

IS CREATIVITY THE KEY TO PREVENTING BURNOUT?

BY DANIELLE WINSTON

SCIENCE SAYS THE SECRET TO WORK-LIFE HARMONY LIES IN TAPPING INTO YOUR ARTISTIC SIDE TO RELIEVE STRESS AND ACHIEVE INNER CALM, GREATER FULFILLMENT AND HAPPINESS.

"ATTUNED CHOICE BY ATTUNED CHOICE, YOUR ENTIRE LIFE IS A FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION."

- RICK RUBIN -
AUTHOR OF *THE CREATIVE ACT: A WAY OF BEING*

If you find yourself physically and emotionally exhausted and feeling overwhelmed, you're not alone. In 2023, 77% of employees in the U.S. experienced stress at work. Pile on the demands of family, friends and romantic relationships, and you've got a pressure cooker recipe for mind-body burnout.

But creativity may offer a gateway to work-life balance. What begins with expanding your imagination may also help you shift your mental headspace. Creative activities offer a rainbow of benefits, such as stress reduction, resilience, and immunity and cognitive function boosts. It may even increase feelings of happiness and well-being, which can offset the effects of burnout.

If you're shaking your head thinking that creativity is for a select group of talented artists, think again. New research from the University of Utah Health suggests that creativity is a specific brain function. "Creativity is a mental skill that can be developed," says Clarissa Silva, a behavioral scientist and founder of C Silva Solutions LLC.

Additional research from the University of Birmingham showed that creative thinking starts in infancy. According to their findings, babies are "not only capable of creative thinking well before starting to speak, but this sort of thinking may be essential for language acquisition."

Creativity helps you reframe your thoughts and feelings by lowering the stress hormone cortisol and increasing the "feel-good" neurotransmitter, dopamine. Members of a 2016 study on cortisol levels in adults who engaged in visual art-making activities said that afterward, they felt more relaxed and free to explore and enjoyed losing themselves in the creative flow. As a result, their cortisol levels significantly decreased.

When you engage in art- or craft-making, your brain begins to generate spontaneous thoughts that lead to "new ideas, associations and emotions that help you transcend that immediate negative mental state," Silva says.

Unplug your devices, remove distractions and resist the urge to judge what you create—it's time to invite inner harmony through creativity with these expert recommendations.



**YOGA BREATHING
TO ENCOURAGE FLOW**

When you’re deep in the creative experience, you’ll notice that hours may feel like minutes, or the reverse, as you enter what’s known as the “flow state.” Silva explains that this happens because you lose your sense of self and self-consciousness. The process produces a brain antioxidant that acts as a protective factor that Silva says can help you create cognitive flexibility and “razor-sharp, problem-focused coping that can help reduce the risk of developing and experiencing future burnout symptoms.” However, during times of stress, your brain inhibits your “ability to create solutions to resolve the symptoms,” she adds.

One way to encourage flow and warm yourself up for creative activities is through yoga breathing practices. According to Hari Kaur, a Kundalini yoga master teacher, author and co-founder of Hari NYC, meditation encourages the synchronization of body and mind, and “breath practices stimulate the parasympathetic system to help you decompress and slow down, making the flow state available to you.”

Kaur says that yoga philosophy describes flow as a state of being with “a feeling of connectedness and fluidity of mind and body that allows one to focus deeply and without distraction.” Try relaxing your mind by way of yoga breathing with Kaur’s instructions: “Lay on your back; inhale, feeling your lower abdomen rise; and continue the breath, feeling your chest rise and expand to the sides as the floating ribs move, and finally, complete the breath by reaching deeply and allowing the very top of the chest to expand.”

PLAY WITH CLAY

Working with clay can be messy, meditative and calming. Go simple with air-dry clay. Explore the tactile nature of kneading and shaping it with your fingers. For added benefits, close your eyes and feel your way. Then, open them and see what emerges. You can also work on a specific project like creating beads, paperweights, statues or bowls. After the clay dries, you have the option to paint and glaze your work.

Silva says that “sensory activities stimulate the release of endorphins, the body’s natural feel-good chemicals, [which] can lead to a reduction in negative emotional states.” A Newcastle University research study also discovered that clay therapy may benefit mental health by reducing anxiety in individuals with epilepsy and improving cognitive function and reducing stress in others. Similarly, drawing and clay therapy may also encourage more positive emotions and promote relaxation.

COLOR YOUR EMOTIONS

Chances are that one of your earliest childhood memories may involve coloring outside the lines with crayons. As an adult, most of us are taught to stay contained and follow the rules. But coloring can help you reconnect with your younger self and an innate sense of play.

