Practice your grounding techniques so that they come naturally when you are upset. Let go of any negative feelings. Try a variety of techniques and, on the next page, rate the effectiveness of each technique in keeping you calm. Then, in times of need use the technique which works best for you.

Here are some suggestions for grounding yourself; you can make up your own as well.

- Run cold water over your head.
- Grab tightly onto your chair, as hard as you can.
- Touch various objects around you: a pen, keys, clothing, or a wall.
- Look around and notice things you haven't been noticing before.
- Listen to the sounds you haven't heard before.
- Dig your heels into the floor, literally "grounding" them. Notice how the tension centers in your heels as you are doing this. Remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket so you can touch it any time you need to.
- Focus on an object that inspires or calms you.
- Notice your body: the weight of your body in the chair; wiggle your toes in your socks; notice the feel of your chair against your back.
- Stretch.
- Focus on your breath. Try deepening it slowly.
- Walk slowly; notice each footstep, saying "left" or "right" to yourself, or counting them.
- Eat something, describing the flavors to yourself.
- Concentrate. Focus on detail.

Recording Your Use of the Grounding Technique

Begin by writing in five or more techniques you want to practice. Practice them several times a day for five minutes or until you feel calm and in control.

Circle the number that best describes the effectiveness of each technique, using a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = no effect and 10 = immediate calming effect.

Technique	Date done	Rating 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Comments
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
		1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	

Breathing Practice

Relaxation exercises typically begin and end with breathing practice. This activity describes a very simple method that can help you release tension and maintain balance.

Sit comfortably, with your back as straight as possible. Do not force yourself to sit in a position that seems right if you are not comfortable. Keep your head up and close your eyes. Pay attention to your breathing. At first, simply observe how your breath flows. Focus on your breath as it goes in and out. Observe how spontaneous and effortless this flow is. Try to awaken joy or gratitude for being alive in this very moment. Do not think further; just focus on breathing here and now and think how good it is to be alive.

Think of the breath as a life force. Become aware of how the air that you breathe fills your lungs, how it expands and moves through the whole body. Now, inhale slowly. Imagine how life force and energy flow into your body with the air you inhale. Repeat this inhaling until you no longer have a problem imagining energy and vitality. Now focus on exhaling. As you exhale, release tension, anxiety, sadness, or any other unpleasant emotion. Imagine how bad things are leaving you with the air you are exhaling.

Inhale calmness, exhale tension. Inhale vitality, exhale tiredness. Inhale anything you need at that moment, exhale whatever it is that bothers you.

Use this technique whenever you find yourself in a creative block. Inhale inspiration, exhale the blockage or obstacle that is keeping you from creating.

Use the chart below to record your daily breathing practice. Make copies of this chart and keep recording the time you spend breathing until it truly comes spontaneously.

Week of: _____

	Time of day	Minutes	Mood before	Mood after
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Imagining Your Best Creative Self

Although people who have creative blocks are unique individuals, they are often seen as the age-old stereotype: *creative person = artist*. But that stereotype no longer holds true. Creativity has moved into the boardroom, and successful extroverted business people are seen as creative individuals. Of course, being creative and being successful in business are not mutually exclusive.

Psychiatrist Silvano Arieti suggested that you can foster your creativity by creating conditions where you can be introverted. Modern societies have imposed a model of successful people as being extroverted. That is neither true nor helpful, especially for creative people. Being alone and being introverted helps with a creative block.

The same goes for inactivity. Find some space and time to be still and inactive. When it is safe and useful, daydream as much as you can. Let yourself think freely, because in addition to logical, orderly, and analytical thinking, you also have irrational and nonlinear thinking, and you should allow space and time for those processes to polarize, merge, and inspire each other. It is OK to be uncertain for some time and reflect on an old conflict and choices you have made. Denial is not the best way to work through your creative blocks.

Remembering some of your old choices, you might find it difficult to understand that the best choice in one situation was to be inactive, and in another situation it was to be hardworking. But remember paradox is intrinsic to creativity.

This exercise is aimed at showing the importance of visualizing a positive future. There are five segments to be used on five successive days. Before you begin each, sit back and relax, and take a few deep breaths. Do your best to clear your mind of all the things that have bothered or worried you during the day. Take about ten to fifteen minutes for each segment. Do not be concerned about grammar or style. Write whatever comes to mind. Try to be realistically positive, while staying within the realm of optimistic probability. For example, rather than imagining yourself winning the Nobel Prize for literature with your first published novel, imagine that a random tourist read it during a long flight, translated it into her language, and published it in a foreign country from where it traveled to yet another country ... eventually landing in the hands of a movie producer's wife who loved the characters so much that she convinced her husband to turn your book into a film.

Day 1

Imagine the best possible creative surrounding you could have. Think about the people who are involved in your creative work and support it. Explore how this circle around you brings you confidence and inspiration. Imagine the smoothest possible flow of ideas between members of your creative circle. See how you grow and help each other, co-create and share experiences. Describe this creative support in detail.

Day 2

Imagine that you completed your most important artistic project two years ago. What did its realization bring you? Are you feeling proud of your achievement? Describe the reception of your work from both the critics and the audience.

Day 3

Write about the things that your work has brought to you. Money? Fame? New and interesting people? Other valuable things and possibilities?

Day 4

Write about your other ideas and plans. By five years from now, what do you want to have achieved with your work? What kind of fulfillment will your art bring to you? Describe your success. Will you feel better about yourself? Why exactly?

Day 5

Write about how your work and ideas will influence others in the future. Imagine yourself as an inspiration to many people. How are you affecting them? What inspires them most about you and your work?

EXTERNAL DRAMA

First they ignore you. Then they ridicule you. And then they attack you and want to burn you.
And then they build monuments to you.

—*Nicholas Klein*

You and Your Surroundings

Because creativity grows in contact, relationship, and bonding with other people, nature, and the world of ideas, external factors play a significant role in every creative process. A creative lifestyle needs a context and feedback that will sustain and reinforce creativity. It needs to be on the move and interacting with the surroundings. But you should be aware that the surroundings could also be a disturbing factor contributing to your creative blocks.

In the two exercises that follow, you will learn how to recognize and deal with inhibiting external factors. You will also learn how to recognize and embrace those external factors that can stimulate your creativity. The factors you will read about were identified by psychologist Teresa Amabile and her colleagues. You may be surprised by what you read, as it might contradict modern ways you were taught to believe in.

To start, list as many external factors as you can (for example, people, places, weather, financial circumstances, possessions, and friends, among others) that you believe influence your creativity, either inhibiting it or stimulating it.

Inhibiting External Factors

These external factors were identified by Dr. Amabile as having significant impact on creative processes:

Surveillance

While no person will find surveillance a pleasant and stimulating factor, an artist will be especially stricken by its negative impact. It will ruin spontaneity and the free flow of creativity. Surveillance of any kind will undermine every authentic, intimate, and honest creative expression.

Expected evaluation

If you know that your work will be estimated and judged, you will naturally burden yourself with thoughts of possible failure, forcing yourself to give your absolute maximum and avoid negative criticism. It can also cause frustration or obstinacy, making you deliberately perform lower than expected.

Competition

Creativity is not about being better than others but about finding and expressing yourself. Competitiveness can force you to follow other people's ideas and criteria instead of your own. Artistic value is not a simple material good that can be measured, compared, and prized. Artistic competitions should not be the measure of your success.

Choice reduction

Limitation in choices—whether of themes, techniques, or creative styles—can result in a poorer artistic performance.

Overcontrol

While a certain amount of structure can be helpful in organizing creative activities, too much control will hinder it. Why, where, how, and when to create cannot be determined by others.

Pressure

If you do not have freedom to choose what and how you will express yourself due to interference from your surroundings, you will feel blocked. There is a level of pressure that you can be subject to and still remain creative, and you should learn to recognize when the pressure becomes too strong.

Deadlines

When we hear the word *deadline*, we tend to immediately associate it with big stress. Rightly so, because working with a deadline may force productivity but not creativity. It will cause you to reach for the fastest and easiest solutions.

Reward/Money

This factor is partly related to expected evaluation and competition. It may sound strange that an artist is not motivated by money, but you should understand that while in a creative process, money is an external factor that causes pressure. It is different from receiving recognition in the form of money after your work is done.

The first step is to decide for certain if these influences are affecting you; it is possible that you are simply not aware of them. The next step is to determine whether you can stop exposing yourself to them. If that is not possible, if you are not in a position to change external influences, you need to practice adapting to them as much as possible and avoid becoming frustrated over circumstances you cannot control. The most important thing regarding your creativity in such circumstances is not to push yourself. Do not expect too much from yourself if you are blocked by external factors—but do remember not to use them as an excuse for the blockages that come from within.

Use the table below to track possible negative external influences. If you feel you are blocked by any of them, rate its strength on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = not so strong and 10 = very strong. Then write down your strategy for dealing with the negative influence. For example, you may be under a contract that forces you to work with impossible deadlines. Adapting to a situation here would mean that you should consider finding help for the job you are doing from someone you work well with. You could also split the job into stages to ensure you will do the crucial or the most important part first before moving on to details. After you have tried your strategy for a week, rate its efficiency.

Inhibiting external factor	Strength of the external factor influence 1–10	Strategy for dealing with inhibiting factor	Efficiency 1–10
Surveillance			
Expected evaluation			
Competition			

Inhibiting external factor	Strength of the external factor influence 1–10	Strategy for dealing with inhibiting factor	Efficiency 1–10
Choice reduction			
Overcontrol			
Pressure			
Deadlines			
Reward/Money			

Stimulating External Factors

The factors that follow were identified by Dr. Amabile as ones that stimulate creative processes:

Support and recognition

It is very important for creators that the context they work in supports their need for autonomy, flexibility, and spontaneity. This support recognizes their lifestyle and gives meaning to their creativity.

Available resources

People do not create in a vacuum; nor do they create from nothing. Whether provided by the government, an institution, or the family, an available supply source is very important, especially one that can be readily drawn on when needed.

Creative tension

Tension stimulates creativity when disagreement ultimately becomes motivational and yields better ideas and outcomes. Differences and discrepancies can be more stimulating than sameness, harmony, and coherence.

Trust-based security

Trust occurs when we estimate that other people are well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy. Humans use trust to promote interaction and accept risk in situations where they have only partial information. Their certainty that they know how events in their lives will roll out promotes a sense of safety. Trusting a person or even an idea creates a safe place for creative people to express themselves.

Freedom of expression

This term refers to the freedom of artists to produce art based on their own insight. In a climate of artistic freedom, creative people can craft a reality different from the concrete one by using some alterations, distortions, and constructions.

Cooperation

Cooperation is very significant for creative people. People may be more or less active in the process of cooperation. No matter what their level of involvement, it is crucial that they work together for the purpose of creative production. The same goes for the support from a community to recognize and support creative people for their cooperative efforts. It is a mutually beneficial action among individuals working creatively.

Creative bonding

This bonding might occur in a creative “what if” context where people’s curiosity and spontaneity are stimulated. That social context offers permission to be different, tolerates confusion and paradoxes, and is optimal for creativity. Creators who are protected from the consequences of their mistakes develop the courage to change. Empowering them to take risks

for the explicit purpose of the creative process would foster creativity. At the same time, in that context it is clear that creators have responsibilities toward other people, themselves, and the earth.

Use the table below to track stimulating external influences. If you feel you are stimulated by any of them, rate its strength on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = not so stimulating to 10 = very stimulating. Then write down your strategy for remaining in a stimulating environment. For example, you may find that you work best in circumstances of creative tension with a lot of support and recognition. What can you do to make these conditions the default state for your work? Evaluate your strategy after one week.

Stimulating external factor	Strength of the external factor influence 1–10	Strategy for remaining in the stimulating environment	Efficiency 1–10
Support and recognition			
Available resources w/possible diversity			
Creative tension			
Trust-based security			
Freedom of expression			
Cooperation			
Creative bonding			

Facing Audiences and Critics

No matter what type of creative work you do, you may feel unpleasant in front of the public, a phenomenon that is known as stage fright. But stage fright—an annoying combination of anxiety, irrational fear, and embarrassment—is not exclusively stage related. It may appear whenever you or your work face the actual public or even an imaginary public. Naturally, no one likes to be judged, and the possibility of negative criticism brings the fear of failure that can even prevent you from creating or exhibiting your work.

This exercise will help you understand your relationship with an audience and critics. It will help you overcome certain irrational fears and clear your thoughts about the public. Whether or not you feel uncomfortable in front of an audience, you may find the activities useful in creating a strategy for presenting your work to the world.

The questions below will help you ascertain your attitude toward facing an audience. Try to be as concrete as possible by giving an example of a situation or a reaction.

1. Is the opinion of the public important to you? Why?

2. In your opinion, what is the best possible thing you can get from an audience?

3. In your opinion, what is the worst possible reaction of an audience?

4. How do you react when your work receives positive criticism from an audience?

5. How exactly does positive criticism influence your creativity?

6. How exactly does negative criticism influence your creativity?

8. Describe your worst experience with the public. What made it so bad for you?

9. Whose opinion influences you the most? Why?

10. Whose opinion do you care for the most?

11. What kind of criticism would you like to receive for your work?

Comic Relief

Think back to a time when a strong negative criticism you received for your work made you feel bad. Try to remember as many details of that moment.

