

Get Unstuck in the Practice Room With a “Creative Pause”

Description

You know those moments when you run into a particularly vexing problem in the practice room and get stuck?

Where no matter how many repetitions you put in, or hard you try, you just can't get a note to speak right, or work a passage up to the goal tempo?

Whether it's uncooperative fingers or an embouchure mystery, this can all be pretty frustrating. So as the frustration builds, you might dig your heels in, grit your teeth, and continue to hack away at the problem, hoping that brute force will eventually lead to some sort of breakthrough.

There is of course something to be said for persistence – but then again, someone once also said, “If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.”

Because in many cases, once you reach [rage-quitting levels](#) of frustration, you're probably just making things worse.

So what's the alternative?

The “creative pause”

I once met a writer, who said that when she gets stuck in her writing, she'll often take a shower to get unstuck. And that on difficult writing days, where she's working on a deadline and can't afford to put the writing off any longer, she might take as many as 5 showers in a single day.

Creative types sometimes refer to this as a “[creative pause](#)” – a brief pulling away from the problem, which often results in new ideas, or solutions presenting themselves unexpectedly.

Sort of like what seems to happen in this video of the mouse and the cracker (check out what happens around the 54-second mark).

Just when the mouse looks like it's about to give up, it appears to take a creative pause, and tries one last time. And yes, the pause is pretty short – only 4 seconds to us – but if one human year is like 33 mouse years, maybe that's like 132 seconds in mouse seconds? ?

I'm sure I'm making too much of this little mouse's pause, but if nothing else, it's kind of fun to watch that mouse jump around (if only this had a soundtrack).

Umm...so what is it about taking a break that helps with creativity anyway?

Well, it appears that it may not be the break itself that's important, but what we do *during* the break that matters.

The benefits of mind-wandering?

When you are driving in snowy icy weather, or performing open-heart surgery, or auditioning for a big job, letting your mind wander aimlessly is probably not such a great idea.

But when it comes to enhancing creativity and problem-solving, mind-wandering may actually be quite desirable.

A 2006 study ([Dijksterhuis & Meurs](#)), for instance, found that being distracted enhances creativity, while being too focused on the problem diminishes it.

And a 2011 study ([White & Shah](#)) found that individuals diagnosed with ADHD tend to score higher than non-ADHD folks on certain standardized measures of creativity. The same researchers have also gathered data which suggests that people with ADHD may enjoy greater levels of achievement in creative domains like music, art, cooking, writing, humor, and invention.

How much of a benefit could we gain from a little purposeful mind-wandering?

A creativity study

A 2012 study out of UC Santa Barbara ([Baird et al.](#)) tested 145 participants' creativity with the Unusual Uses Task, where the objective is to generate as many unusual uses as possible for a common object (like a lawn chair) in 2 minutes.

After running everyone through this test once, participants were split into 4 groups.

1. One group did it again immediately.
2. Another group engaged in an **attention-demanding task** for 12 minutes.
3. A third group engaged in a cognitively **undemanding task** for 12 minutes (basically just responding to a computer prompt which asked if a number was even or odd).
4. And a final group just sat quietly for 12 minutes.

How much mind-wandering took place?

The researchers then used an assessment to find out how much mind-wandering occurred during this “incubation” period.

They found that the participants engaged in the undemanding task experienced significantly more mind-wandering than those who were busy with the demanding task.

Then the researchers had the participants repeat the same creativity test.

Any guesses as to which group did the best?

The biggest boost in creativity

As you probably guessed, the participants in the **undemanding** task group – whose minds did the most mind-wandering during the break between creativity tests – improved their scores by about **40%**!

And how did the others do?

None of the other groups improved their scores at all.

Take action

So the next time you run into a problem in the practice room (or elsewhere) that has you stumped, try taking a creative pause.

Take a shower. Wash the dishes. Fold some laundry. [Knit](#). Doodle. Go for an [awe walk](#).

Do something that uses some brain power, but not too much (and [avoid social media!](#)).

Don't think about the problem directly, but just let your mind wander for a bit, then come back to your instrument after a little while.

When you return, maybe you'll find that the solution was there in front of you the whole time. And you just needed a little “creative pause” to see it. ?

Just for fun

Are you on a “creative pause” right now?

I'm pretty sure this video doesn't meet the criteria for a cognitively undemanding task that promotes mind-wandering, but I thought it was hilarious 10 years ago, couldn't find it for years, and just rediscovered it while on a creative pause of my own, so I figured I'd share. ?

References

Baird, B., Smallwood, J., Mrazek, M. D., Kam, J. W. Y., Franklin, M. J., & Schooler, J. W. (2012). Inspired by Distraction. *Psychological Science*, *23*(10), 1117–1122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612446024>

Dijksterhuis, A., & Meurs, T. (2006). Where creativity resides: The generative power of unconscious thought. *Consciousness and Cognition*, *15*(1), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2005.04.007>

White, H. A., & Shah, P. (2011). Creative style and achievement in adults with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*(5), 673–677. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2010.12.015>

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