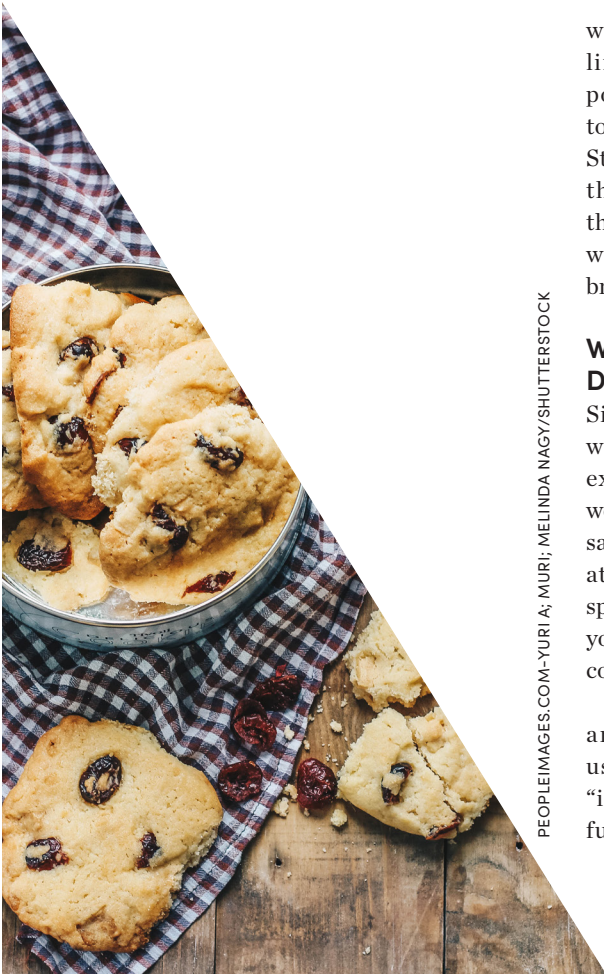
According to Carla Marie Manly, Ph.D., creator of the *Imperfect Love* podcast and author of *The Joy of Imperfect Love*, coloring preset images takes the stress out of creating the basic form, allowing you the freedom to color as you desire. “If an image is overly challenging (e.g., too intricate), it can actually create stress and frustrations,” she says. “So it’s important to select image types that suit a person’s individual needs. Color choice, too, plays a part in the process of creative healing.”

**EXPLORE THE WONDER
OF COLLAGES**

Collaging has the potential to springboard your imagination while helping you focus. Manly says that “collaging encourages an immersive physical, mental and emotional experience. Each step, such as choosing, cutting, gluing and placing, allows the creator to focus on the flow of the work in progress.”

Have fun experimenting with different textures, designs, images and shapes. When choosing images, let your mind wander. You can upcycle vintage magazines, prints, wrapping paper and old cards. Decide how to cut and trim them and experiment with fun ways to arrange your images. After securing your visuals, you might embellish with designs made from paint, glitter or markers. Let your intuition guide the way.

“When we lose ourselves in any creative activity, we are fully present in the moment,” Manly adds. “In this relaxed space, stress naturally melts away.”



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WORK ON MINDFUL PAINTING

One of psychotherapist Babita Spinelli’s favorite creative stress-relieving activities is painting. “It helps me express my feelings and thoughts visually and is therapeutic and relaxing. It allows me to slow down and channel my inner child,” she says. She goes on to explain that the act of painting helps her shift from daily life routines by immersing herself in “the beauty of texture, colors and expression of whatever I may be feeling. It’s a cathartic outlet.”

Do you prefer the languid shapes of watercolors and want to recreate still lifes from nature? Are large abstract posters more your style, or are easy-to-clean acrylics and canvas your jam? Start with primary colors, give yourself the freedom to mix colors and enjoy the process. When it comes to choosing what to paint, let instinct guide your brush and see where inspiration leads.

**WHIP UP SOMETHING
DELICIOUS**

Since eating is part of everyone’s day, why not use mealtime as a chance to express your creativity? Cooking is a wonderful multilayered activity, Spinelli says, as “the process itself involves creative freedom. You can choose your spices, preparation techniques and how you want to plate it. It can be simple or complex, depending on how you feel.”

Along with using your imagination and being tactile, cooking involves using your senses. The act of tasting “incorporates a natural, organic mindfulness,” Spinelli adds.

FEAST ON ART

Even when you aren’t actively engaged in art-making, viewing art provides an array of benefits, including lightening your mood and enhancing feelings of inner calm. Viewing art can also inspire you to be more creative and may give you ideas for future styles, colors and mediums.

According to Manly, “whether visiting a museum, noticing nature’s canvas [or] street art or standing in awe inside a local artist’s shop, our psychological and physical health benefit when we slow down to enjoy the artwork that is around us.... If we train ourselves to pause to appreciate the creative works that surround us, we naturally feel more balanced and joyful.”

**FOCUS ON INTUITIVE
PHOTOGRAPHY**

If you have a camera, go ahead and get started. Otherwise, your phone doesn’t have to be a distraction. Turn it on airplane mode and use it solely as a camera. Take a walk in nature or on a busy city street and let your lens guide the way. Zoom in on a bird in flight, a blade of grass or melting snow on a street sign. Focus on anything that draws you in. Remember to pull back and view the larger picture, too.

Don’t edit, filter or look at photos while you take them. Later on, you can slowly go through them to see what you find. If you want to edit, now’s your chance. But before you do, enlarge each photo and see if you can uncover new details that you didn’t originally catch. If you’re so inclined, you can also print your favorite images.

**ENGAGE IN RITUALS
TO INVITE BALANCE**

Before you become depleted by stress, remember to pause and be kind to yourself during life’s ordinary moments. Infuse your favorite creative activities into daily life, just as you would any mindfulness practice. As you embrace your inner artist, explore different avenues for self-expression. Build up your creativity muscles with consistency as well. Do something small each day that helps you form a new habit. Silva says that doing creative tasks can increase your desire to continue them, as “research shows that people report being more creative the day after the actual creative flow state activity.”

Make a point to stay curious and view each sensory experience as your own personal respite, a playful form of self-care where you can recharge and restore balance, even on the most demanding days. ♦

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