Where were you? _____

Who was the critic? _____

What was the criticism? _____

What was the occasion? _____

Who was around? _____

Keep thinking about how bad you felt. How small, insignificant, irrelevant, untalented, and worthless you felt. Exaggerate those feelings as much as you can. Exaggerate to the point where the whole scene becomes totally absurd.

Now switch roles. From your present perspective, how would you ridicule and make fun of the critic? In your imagination, what practical jokes would you play on the critic? Would you dress her oddly, maybe let him be naked, give her a squawking voice, or take your critic's cellphone and change the language to some strange nonalphabetic one and then text him to make sure he sees it. How do you feel about the critic now?

Write down your experiences. Were you able to laugh about the situation you initially believed was one of the worst? What did the comic relief tell you about your fears or insecurity?

A Letter to a Critic

In this activity, you will write a letter to express your frustration or feelings of hurt caused by a critic in the past. You will not send this letter; it will remain as a note in your activity book and it will help you to see what it is that frustrates you. Maybe it is just the fact that you didn't originally get a chance to say what you wanted.

Write freely, without thinking if it would sound nice. Use additional paper if needed. Remember, this letter stays with you. Express what you feel and think about the critic who caused you harm. If you can, try to address your critic in their role as a critic, not as a person. The ground rule of constructive criticism is to address the work, not the personality. Don't hold anything back. Express whatever emotion is in you.

A Letter to a Critic



How did you feel after writing the letter?

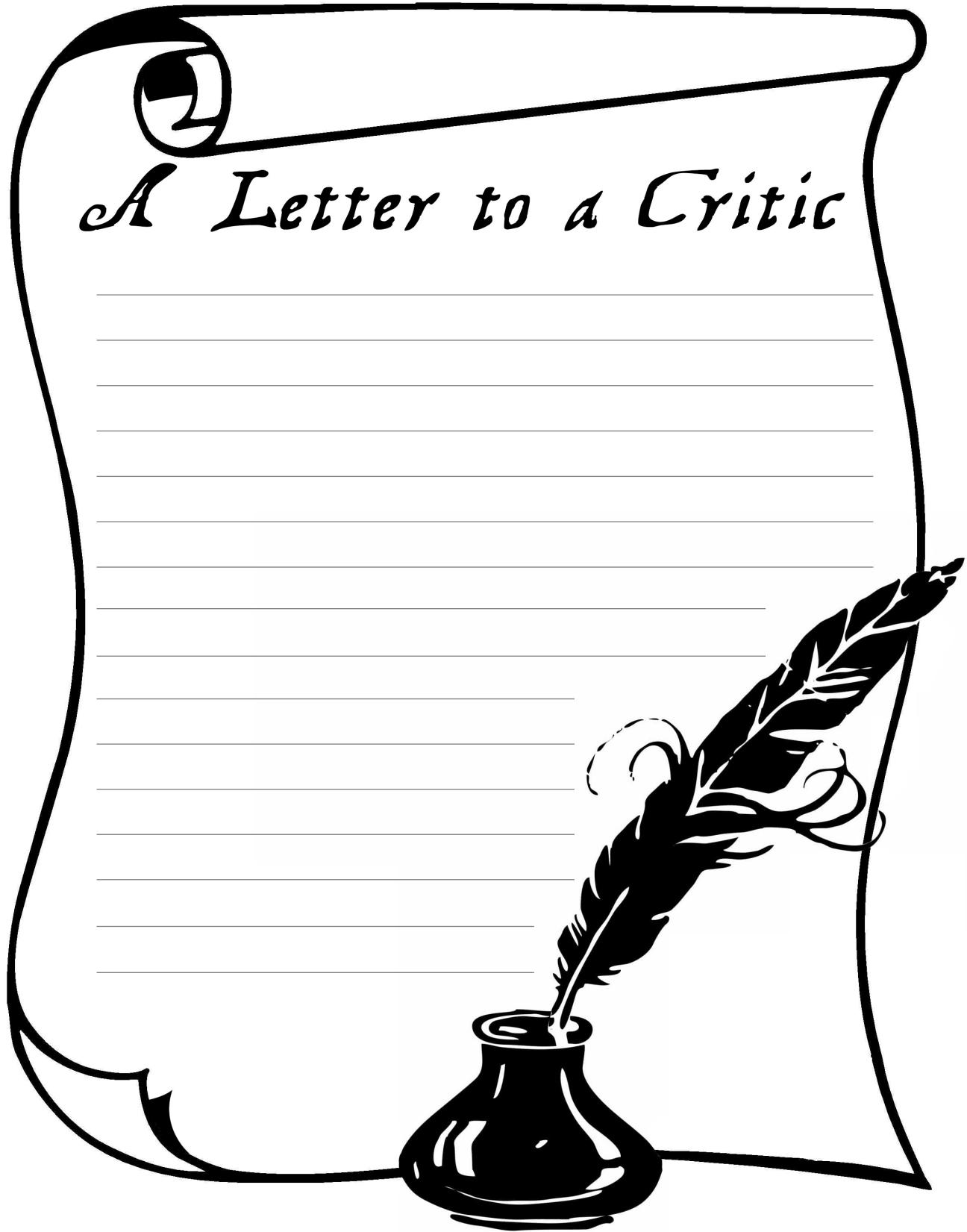
Following Up

In the follow-up, you are going to write three more letters. Remember, the letters are not to be sent. They are for you, and you may benefit from reading them now and then. Follow the instructions for each letter.

Think of a time when your work was publicly displayed and you received some very harsh and bad criticism from a critic. Refer to the same event in each letter.

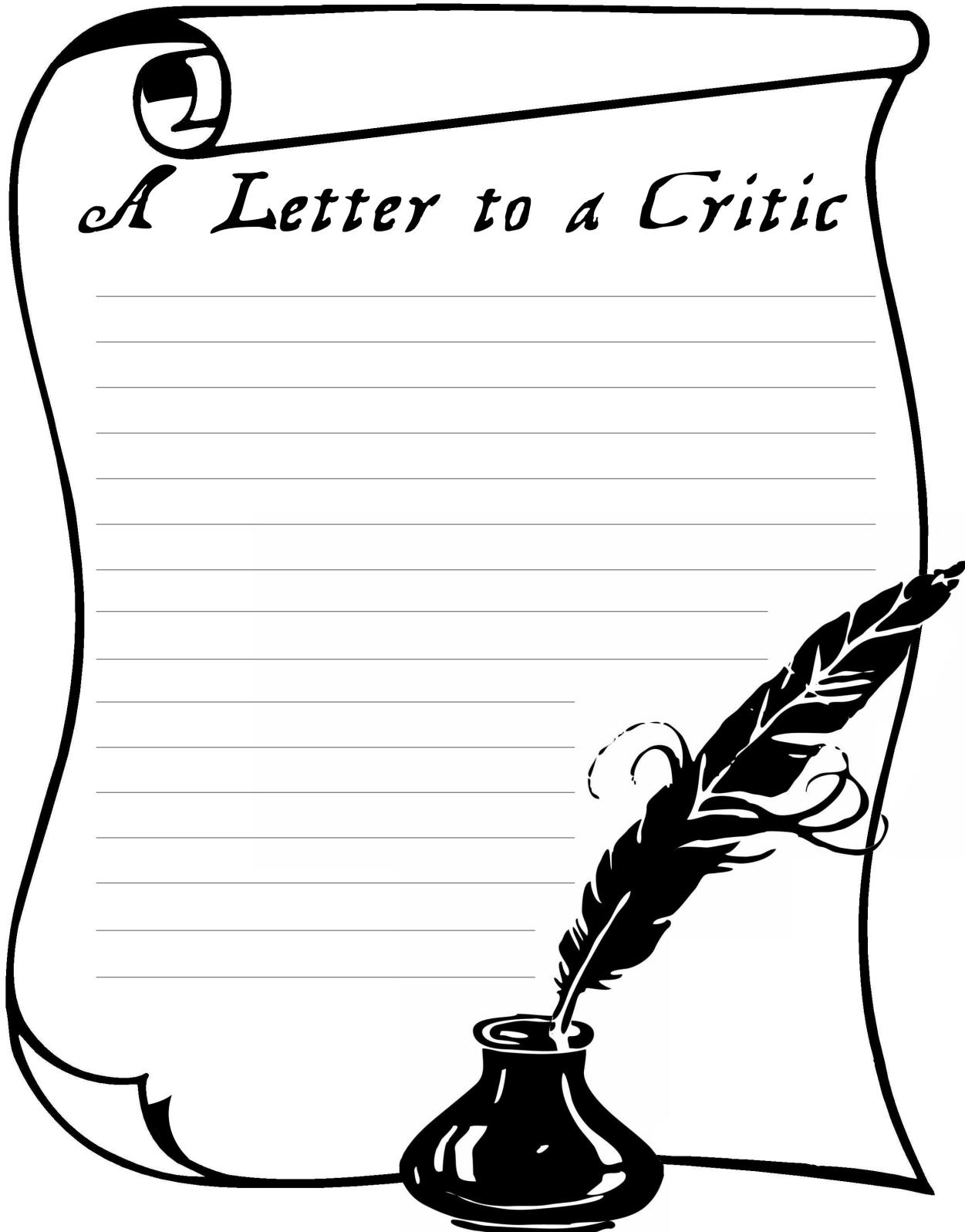
A Letter to a Critic: Take One

Reply to your critic in a very rude manner. Just get it off of your chest.



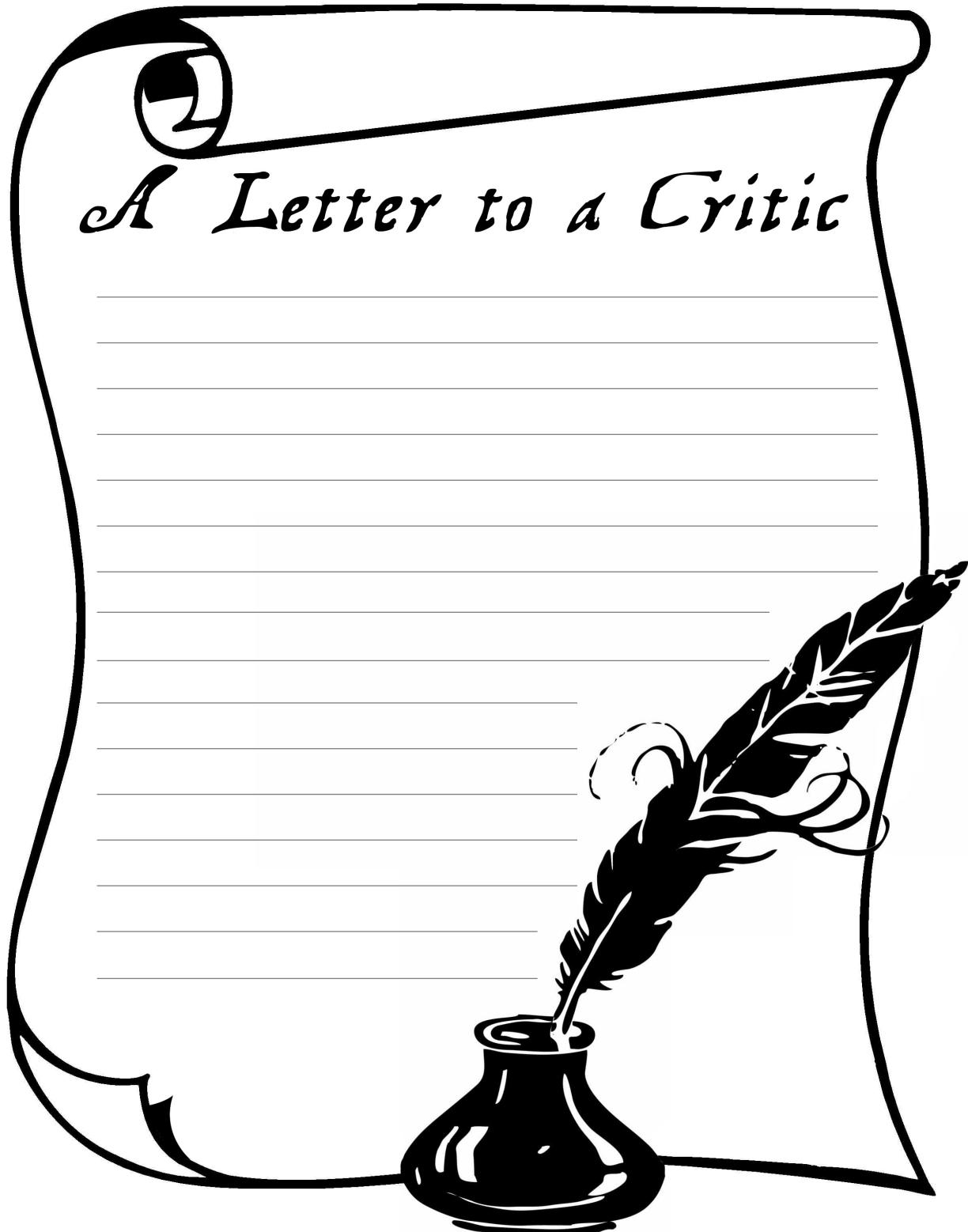
A Letter to a Critic: Take Two

Reply to your critic, taking extreme care to remain civilized, polite, and kind. Present your arguments but do not start arguing.



