

The Unheralded Benefits of Mindlessness, Mind-Wandering, and Daydreaming

Description

From [scoring higher on the GRE's](#) to [boosting mental toughness in Marines](#) to [improving peak performance in Olympic athletes](#) to [maximizing happiness](#) for all of us, mindfulness seems to be all the rage nowadays.

And there are indeed a ton of benefits from developing our ability to be more present and engaged in the moment.

But sheesh, sometimes being mindful can be so exhausting. Is mind-wandering really so bad? What's wrong with spacing out, and going on a bit of a mental holiday every now and again?

Practicing as problem solving

At some point during my studies, I came to realize that effective practicing is often about solving problems. Sometimes they are more technical in nature – like finding a better bowing or fingering, or figuring out why a passage sounds so muddled, or why the sound we want comes out only every 7th time. Other times, our challenges are more interpretive in nature – like puzzling over what the “right” tempo ought to be, or trying to make sense of a phrase that doesn't feel quite right, or working to interpret the suggestions and clues the composer provided.

When stumped by something of this nature, there are a few different approaches we can take to solving it.

1. Just give up and sweep it under the rug. Hope nobody notices.
2. Just power through, and hope that our sheer force of will and persistent repetition will eventually shake out some sort of solution that sticks.
3. Leave it for a moment, work on something else instead, and return to it later.

Much as we wish we could at times, we know #1 is not really an option.

And #2 can be pretty tempting as well. A friend once told me a story about a pianist who was struggling with a technical passage. So, he took a deep breath, committed to playing it 100 times, and put his pencil on the 88th key of the piano. After playing it through, he moved the pencil down a key, played it again, moved the pencil down another key, played it once more, and so on (and if you're wondering, yes, he would move the pencil back up to the top after a certain number of reps to avoid playing on the pencil key).

Of course, sheer mindless repetition is not a particularly fun, efficient, or effective strategy for solving problems.

Anecdotal though, there seems to be something to strategy #3. Of taking a break, letting the problem unconsciously simmer on the back burner, and having a creative breakthrough occur to us when we're doing something else. An "incubation" period, if you will.

Studying incubation effects

A [team of researchers](#) took 145 participants (ages 19-32) and randomly divided them into 4 different groups.

All groups started by taking a classic test of creativity – the Unusual Uses Task (UUT) – which requires the individual to list as many possible uses for a common item such as a brick (e.g. paperweight, doorstop, buffet table for pet hamsters, etc.) as they can think of in a set amount of time. In this study, the participants were given four minutes to complete two UUT problems (2 minutes per object).

Then, three groups experienced a 12-minute "incubation" period to see what kind of impact this might have on their creativity.

One group's incubation time was devoted to performing a mentally-demanding task, before being told that they would work on the Unusual Uses Task once again. This time, however, the test would consist of four UUT problems presented in random order – two new problems, in addition to two repeat problems (i.e. the same exact problems they worked on in the initial test). Let's call this the **demanding-task** group.

The **undemanding-task** group's incubation time consisted of an easy, mentally-*undemanding* task. Then, they too were presented two new and two repeat UUT problems.

A third group (the **rest** group), was simply asked to sit quietly for 12 minutes, before they too were presented with the 4 UUT problems.

The last group (the **no-rest** group), didn't get any break at all, but just went straight to the 8-minute UUT test after completing the initial 4-minute UUT test.

Does incubation enhance creativity?

As you can probably guess, the group which took both tests back-to-back (**no-rest**), failed to demonstrate any change in creativity from one test to the next.

The **demanding-task** group also failed to demonstrate any improvements in creativity. Same with the sit-around-quietly-for-12-minutes-and-do-nothing (**rest**) group..

But as you can see in the chart below, the **undemanding-task** group DID improve their creativity scores significantly from the first test to the second – *but only for the repeated problems*.

What does it all mean?

So why the undemanding-task group, and not the others?

Well, a mind-wandering assessment given to all three incubation groups indicated that this group did indeed experience more mind-wandering than did the demanding-task group. Which adds to a body of other studies which have found that engaging in an undemanding task tends to result in greater “incubation effects” than either demanding tasks or rest.

All in all, it seems that engaging in tasks that maximize mind-wandering may help facilitate the generation of creative solutions to problems.

However, this seems to be true only for problems that we’ve already tried to solve in the past. Mind-wandering doesn’t give us a general boost in creativity across the board, so much as it seems to help us problem-solve familiar problems more creatively.

Take action

So the next time you are stumped by a problem in the practice room, don’t just grit your teeth and power on through. Take an “incubation break” and come back to it. You may find that you will be able to come up with a few more solutions to try once you’ve let your brain stew on things a bit.

And if you catch yourself daydreaming or lost in moments of mind-wandering, you don’t necessarily have to beat yourself up about this!

During a test, or audition, or even during practice sessions, [mindfulness is the way to go](#), but periods of deliberate mind-wandering, can certainly be of value as well. Everything in moderation, as the saying goes.

Additional reading

[In Praise of Spacing Out](#) @NY Magazine

[Ode to positive constructive daydreaming](#) @ Frontiers in Psychology

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