A Letter to a Critic: Take Three

For this letter, imagine yourself as someone who attended the event and then read negative criticism of it. Your imagined self enjoyed the event and thinks that the critic wasn't fair and that the criticism is biased.



Creativity Killers

Creativity killers are people whose voices are powerfully discouraging. Even when you are enthusiastic and optimistic about your work, those voices have the power to shake you up. And when you are in need of support, they can be devastating. The trick is to learn to handle them.

The people who send these discouraging messages to others don't necessarily have to be negative, envious, or bad (though it is very likely that they are stuck or blocked in some way). In fact, they can be very useful to you. They might be the best possible sign and a confirmation that you are on the right path. This may sound paradoxical, but it is not.

Whenever you are creating or working on an idea, you are in a minority. You should be aware of that fact. You are confronting inertia and the human resistance to change. Creative work is related to change and moving out of the comfort zone, and people hate to be reminded that they, too, should leave their comfort zones. Instinctively, when they sense that something is about to make a significant change, that something provokes their inertia, they will find "reasons" why it is better not to act.

Here is a list of common messages that creativity killers send:

- *That is ridiculous.*
- *Let's get back to reality.*
- *I wouldn't be so sure.*
- *Things don't work that way.*
- *You can't teach an old dog new tricks.*
- *That doesn't really make too much sense.*
- *Lots of people have tried that before.*
- *It's too radical a change.*
- *You are not the right person for that.*
- *It takes too much time and energy.*
- *That will never work.*
- *It's not the right time for that.*
- *If it were possible, someone would have thought of it by now.*
- *Do you really think you can change the world?*
- *Yeah, right, that's exactly what the world needs now.*

Add any other discouraging messages that were addressed to you before or that you often hear:

How do you react usually to creativity killers?

How do they make you feel about your idea, plan, or creative project?

~~When do they influence you more: when you yourself have doubts or when you are feeling enthusiastic and self-confident?~~

Which creativity killer do you find the most annoying? Why?

From whom do you usually hear these discouraging statements?

Creativity Killers Diary

Keep a diary of your responses to creativity killers and note your reactions.

Creativity killer message	How did it make you feel?	How did you respond?	How did you feel after the response?

Creativity killer message	How did it make you feel?	How did you respond?	How did you feel after the response?

The next time someone tries to destroy your motivation, choose some of your best responses from the diary. Practice confronting the creativity-killing messages and making them meaningless for you, or use them as a sign and confirmation that you are doing great.

Remember that what these creativity killers actually do is show you that you are onto something very interesting and thought-provoking. If it were not so, no one would bother to discourage you. Creativity killers react when there is a threat that a change will occur, that something emerges and irritates them due to their own inertia. Practice observing the phenomenon from this perspective, and use the messages from creativity killers as a confirmation that you have started on an interesting, adventurous creative journey with promising results.

Psychological Aikido

Psychologist Mikhail Litvak developed a communication strategy called psychological aikido, aimed at gaining and retaining mental balance. It is called aikido because the strategy uses the same principle as the martial art—defending yourself by using an opponent's energy and realizing his intentions.

Psychological aikido is a very good technique for handling creativity killers. Even though the people who send you these discouraging messages are usually not aggressive, consciously or unconsciously their words are aimed at weakening you. Here is an example:

Creativity Killer: *Oh, you think no one ever tried that! That's not a new idea at all. Many have thought of the same or very similar, trust me.*

Creative Person: *I'm happy that you took time to think about my idea. That's so kind of you and very helpful. I see you know the subject very well and can tell me more about the people who made the effort before.*

Creativity Killer: *Well, I can't tell you the names, can't think of them at the moment, but there are many examples. Everyone knows that.*

Creative Person: *I was completely unaware. My approach was obviously very superficial. Could you direct me to the source you used so I can inform myself better?*

Creativity Killer: *Well, I can't give you the exact source, I just heard about it. Maybe those who told me weren't right. I don't know; if you've studied the subject, I guess you know better.*

Psychological aikido will reveal what you may have sensed but been unable to prove—that people who act as creativity killers lack real understanding of the subject. They are not able to instruct you, or give you valuable advice or constructive criticism.

Psychological aikido doesn't refer to human relationships in terms of winners and losers. This may be hard to accept if you were brought up in a modern Western society that praises the ability to dominate and be a winner. Psychological aikido teaches you to save your precious energy and time, to win by being smarter and wiser, not by being angrier or more aggressive. Although some people enjoy fighting, often without a particular reason, it is always the best solution to avoid conflict whenever possible. Psychological aikido teaches you not only how to protect yourself from other people's aggression or other harmful intentions but also how to benefit from a conflict by staying calm, focused, and grounded.

The basic strategy in psychological aikido, called “reaching Aiki” (or balancing the energy of an exchange), is based on a simple three-step approach:

- Being grounded, centered, and assertive in reacting to an attack

- Destabilizing an attacker
- Rebalancing the attack so the attacker can save self-respect

To reach Aiki, you should first of all believe in a vision of the world and human communication that seeks to transform a fight into a dialogue. Also, you have to practice regularly, as if you were going to a gym, and not allow the difficulties to scare you. Remember, it is always absolutely wiser to avoid conflict. You have the right to withdraw simply by making an excuse and exiting. You have the right to deflect an argument or conflict by changing the topic or focus of the interaction. If it is not possible to avoid a conflict, use psychological aikido. You won't always get what you want, but you might learn how to avoid a lot of pain and get a lot of your needs satisfied. Learning psychological aikido will be a big test of your narcissism. People who are highly narcissistic, and thus narcissistically vulnerable, cannot learn psychological aikido.

Psychological aikido is done in phases:

1. Notice the movement meant to punch you (words or physical action).
2. Find the direction of the movement's energy (in psychological terms, the motivation for the attack).
3. Block the aggressor (usually by shocking the aggressor with your calm, focused, and essentially kind acknowledgment of the position of the aggressor).
4. Offer cooperation.
5. If the technique worked the way you wanted it to, do not triumph or show off; remember, this is not a war, and you are not a soldier. If it didn't work, do not give up. Practice makes perfect.

Read the following examples and think about the aikido strategy used. Try to observe the phases of the conflict.

Example 1:

Careen is a fine-arts student. Her mentor is highly critical and never satisfied.

Mentor: *You are not talented. I am wasting my time with you!*

Careen: *You are absolutely right. And clever to notice it. I don't know how I got accepted here. I should ask the dean to give me another mentor or advise me if I would do better to give up completely.*

Mentor: ...Wait now, don't rush... Maybe we can find some way...

Careen: *Do you want to talk about it?*

Mentor: *Next Wednesday, my office...*

Careen: *I'll be there.*

Example 2:

This is Careen's first public exhibition of her paintings. Among other things she expects is to sell some of her work.

Visitor: *You are the best painter in the world!*

Careen: *Thank you for your kind compliment. I am really grateful because it is not selfish; it is not followed by any request for favors. Some people praise me and then expect me to give them one of my paintings for free. I am glad you are not one of those.*

Visitor: *(grins and goes away).*

What was unusual or unexpected in Careen's reaction in these examples?

What caused the other people's reactions?

Think of a time when you experienced others' behavior as aggressive toward you. Briefly describe the situation, and write down how you reacted.

Imagine you had known psychological aikido then. How would you have applied it?

If you find yourself in a future conflict, would you apply psychological aikido? Why? Why not?

Psychological Aikido Log

Psychological aikido is a demanding technique in the sense that it requires practice. Conflict situations vary, and we need time to become sure about the real motive for the attack. Also, it takes time to adapt to the idea that we can solve a problem *without* fighting.

Start practicing the technique and write down your experiences. Copy the table below, and make your own diary of your psychological aikido learning process for every conflict situation you encounter from now on.

Describe the conflict situation (when, who, where, over what)	
How hard was it for you to remain calm and respond with sincere politeness or interest?	

Could you see and understand the real intention of an aggressor?	
What was the aggressor's reaction?	
Were you successful in applying the technique? If so, to what extent—completely, partly, not at all?	
If you did not succeed, what was the reason? What could you do differently in the future?	
How do you feel after applying this technique in a conflict?	

KILLING YOU SOFTLY

Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, and to humble.

—*Yehuda Berg*

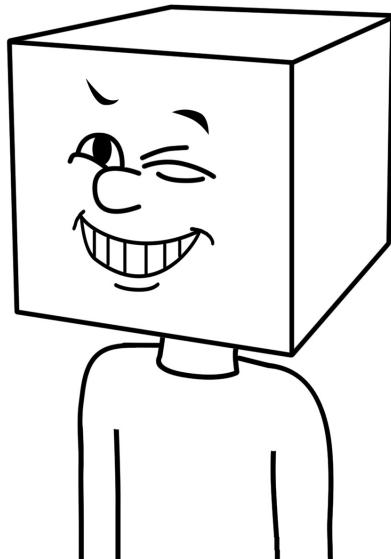
Toxic People

In this exercise, you will learn about the psychological profiles of people who might be devastating for some people's creativity. Understanding these profiles can help you be aware of specific people when you are in a creative block: those who usually act in a way that can only make it stronger. It can also save your time and energy, teaching you whom to simply avoid or be cautious with when sharing your ideas, plans, and energy.

So, who are they?

Begin by thinking of people in your life. They can be people very dear and close to you, people you respect, people you have to be nice to, or even people you don't know yourself but who keep coming into your mind during a creative block. Keep their names in your mind as you read about different types of toxic people.

Dramatic People



They crave the admiration and approval of others and are theatrical, self-centered, seductive, charming when they want to seize someone's attention, emotionally unstable, extremely manipulative, and very infantile.

They will often show interest in you or your work if they sense they can make themselves the subject or the center of attention. They will be supportive as long as they receive enough admiration, and to achieve that they will manipulate you emotionally. When frustrated, they will make a scene, exaggerate enormously, and create real drama.

To handle dramatic people, you need to channel your emotions and avoid getting involved in the drama—remember they need actors and audience to keep them going. Resist; do not fall for flattery and emotional traps. Also, do not get confused or shocked by their hysterical reactions and demands. You should connect with them rationally, not emotionally. Try to awaken a sense of responsibility in them.

Can you remember a fictional book or movie character who represents a dramatic person?

Does anyone you know fit the description? What are your experiences with them?

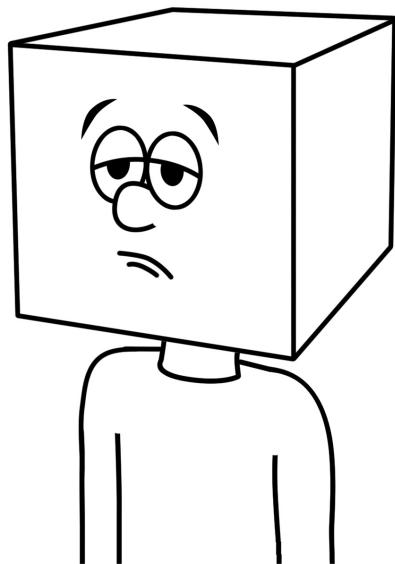
How are they toxic for your creativity?

Now that you understand their aim, and how they achieve it, what would you change in your approach to them?

What would you say to make a dramatic person escalate the drama?

To make them de-escalate?

Sad People



They are pessimistic, helpless, burdened with guilt so they often hurt and injure themselves. When you are in a creative block, sad people can drag you down. If your project depends on them or you need their assistance, they are likely to withdraw or become stressed as they cannot see a positive outcome. Their pessimism can be very harmful to your enthusiasm.

To successfully deal with sad people, you need to support them and offer care, protection, and defense. Do not criticize, but motivate. If you try to criticize, they will withdraw into their existing feeling of guilt. Make them accept responsibility, but do not push or force them.

Can you remember a fictional character that would represent a sad person?

Do you know sad people? What are your experiences with them?

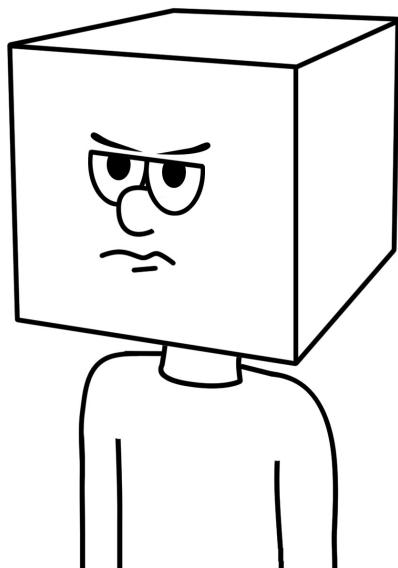
In what way do these people reinforce your creative block?

Do you see where you maybe went wrong with sad people before? How could you have acted differently?

What would you say to a sad person to make them escalate?

To make them de-escalate?

Tidy People



They are rigid and emotionally cold, focus on details, and ignore both the big picture and the essence; they are picky and demanding, proud of their perfectionism—obviously not the features that can stimulate creativity. Tidy people will be highly critical of your work and will probably miss the underlying idea, expressing their dissatisfaction with irrelevant details. Their criticism may sound rational and useful, but they are not supportive and are indifferent toward you or your success.

Which fictional character would be the best representation of tidy people?

What are your experiences with tidy people?

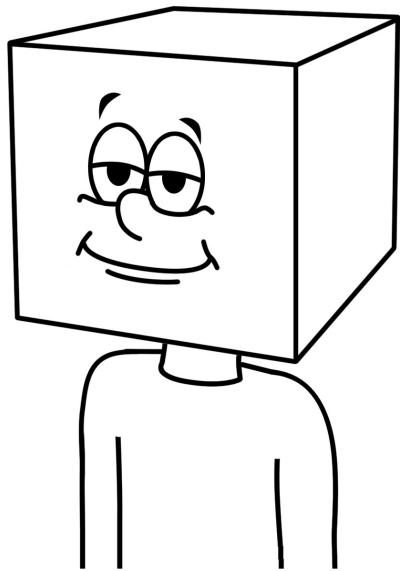
How do they reinforce your creative block?

What would you change in your approach to tidy people?

What would you say to a tidy person to make them escalate?

To make them de-escalate?

Conceited People



These people are arrogant, vain, and exhibitionist. They are manipulative and emotionally imprudent. Your work will be of no significance to them. Assuming that everything is allowed if you are a true artist, they may use art and creative jobs as a way to present themselves as talented, unique, and special. They will exaggerate their importance, influence, and success, diminishing yours. They crave praise and admiration and may connect with you if they think you are socially important or influential, or they may choose to ignore those who are really successful. It is advisable to ignore them, or confront them with facts and evidence. Becoming attached to them would mean that you will need to admire them if you want their attention. If you are not emotionally involved, you may use admiration as a strategy to avoid unpleasant situations.

Can you remember a fictional book or movie character who represents a conceited person?

Does anyone you know fit the description? What are your experiences with them?

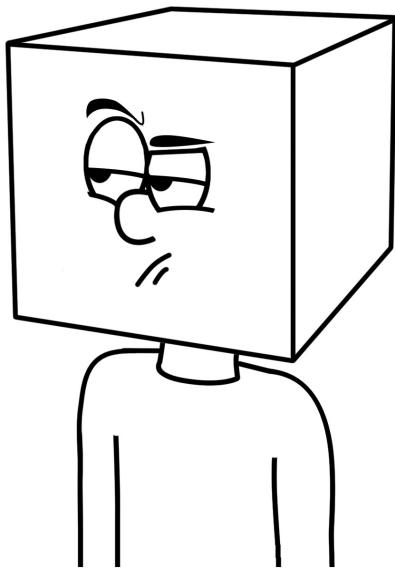
How are they toxic for your creativity?

Now that you understand their aim, and how they achieve it, what would you change in your approach to them?

What would you say to a conceited person to make them escalate?

To make them de-escalate?

Distrustful People



This type of person likes to control. They are not loyal. At the peak of their distrust toward someone, they can persecute and harass as they cannot be convinced of other facts than the ones they have. They are also jealous, as they feel threatened that they may be cheated or otherwise deceived. It is wise not to lie to them, but also not to trust them. Resist and keep the balance. Offer clear, rational explanations as a way to confront them.

When you are in a creative block, distrustful people can push you even deeper in doubt, or choke you with their need to control. Avoid them when you are anxious and when you feel you need space. If they are involved in your work, they will think you are trying to trick them or leave them without something—money or recognition, for example.

Can you remember a fictional character who would represent a distrustful person?

What are your experiences with distrustful people?

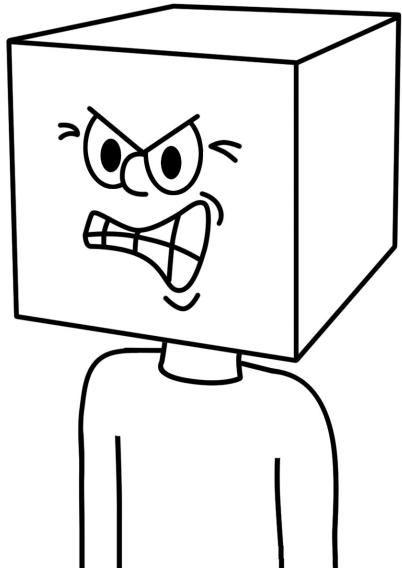
In what way do these people reinforce your creative block?

Do you see where you may have gone wrong with distrustful people before? How could you have acted differently?

What would you say to a distrustful person to make them escalate?

To make them de-escalate?

Aggressive People



They can be predacious and immoral. Dishonest, crooked and insincere. These features make them highly manipulative. They can also be impulsive, react fast with brutal focus on their goal. To handle them, you need to set borders. Do not trust them, and secure yourself. Make sure you are in a position to call for help if they are having an outburst of physical aggression. Be aware of your own fears, and do not let these people manipulate you.

It is clear that your creativity can benefit very little from aggressive people, except maybe as an inspiration for a character in your work. Beware of telling them too much; they may easily steal any interesting idea or lie about their intentions. When you are in a creative block or otherwise weak, they will manipulate you more easily and grab whatever they can—money, time, or energy.

Which fictional character would be the best representation of aggressive people?

What are your experiences with aggressive people?

How do they reinforce your creative block?

What would you change in your approach to aggressive people?

What would you say to an aggressive person to make them escalate?

To make them de-escalate?

Though toxic people are not malicious in themselves, the result is the same: your creativity suffers. Things can get very difficult when toxic people are close to you. The people you admire and idealize—parents, spouses, children, family, close friends—can also be toxic for you. Sometimes you are aware of their toxic presence in your life, but most often you mistake their negativity for good intentions, which on the surface they might have. In this case, the road to your personal hell is paved with other people's good intentions for you.

Ahh ... People, People, People ...

Look back at the six personality types described in the preceding exercise.

Which personality type do you find to be the most difficult to handle?

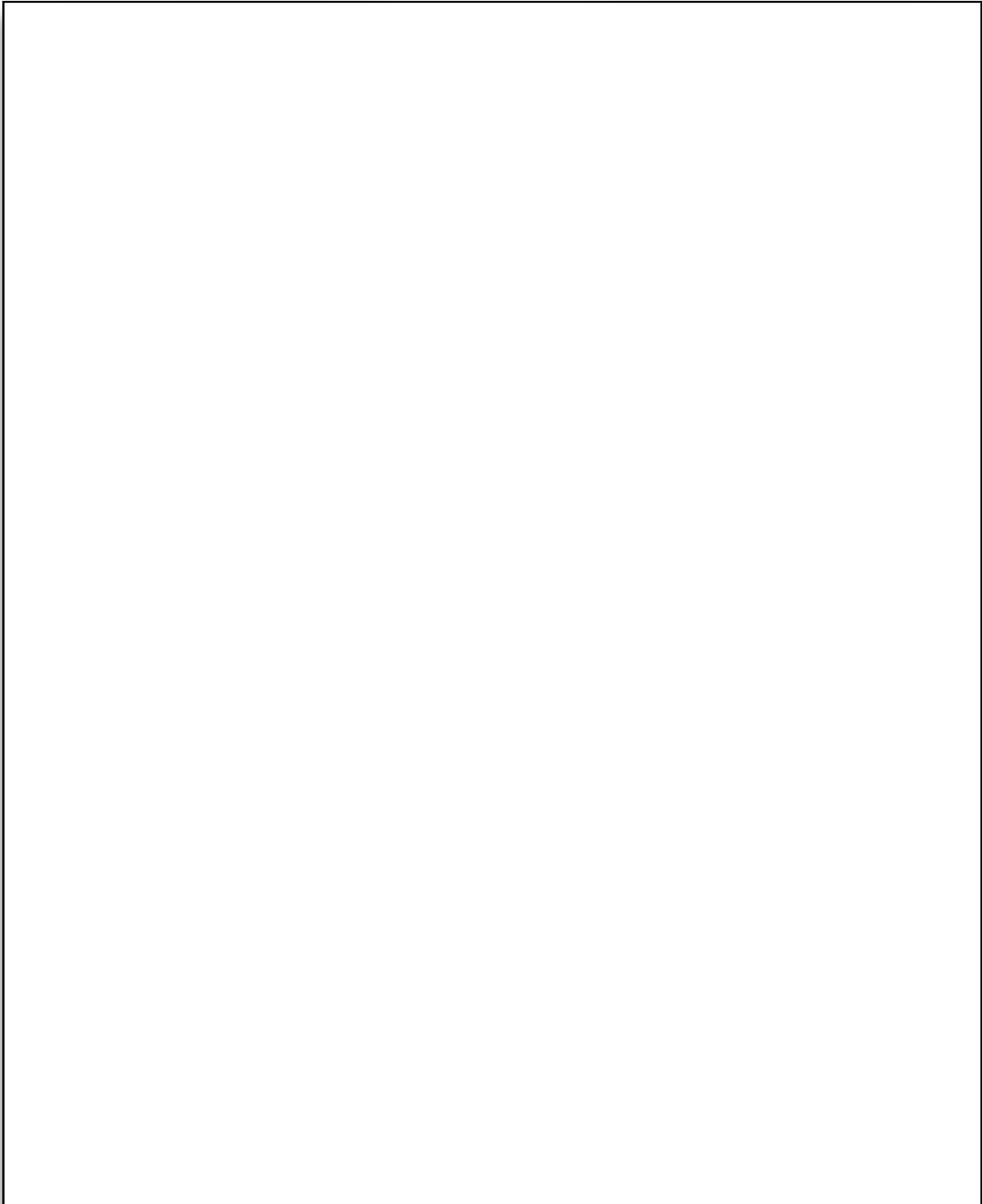
Are there any characteristics you could add to the description? What are they?

Make this toxic personality more vivid: give it face, body posture, costume. Using the space below, draw it or make a collage using pictures you've downloaded and printed, or cutouts from magazines.

Feel free to use any technique. Clay, modeling material. Do it as a grotesque, a cartoon, a comic ... anything, really.

Have fun turning a real toxic person in your life into a creative art project. Why not make a gallery of toxic characters!

By doing this you can slowly start learning about different people who might be toxic for you, their hidden agendas and strategies.



BODY TALK

The human body is the best picture of the human soul.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

Images Speak Louder Than Words

Our bodies and minds never work separately from one another. The problem is that we are not used to seeing them as a whole. We tend to ignore the body and to think of it as somehow less important than the mind. But the body feels, it experiences, it reacts to whatever is happening to us in its own wonderful way. It remembers and sends us powerful messages. And it needs attention, care, and love the same way the personality needs them.

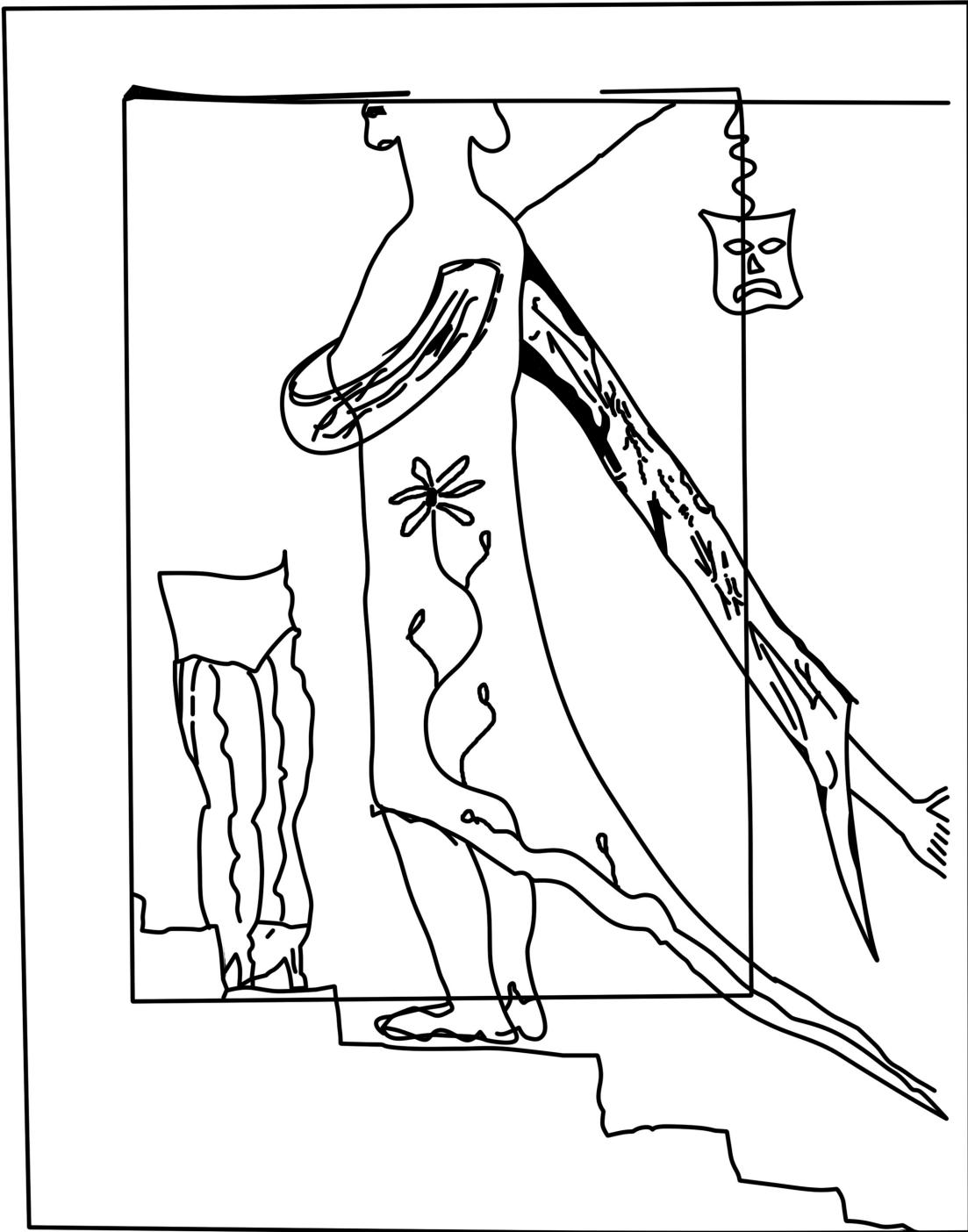
Unfortunately, many people pay attention to their bodies only when something is wrong, when they start feeling pain, weakness, or some other disturbance. You should learn to observe and listen to your body because it sends messages when it is not happy much before an illness occurs.

Surely you have often noticed how certain mental conditions cause specific physical reactions. You might experience a headache or a stomachache when you are stressed, an irregular heartbeat when you are extremely excited, problems with breathing when you feel fear or anxiety, to name only a few and the most common ones.

But what happens to your body in situations when your emotions are not so intense or not very clear to you? How does your body react in a state that is nagging, annoying, frustrating, but not necessarily extreme or obvious—like a creative block?

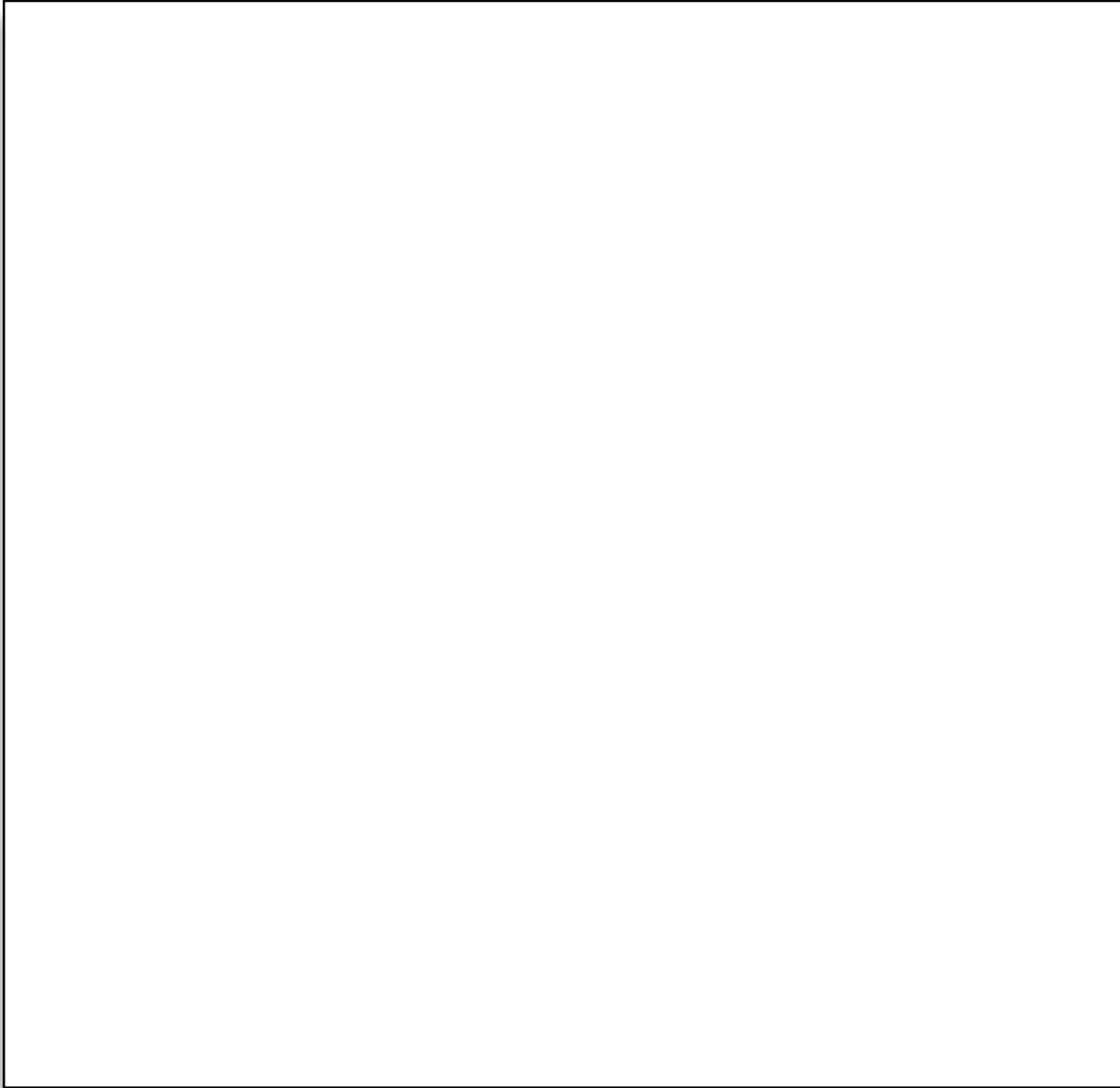
Your body will react to a creative block in a specific way. It will reflect the mind's state, and it will try to regain balance by sending messages about what bothers it, helping you restore energy and vitality.

This exercise asks you to draw your body the way you see it when in a creative block. Below is an example of a drawing made by Samantha, a theater director, who felt unaccepted as a female director. Her ideas were laughed at, or dismissed altogether, and she felt split off from her body at work. Her drawing expresses a feeling of frustration and struggle.



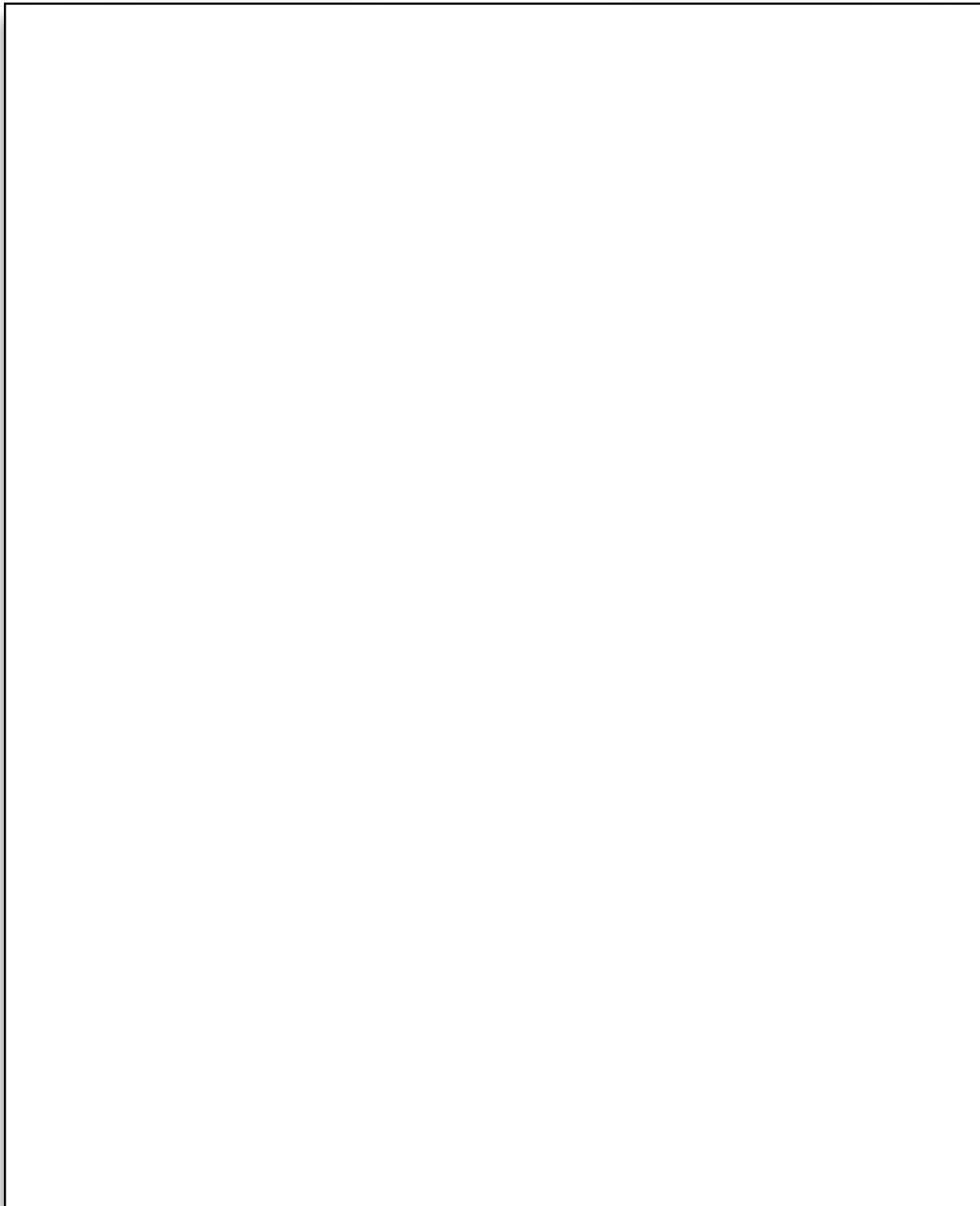
Samantha's drawing shows a body with a partial head and feet cut off. This depicts her feeling of being stuck—the person in the drawing wants to climb the stairs that represent her idea, but cannot move. Also, Samantha cannot think clearly. Her arm is spread toward those standing behind and down. They are pulling her hand, skirt, and scarf, preventing her from climbing. The mask on the right represents a way to handle the oppression. Its function is to protect her from her vulnerability. Unable to handle coworkers whom she describes as spoiled, she will put on the mask and act with authority.

Make a drawing of yourself that expresses how you see yourself during a creative block. You may use colors if they will help you express yourself better.



Did the drawing tell you something you weren't aware of or surprise you in some way? If yes, explain how. If no, keep looking at it until you hear it speak to you.

Now draw how you would like to see yourself in the creative process.



Relaxing with a Body Scan

To become aware how your body feels when you are in a creative block, you need to relax and to listen to your body, checking every part of it and noticing sensations.

There are numerous techniques for body relaxation, including many that are taught in yoga classes. If you are not familiar with yoga, follow this simple procedure that will help you to relax and tap into the subtle language of your body.

Find a place where you won't be disturbed and where you feel safe and calm. Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes closed. Focus on your breathing for about two minutes, until you start feeling relaxed.

Turn your focus to your right foot. Notice any sensations there. Imagine each breath flowing to your foot. Remain focused on this area for about thirty seconds. Then slowly move your focus to your right ankle. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body, and imagine each breath flowing to your ankle. Move your focus in the same way to your calf, knee, thigh, and hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.

When you sense pain, discomfort, pressure, itching, or any other unpleasant feeling in any part of your body, try letting it go. Breathe slowly and deeply, and imagine your breath flowing to this part of the body and dispersing pain or discomfort. Just let the sensation go. Remember that you are the one that holds it, and you can let it go. You don't need this sensation so release your body from it. Breathe and release. Do this until you feel the pain, pressure, or discomfort has lessened or is completely gone.

After completing the body scan, relax for a while, noticing how your body feels. When you feel you are ready to open your eyes, make a few small movements and stretch a bit.

Do the body scan regularly, on a daily basis or whenever you start feeling a creative block. Keep a diary and write down the things you have discovered about your body. If you are facing a longer and more persistent creative block, make a copy of the table below and use it to keep a record of your body's condition until you feel you are no longer blocked.

Body Scan Diary

	Describe any unusual sensations, noting which part of your body you felt them in.	Were you successful in letting go of the pain, pressure, or other discomfort?	How do you feel after relaxation?
Day 1			
Day 2			
Day 3			
Day 4			
Day 5			
Day 6			
Day 7			

Rating Your Physical Symptoms

As already mentioned, there are certain common symptoms that accompany stress and various negative psychological states. Here we will list the most common ones to enable you to do a quick self-check of your physical condition that might be caused by some psychological imbalance.

Please note that this cannot under any circumstances replace a medical examination, nor is it meant to be used to give a diagnosis of any kind.

Rate the frequency of each symptom on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 = not present at all, 2 = very rare, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = almost all the time.

Symptom	Mark
I have a problem falling asleep.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
My dreaming is light and easily interrupted.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I have difficulty falling asleep again.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I wake up drowsy or tired.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I sleep too much.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I have nightmares.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I have problems with my bowels (constipation, diarrhea).	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I need to urinate more often than usual.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I have a nervous sweat or sweaty palms.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I hardly ever sweat or sweat very little.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
Compared to most people, I have a very small or a very large appetite.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I skip meals.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I am having problems with digestion.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I have problems with sex.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5
I am not able to relax during sexual intercourse unless I use pills or alcohol.	1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

My score:

Add the points to reach your score. Again, we must warn you that the purpose of listing these symptoms is to work through your creative block; **this is not a medical check-up**. However, if you scored higher than 20, it is advisable that you visit your doctor for a thorough examination.

Body Scale Feedback

Complete the body scale while in a creative block and then again when you are not experiencing a creative block. Did you notice any difference? If so, what is it?

What do the results tell you about the connection between your body and your creative blocks?

Have you been ignoring the symptoms? Why?

Do you think you can do something to improve your physical condition and health and make your body happy?

List the things you could do for your body (go to a massage, exercise more, buy a favorite body lotion, sleep more, sleep on a more comfortable bed, eat more regularly, eat less/more). Add at least five of your own ideas.

Body Diary

Keep a diary of what you actually did to make your body enjoy being your body. Start today! Use the body scan to check what your body is telling you about its needs.

Day of the week	What you did to make your body happy	How much time did it take?	How do you feel about yourself after responding to a need of your body?
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Loving Your Body

We all know that mind and body are an inseparable unit, but sometimes we forget it. Focusing back on your body while in a creative block might be very helpful. One of the ways to focus on your body is to exercise.

Do you have a preferred exercise activity? What is it?

How do different parts of your body react to this exercise?

In your next creative block, change the type of exercise you usually do. How did different parts of your body react to this change?

ABOUT THE FLOW

Anyone who has experienced flow knows that the deep enjoyment it provides requires an equal degree of disciplined concentration.

—*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

Flow

In challenging but not overwhelming situations, some people experience a complex state of being called flow. It is a subjective experience connected to intrinsic (internal) motivation, and it is very important for the creative process. People who frequently experience flow have higher senses of meaning, purpose, quality of life, and well-being. Flow is an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best. Similar concepts related to the state of flow are the peak experience, happiness, ecstasy, or bliss.

Flow is a natural potential and an objective of our consciousness, and it is often experienced unintentionally, without awareness of the cause that initiated the state or of what interrupted it. It is, therefore, important to understand what flow is, and how you can influence it, learn it, and exploit it for your creative goals. There are very specific characteristics of flow that will be observed in all cases, but recent research shows that people differ quite a bit from each other in frequency, intensity, length, and quality of the flow they experience.

Every flow is characterized by clarity. People are energized, have laser-sharp focus, and can control their attention. They are very involved and experience high inner quality of goals. Creativity values are taking responsibility over some psychological processes. They experience a union with other people, earth, and high ideals, and use abilities they didn't know they had. Their outside performance increases while the internal reward system brings high levels of self-esteem. There is a balance between challenge and skills; actions and awareness emerge; distractions are excluded from consciousness; and there isn't a worry of failure. The space, the place, the time, and some parts of the self get distorted or disappear, so in a way we can say that the activity becomes autistic. Once people have clarity of vision, they don't doubt anything else, don't have a sense of frustration or force, and they are building a momentum that enables them to make new choices, learn new behavior, and create new habits.

In its essence, flow is a paradoxical experience. It is the simultaneous experience of being and doing. At the same time, it comprises playfulness and discipline, divergent thinking and focus, ambition and a deep sense of connection with others, awareness of surroundings and separation from them. Yet, in spite of this paradox of polarities, people in flow are still very integrated, passionate, balanced, autonomous, and connected with the world. They have the ability to accept and harmonize two polarizing thoughts, feelings, wishes, and behaviors. In some situations (for example, when they are distracted and begin to daydream), flow could be interrupted by other small processes, and while the interruption could cause small-scale chaos, the balance between polarities comes back and flow continues.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi believes that flow processes can be controlled and enhanced in depth and duration through learning, like a seed put in the ground and then nurtured with care, attention, and practice. He advises controlling outside input, disabling stimuli that could distract your flow, whatever those stimuli might be. It is advisable to expand

new ideas freely, to include only supportive partners who are diverse and skilled, not to tolerate disrespect, disregard, and criticism—that is, to exclude toxic people. When practicing flow, you should go above and beyond from the inside; do the unexpected and push beyond the walls.

The state of flow has a strong connection to neurobiology. People who are experiencing flow seem to be in a daydream mode and appear to be temporarily disconnected from their prefrontal cortex. Their neurochemistry and brain function are changed.

Although many people believe that flow is a state of happiness, flow actually has little to do with emotion as a governing principle behind most of our actions. Flow is about clarity and the profound experience of being as it is. One specific emotion cannot be the criterion for flow. It transcends our understanding of positive and negative, often including them both in the widened and deepened experience of life. You should be aware that high openness and sensitivity in creative people make them vulnerable to suffering and pain as much as open to happiness. But in the state of flow, these merge to create fullness.

Curiosity and surprise are entryways into flow. Learn to surprise yourself every day, for example, by trying something new, taking a step away from the familiar, or following your intuition. Also, try to surprise others in a creative way.

Use the tables below to keep a record of your work on surprises and what they brought to you. Write down how you surprised yourself and/or somebody else. Keep these diaries until you feel you are surprised, and surprising others, spontaneously without the need to remind yourself.

That Surprised Me!

Week _____

	Who or what surprised you	In what way?	What you thought and felt about it
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			

Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

... And I Surprised ...

Week _____

	Who I surprised	In what way?	What I thought and felt about it
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Getting Into Flow

Discipline is another important element of flow. To enhance the depth and duration of flow, you should learn to organize your time between activities that you have to do and activities that you want to do. Giving the right-of-way to either takes you away from flow. Find out what triggers your energies. Protect and nourish your creative sources, and keep toxic influences at bay. Keep in mind that flow comprises polarities, and learn to shift between them and practice flexibility. Avoid simplification of thoughts, feelings, experiences, and activities. When you experience the paradox of flow, stay in it for as long as you can; don't fall back into the trap of a black-and-white world.

Think about your creativity. Have you ever experienced flow?

Before beginning the exercises in this workbook, how often were you in the state of flow?

If you have noticed what activities bring you into the state of flow or close to this experience, list them here.

List challenges that invoke flow.

List physical activities that produce flow.

In what place are you the closest to the state of flow? Where/when do your energy and consciousness easily become high?

Flow comes naturally in childhood. What did you like doing as a child?

Which of those things would you gladly do again but hesitate to do for some reason (for example, because you believe that it would be silly, that you have outgrown doing it, or that it wouldn't be appropriate)?

What are your synonyms for flow?

My Childhood Flow Log

Choose a few activities that you liked doing as a child and do them now. Before doing them, be sure to choose a safe place, and do not do things that may cause an injury or that are physically too demanding. Pick a time when no one is watching to avoid possible distractions coming from others and/or the need to explain yourself. You may, for example, want to climb a tree, paint something with your hands and fingers instead of a brush, build a sand castle, do a children's obstacle course, ride a carousel, etc.

Activity you liked to do as a child	What did you think and how did you feel doing it now?	Did the activity invoke flow, joy, or some other flow-like experience?

Using this log, make a plan of activities, places, and people that will help you reach flow. Practice whenever you can and make notes on your progress. Try to describe your flow—how you felt, what insights you had, how energized and connected you felt.

My Adult Flow Diary

Make a copy of the table below, and continue to practice whenever you can. Note that flow will be more difficult to achieve if you are going through a very stressful period in life or if you are sick and physically weak. But even such states may result in flow if you are well versed in achieving flow and have practiced enough. In return, flow can help you overcome the difficulties and solve the problems you are facing.

Week of _____

	Describe your experience of flow.	Did you have difficulties achieving it?	How long were you in the state of flow?	What was the goal of the flow?
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Keeping a Dream Diary

Dreaming is a complex psychic process of balancing personality potentials. One of its very important functions is the elimination, at least temporarily, of mental rigidity; it is a process of searching for freedom.

We all dream but often do not remember our dreams. That is why psychologists suggest keeping a dream diary. Some of them think that art is a dream of a higher level. Keeping a dream diary can help you access your creative potential that is sometimes hidden from the conscious mind.

Our subconscious mind is very powerful. If the conscious mind absorbs plenty of data while we are awake, the subconscious mind can process and make sense of the data while we sleep. Many scientific and artistic achievements were conceived as ideas in dreams. Among the most famous are the development of the periodic table by Dmitri Mendeleev, the structure of the atom that was revealed to Niels Bohr in a dream, the discovery of a scientific method by René Descartes, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, and the movie *Terminator* by the director James Cameron. Many other scientists and artists confirm in their biographies the importance of dreams and describe them as a source of inspiration and a great help in problem solving.

Reading your dream diary while in a creative block offers many potential benefits. You could:

1. Discover that your dreams contain material you might need later in your life.

Start now by writing down one memorable dream.

2. Notice how writing down your dreams ignites an entirely new dimension of consciousness, ideas, and productivity in the powerhouse that is your subconscious mind.

Try to list important symbols from your memorable dream.

3. Understand yourself better.

Use the symbols from above to make associations. Do not try to make logical or expected connections; simply allow yourself to form associations with whatever comes to your mind.

4. Use these symbols to create a different story or situation.
See if you can add to their meaning or change their function.

5. Understand your creativity.

Use the symbols to store ideas. See if you can place them in a context in your awake state. Pick a piece of music that is in accordance with these symbols, and write down what the music is.

6. Realize that it is possible that certain dreams or emotions experienced in a dream may scare you.

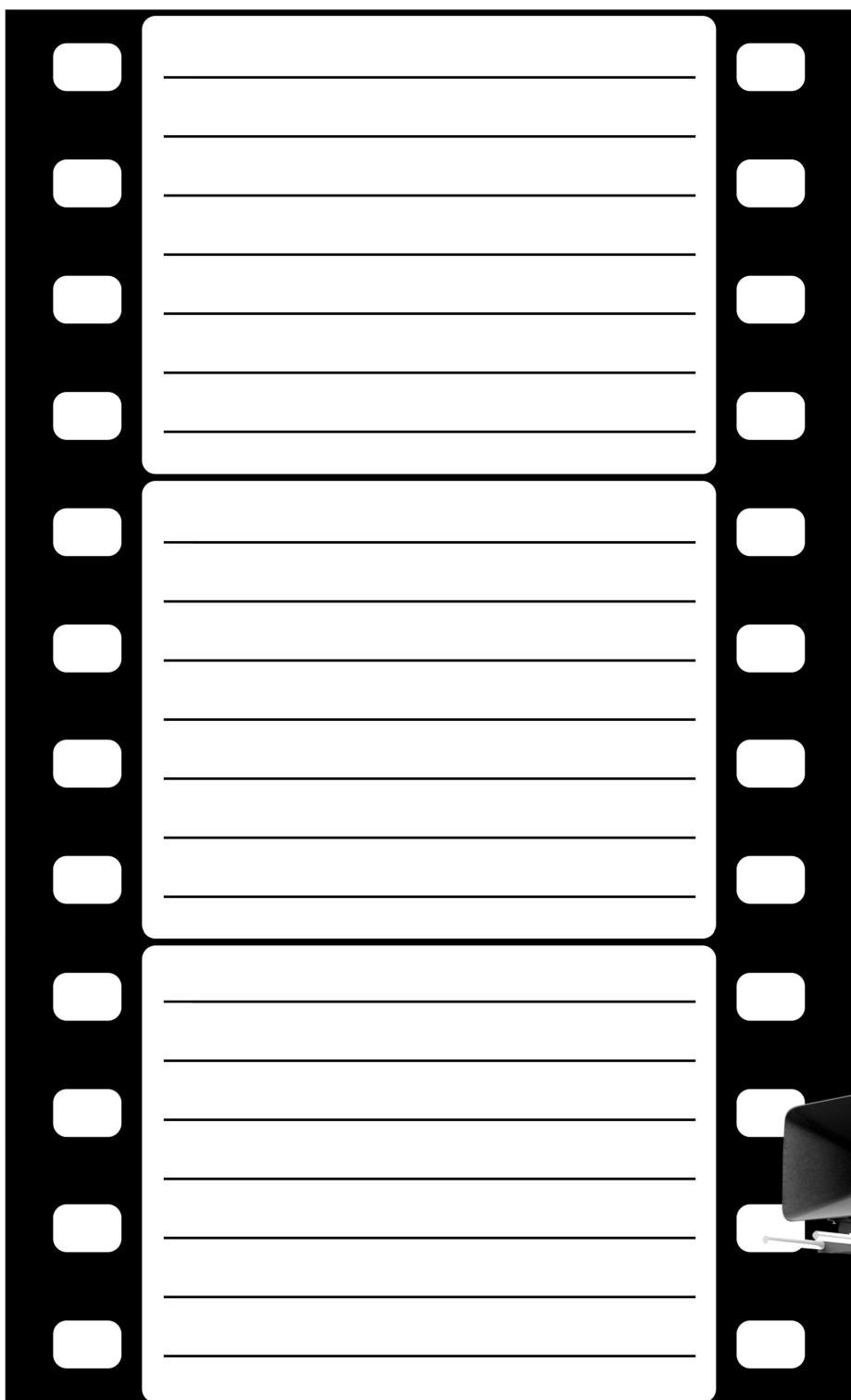
That is perfectly normal, but you should learn to gain rational control over them. Pick a dream or dream situation that for some reason frightens you, and try to observe it calmly and rationally. Observe that it is you who have the control over the situation and that there are alternative ways of finding a solution, a way out, or simply a thought that will dispel fear. Describe how you felt while doing this.

7. Look for common stories or themes.

It is possible that some dreams repeat over a period of time, or that you often dream about the same situations, people, or objects. If that is the case, try to remember the elements that repeat, and write them down. How do you feel about them?

8. Use your dreams as an inspiration any time you can.

They are a true artistic expression of your own life. Try to remember the most creative dream you have ever had and describe it. Then think about imaginativeness, originality, and uniqueness. Those are the qualities of your own mind.



Reviewing What You Have Learned

By now you have learned a lot about your creative block. You have become aware that it is a complex state and that it depends on many factors. The next step is to list the key factors of the block and to review the techniques and strategies you have chosen.

In what phase did the creative block appear? How did it manifest itself?

What characteristics of creativity suffered the most during the creative block?

What is the level of your creative block? Describe it. Remember: the first level is a short stop on your way. It is not so difficult and you can overcome it. The second level is a bigger stop with more of a bad feeling and more difficult to overcome, and the third level is a huge problem and a tragedy to some creative people.

On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 = not important and 10 = the most important, rate the importance of the internal and external factors we unmasked throughout this workbook.

Internal factors and their importance

Crucial negative belief that blocks your creativity	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Name the negative belief:	
Crucial negative thought that prevents you from creating	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Name the negative thought:	
The most harmful driver	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Name the most harmful driver:	
The conflict you cannot resolve	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Which of your selves are in conflict?	
Body symptoms that are related to the block	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Name the body symptoms:	

External factors and their importance

Surveillance	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Expected evaluation	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Competition	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Choice reduction	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Overcontrol	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pressure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Deadline	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reward/money	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Creativity killers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Toxic people	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Support and recognition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Available resources with possible diversity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Creative tension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Trust-based security	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Freedom of expression	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Cooperation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Creative bonding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

What did you do to achieve a balance between internal and external factors?

How did this bring you to the state of flow?

How would you describe your experience of flow and how helpful it is in overcoming the creative block?

Accepting the Creative Block

Why would we want to talk about accepting the creative block? Especially after you have taken a rough journey through the block that, hopefully, you have overcome while traveling?

The answer is quite simple: because it is neither the first nor the last creative block in your life. As you can clearly see now, being in the state of creative block is a complex state of mind. However complex the state can be, the many factors that cause it and reinforce it are under your control, and the focus of your work should always be on them. Of course, you cannot control everything in your life, and you will often find yourself confronted with challenging situations that will be a setback for creativity. Actually, most of the time you will be following “the middle” or the zigzag path. You will be moving from the block to the flow, back and forth, while progressing upward.

Unless your block is on level 3, it will go away. In the meanwhile, you have to learn to endure, overcome your frustrations, and become resilient. Always remember: “This, too, shall pass.”

Zigzag Movement

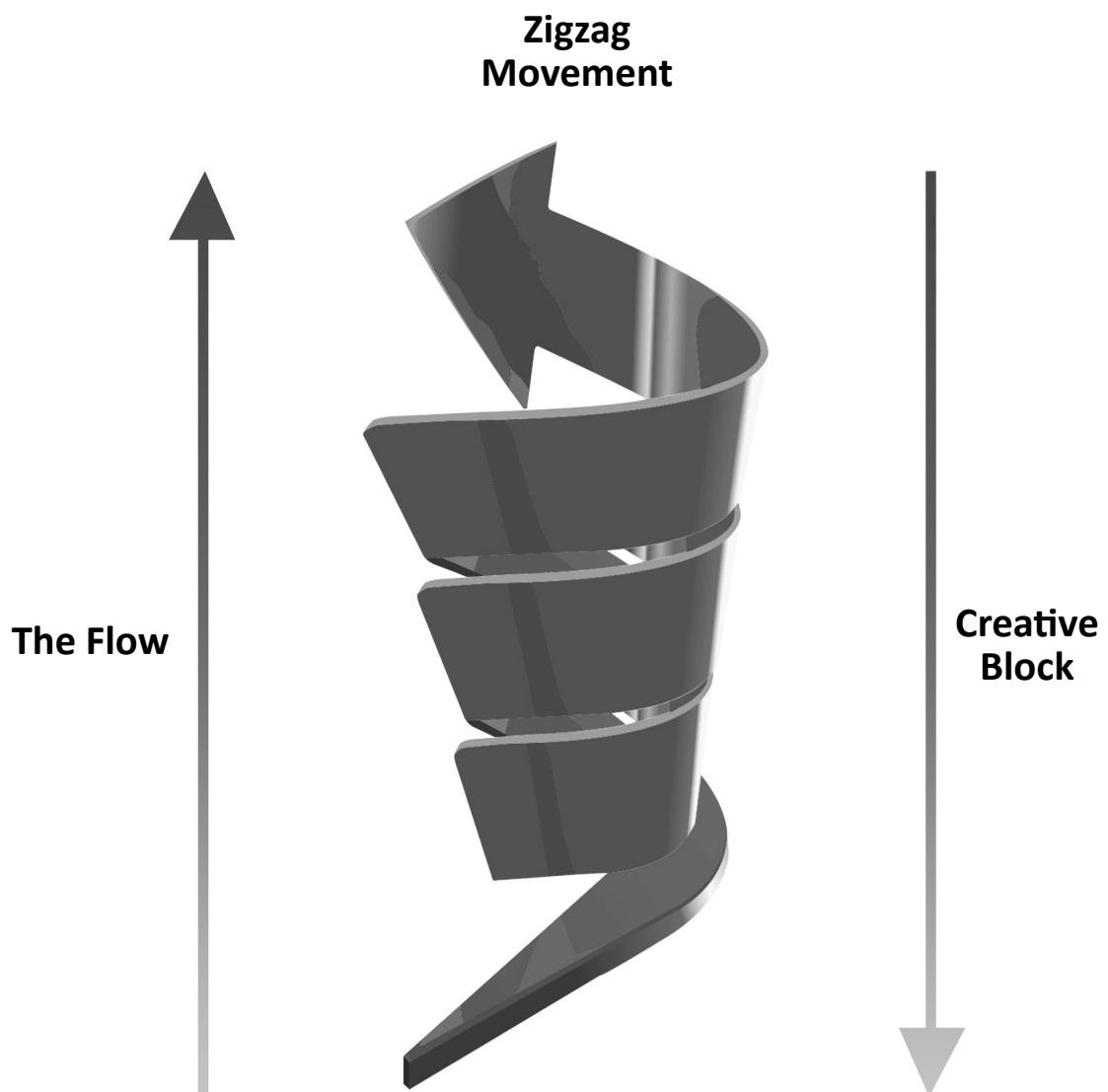
Zigzagging from flow to block and back is the complete path of anyone's creativity, including yours. No one can be creative and productive all the time. The creative block is actually a time for revision. It reminds you that you need to take a deeper look into yourself and pay more attention to your surroundings, especially those you've chosen. The block is there to tell you that it is time to redefine, reexamine, and reassess. Just by being willing to do that, you are already taking a step out of the creative block.

When you compare the creative block that you were facing when you opened this book for the first time with a current or recent creative block, how would you describe the difference in your approach to overcoming the block?

It is important to know that you shouldn't expect to achieve flow directly from the block. The shift is gradual, and it requires at least a few steps on your part.

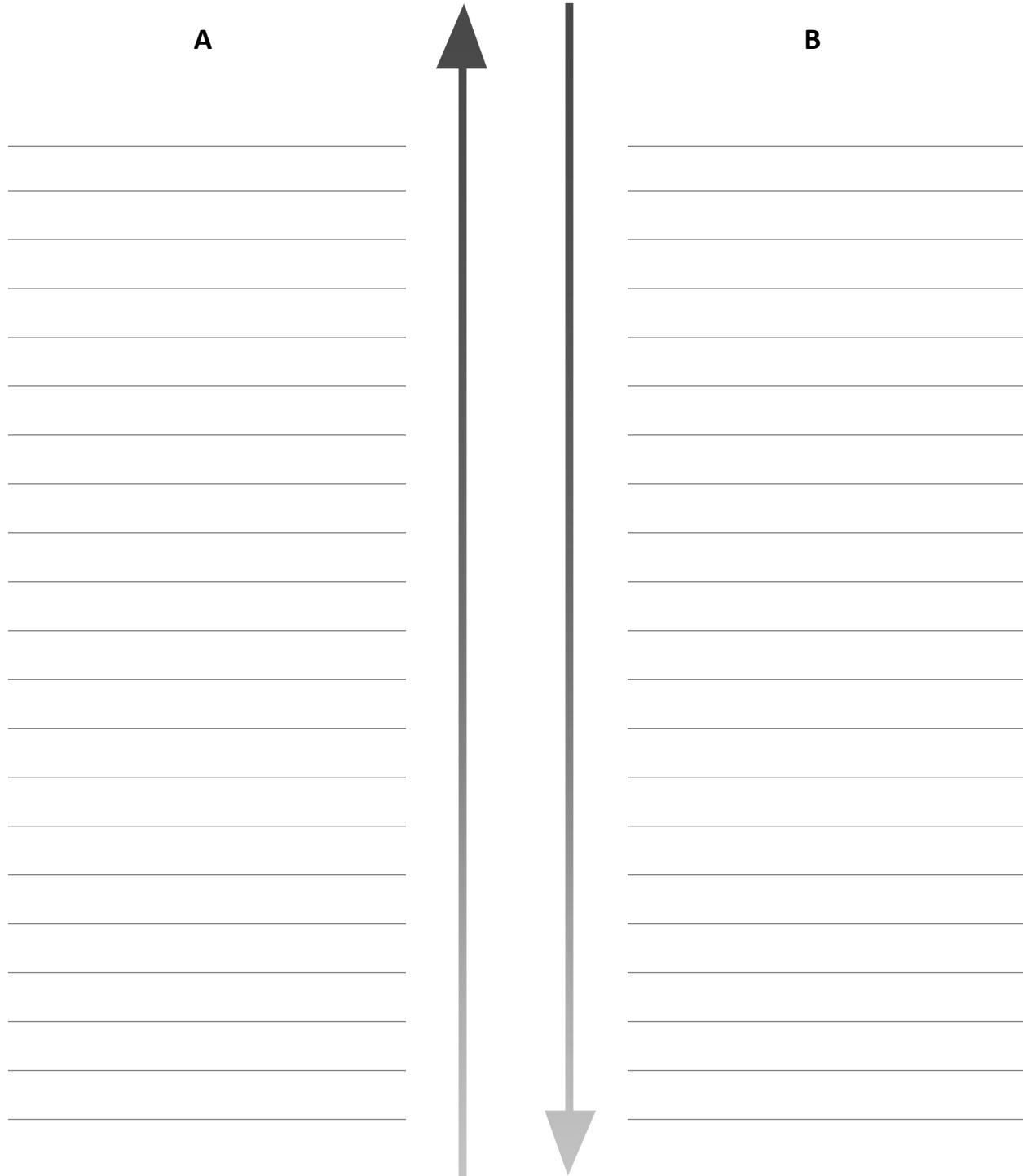
What three steps, exercises, or activities have proven to be the most efficient in helping you move beyond your creative block?

The zigzag movement is about acceptance and growth. It aims at reducing the intensity and length of creative blocks on one side, and extending and deepening experiences of flow on the other. With time, the blocks should become weaker, while flow should become more frequent and stronger.



How do you trigger your flow? Write down your triggers in Column A.

How do you trigger your blocks? Write down your triggers in Column B.



Models of Change

What we call destiny is often our own unconscious script made up of elements that are not always accessible to us because they include our early childhood experiences and the conclusions we've drawn about life. And while we are aware of some of our deep beliefs, most of them remain hidden, like secrets we keep from ourselves. More often than not, we choose to follow our life script in everything we do.

Desire to change might also be a part of this script. Change is very likely to happen if what you want to change or how you want to change is in accordance with your innermost beliefs and convictions.

Each model below illustrates a spectrum of values and beliefs.

Truth – Lies

The story behind this spectrum is the quest for truth. Some people believe that the truth sets us free, heals us, and makes creativity unrestricted and uninhibited. These people see truth as a hidden treasure and will dig deep searching for the absolute truth. During the process, and while obsessed with an unreachable goal, truth seekers miss out on their own lives. When they don't find the truth, or get unexpected reactions from the environment, they become disillusioned and frustrated, and they might discover the benefits of white lies. The other side of the model represents people who believe that lying or hiding the truth will protect them as well as the process and the product of their creativity. The dynamics and the function of this model are either to reveal or to hide the truth that is the core value and a motivation for change. Once the polarities are exhausted, a new path opens itself as a possibility for future growth and development.

As objectively as you can, answer the question: are you a truth seeker or are you living a lie?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Abundance – Deprivation

People who act according to the deep meanings of this model believe that satisfying needs and desires will free and heal them, and make their creativity abundant. Gratification is heaven; deprivation is hell. Satisfaction of any needs that pop up in their minds has magical powers. Pursuing satisfaction means to pursue achievement and to fuel the creative impulse. Without gratification, the person becomes stuck. The opposite belief is that only frustration, seclusion, and deprivation will cure them and set them free from consumerism and the pleasures that inhibit creativity. Renunciation has the power to ignite creativity. Desires and needs are reduced to a minimum. This end of the script is best summarized as “I wish I didn’t wish.”

As objectively as you can, answer the question: do you seek gratification or are you denying yourself the pleasures of life?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Success – Failure

This model holds the belief that success sets us free, heals us, and nurtures creativity. Creativity is important as a way of achieving success. The imperative is to rise above everything that is average. These people strive to reach the highest realization of their creativity. The fear of failure becomes a stumbling block. At the other end of this spectrum is the belief that only in failure can a person rise. The fall gives new strength and makes one wise. Failure commands creation as a means of being reborn.

As objectively as you can, answer the question: are you a success or a failure in your own eyes?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Loyalty – Disobedience

The belief that initiates the events of this spectrum is the question of loyalty. Who are we loyal to? Who must we never betray? To obey means to believe that creativity is the path of respect and obedience to authorities, and only through loyalty to them can we fulfill our destiny. To change is to learn and adopt new wisdom from those who stand as idols. The circle of loyalty may include family, countrymen, and others, not necessarily authorities in the creative fields. The opposite belief is that we must symbolically kill the authorities in order to grow and become free. We must leave and betray our family, our teachers, and those who nurtured our creativity. Creativity cannot be lived without originality and authenticity. The crisis and doubts arise from this dilemma: should we be loyal to ourselves or others?

As objectively as you can, answer the question: do you see yourself as loyal or disloyal?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Revenge – Forgiveness

At one end of this spectrum is the conviction that revenge will set us free, heal us, and make our creativity powerful. The idea of revenge can become one with the act of creating. And creating is possible only if there is a need for revenge. Such a person searches for ways to compensate for past losses, insults, and injustices. The quest of life becomes the quest for justice that will be restored by revenge. If justice is not restored, such a person will not feel free and creative. At the other end of the spectrum is the belief that only forgiveness brings freedom, healing, and the power to create.

As objectively as you can, answer the question: are you a revenge seeker or can you forgive without seeking revenge?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Order – Chaos

This model is organized around the idea of order. Such people feel that only order will set them free, heal them, and bring their creativity into harmony with the universe. Their movement must be balanced and guided by harmony. Change is possible if it adds to universal order. The opposite direction puts chaos and the need to destroy in its center. In order to create, one must destroy first. Chaos becomes a prerequisite of creativity, a symbol of freedom, and an ideal state for healing.

As objectively as you can, answer the question: do you bring order or chaos to this world?

What is the feedback from your environment?

What would happen if you stopped doing this?

Progressing Toward Flow

The first steps on the path of change are becoming aware of the broken pieces of flow that lie scattered in your mind and body, gathering them, and assembling them into a meaningful whole. As you travel further along the path of change, you will notice how the pieces of flow you gathered almost organically grow into a larger, more compact whole. The process is progressive. And as you make headway, your creative blocks will start crumbling, giving way to clarity, meaning, and purpose. Your creativity will become more fluid, and you will feel relief as your stressful experiences recede. The path of overcoming creative blocks is learning how to trust your instincts that empower change.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

If you were honest while doing the activities in this workbook, you have learned a lot about yourself. At times you might have had an impression that you were facing your internal demons. And so you were, except for the fact that they are not half as demonic as they first seemed. At the same time, you have learned how to safeguard the flow, give yourself permission to move beyond your inhibitions, empower and protect yourself, and find purpose in your creative work. By learning to tame and control the zigzag movement of two opposite processes (block and flow), you have learned how to go through your creative blocks. Sometime in the future, while working through a creative block, you will lead yourself toward integration and balance. Gradual and gentle integrations of processes enable the flow of transformation. It takes time to obtain the optimal movement.

We choose a change model in accordance with our personality preferences. After a period of accumulating changes, transformation is set on another level, above the blocked one. We have acquired cognitive, emotional, and perception shifts from the blocked level. We have become resilient and spontaneous. New forms of self-confidence develop, enabling us to relax, enjoy ourselves, and have meaningful lives. The previous overcompensated (or very low) self-esteem is replaced with a realistic, vital new one. It is a form of deep metamorphosis whose quality affects our innermost being as well as people around us. We develop vital trust instead of chronic anxiety or damaged basic trust. We dare to risk creating again.

We have been clear that block work is not a mechanical ritual or a series of acting-out behaviors with spectacular emotional discharges, after which we wait for the magical result. There is no magic pill or technique. For the process of transformation to work optimally, we need motivation and willingness to question everything about our lives. To give in to the flow is not easy. At the beginning, relaxation seems impossible, and it usually doesn't happen the very first time we try it. The tasks of relaxing and seeing clearly are not contradictory. We learn how to give in to those restorative forces, how to zigzag between the creative block and flow forces, how to develop vital trust, and, for those who are in treatment, how to reach out to a psychotherapist who has experience in working with creative people. That rhythmical movement restores and builds up individual power that had been destroyed in the original creative blocks. Learning how to move through your creative blocks could help in your self-actualization, self-individuation, and self-confidence, and your nonconformity, if that is the lifestyle you wish.

You are neither the first nor the last creative person to have a creative block. Here are six stories by people who went to workshops on overcoming their creative blocks. For their last session, they were asked to write short stories. Somehow, endings got lost. So, as one of the last activities in this workbook, we ask you to give these synopses their endings.

Julia

Julia wrote about a young girl who never got what she wanted. Never! With time, the girl came to accept that as a fact of her life, though the sad feeling of never having any of her innermost wishes come true never left her. She became quite good at settling for second best, so good that she wasn't even upset at not having things her way. At least, that was what she kept telling herself. From time to time, she would remember her childhood love of art and how often she was told that she wasn't talented. In high school, she dared to take a few art classes and even started thinking that perhaps she was a bit creative. She worked hard, practiced, attended art courses after school, and got into a respectable art school. But, while her classmates were finishing their projects on time and passing exams with apparent ease, she didn't. Every assignment was a nightmare. Sometimes she couldn't even start, and sometimes she couldn't finish. It seemed to her that she was permanently stuck in her third-level creative block. And then, one day ...

Norah

Norah's story is about a girl who loved playing the piano at her grandmother's house and dreamed about becoming a concert pianist. Her parents strongly disapproved of piano playing as a career, telling her that it was a waste of time, and that as a piano player she would end up being poor and playing in second-rate nightclubs. Now, thirty-five years later, she would often remember those happy, carefree days of her childhood and how right her parents were. Then one night, while playing a piece by Chopin in a kind of jazzy style and feeling sorry for herself ...

Daniel

Daniel wrote about a boy who loved colors and what he could do with them. The boy often sat quietly on his own, happy with his crayons and watercolors. At first, his successful, business-oriented parents didn't pay much attention to their son's love of art. However, as the boy became more serious about his art, the parents began to worry that their son would break the family tradition of success in business and waste the family fortune on the unconventional lifestyle painters were famous for. So they blackmailed him—business school first, and everything else if the boy could find the time for it. So the boy applied for both a demanding business school and a prestigious art college. And he was accepted at both. Torn about what to do, at the last minute he decided to go to business school. Years later, he was one of the top executive managers in the country. His only reminder of his artistic aspirations was a small painting he had done as a child, for which he was given first prize at a community competition. It was hanging in his office, just across from his oversized desk, next to a framed certificate of merit for his management skills. One day, looking through his personal papers, he found his letter of acceptance from the art college, years ago. He remembered how he had never responded to the letter ...

Alex

Alex's story was about a young man who believed that only children were capable of true happiness. So this young man decided not to grow up! He tried many different activities from music to sports, and he was more or less successful at all of them. But as soon as the activity became boring, he would quit and seek something else. After high school, he wanted to take a year off and travel around the world. His parents objected at first, but soon gave in to this idea, as he was their only child and, after all, traveling could help him grow up. Somewhere during his journey, he went to a concert that he enjoyed so much he wished he were a musician. Upon his return home, he was accepted at a well-known music school. It wasn't even difficult. He had passed the entry exam with flying colors. Halfway through the first year, his work became below average and sloppy. His coursework was always overdue, and he received a lot of criticism from his teachers. Music school was turning into torture; he was not happy, and unfinished assignments piled up. One rainy morning, he was standing by the window of his apartment, looking at the rain. His saxophone hung around his neck. He put his hands on it and ...

Suzy

Suzy wrote a story about a daughter of perfect parents. Everything about this girl's parents was perfect. They lived in a perfect neighborhood, had a perfect house, were perfect in their high-profile careers. Their marriage was perfect, their garden, their car. And, of course, the daughter had to be perfect too. Perfection was the only thing her parents expected of her. And the girl was good at everything. In some things, she was the best in her class, and even her school, but she felt she wasn't perfect. When it came time for her to choose a career, this quest for perfection made it almost impossible for her to decide on just one profession. Instead, she became very good at several jobs. Yet, curiously enough, she couldn't keep any single job for long. After a while, she would start to feel paralyzed and deeply convinced that her work wasn't perfect enough. She would start performing badly and feeling unable to meet any expectations of her. Her life was becoming torture. On top of everything, there were her perfect parents who, with the best of intentions, kept urging her to pull herself together. On the train home one day, she saw an older woman, seemingly homeless, sitting opposite her reading an art history book ...

Jane

Jane's story was unremarkable in every respect. It was about a girl who had a peaceful, average childhood and couldn't remember anything great or notable about it. Her heroine said about herself, "My childhood was plain and boring. I was a mediocre person, and I'll die like one. I'll find a mediocre husband, and we'll have barely noticeable children. I can only do ordinary, average projects, and I don't understand why people delegate new tasks to me when it's more than obvious that I can't do anything original." So she would sit at her desk procrastinating, thinking how useless, meaningless, and ordinary her work was. But as a deadline approached, she would somehow manage to finish the work. Once, in conversation with her colleagues, the topic of creative blocks was brought up and she realized that her problem was a second-level creative block. The next day ...

We humans are storytellers. We create our own and listen to other people's stories. We are in search of a meaningful and creative life. Telling or listening to a story helps creative processes.

Putting Your Life on Stage

Imagine that, for fun, you entered a competition titled “My Life As a Film.” You submitted your entry, convinced that nothing would come of it—and it was your entry that won! You received a letter from the producers, asking you to write a more detailed synopsis of your life. But there is a catch: the ending must be a happy one. Rather than writing it themselves, the producers prefer you do it. After all, it is your life being put on stage.

What would you write?

Epilogue

Remember the Painter? Professionally speaking, he suffered from clinical depression. In plain language, he had convinced himself that true art and creativity can only result from being wholly miserable. To that end, he lived the life of a miserable person. He didn't nurture his friendships, he denied himself small earthly pleasures, he read only serious and heavy books, he wore dark clothes and painted in dark colors, he drank and even used drugs on occasion. He lived the life of a monk in a dark monastery, faithful to his conviction that misery is the essential condition for great art. Yet in spite of his being faithful to his belief, great work did not come so easily to him, and it happened so rarely. Rather, it was the result of almost endless hours of feeling wretched. The Painter suffered in both his life and work. The gifts of his misery were many, but truly great art was not among them. Then he came to me, and you know the rest.

What the Painter failed to take into account was the simple realization that creativity—despite being complex and multifaceted—is about the joy of life, the joy of being wholly alive, of experiencing happiness and fear, anger and sadness, pain and pleasure, satisfaction and failure. Creativity is the expression of such a life.

So after all, having a creative block is actually good news because it means you are a creative person and as a creative person you have the ability—your creativeness—to overcome the block by being alive now. *Now!*

Notes