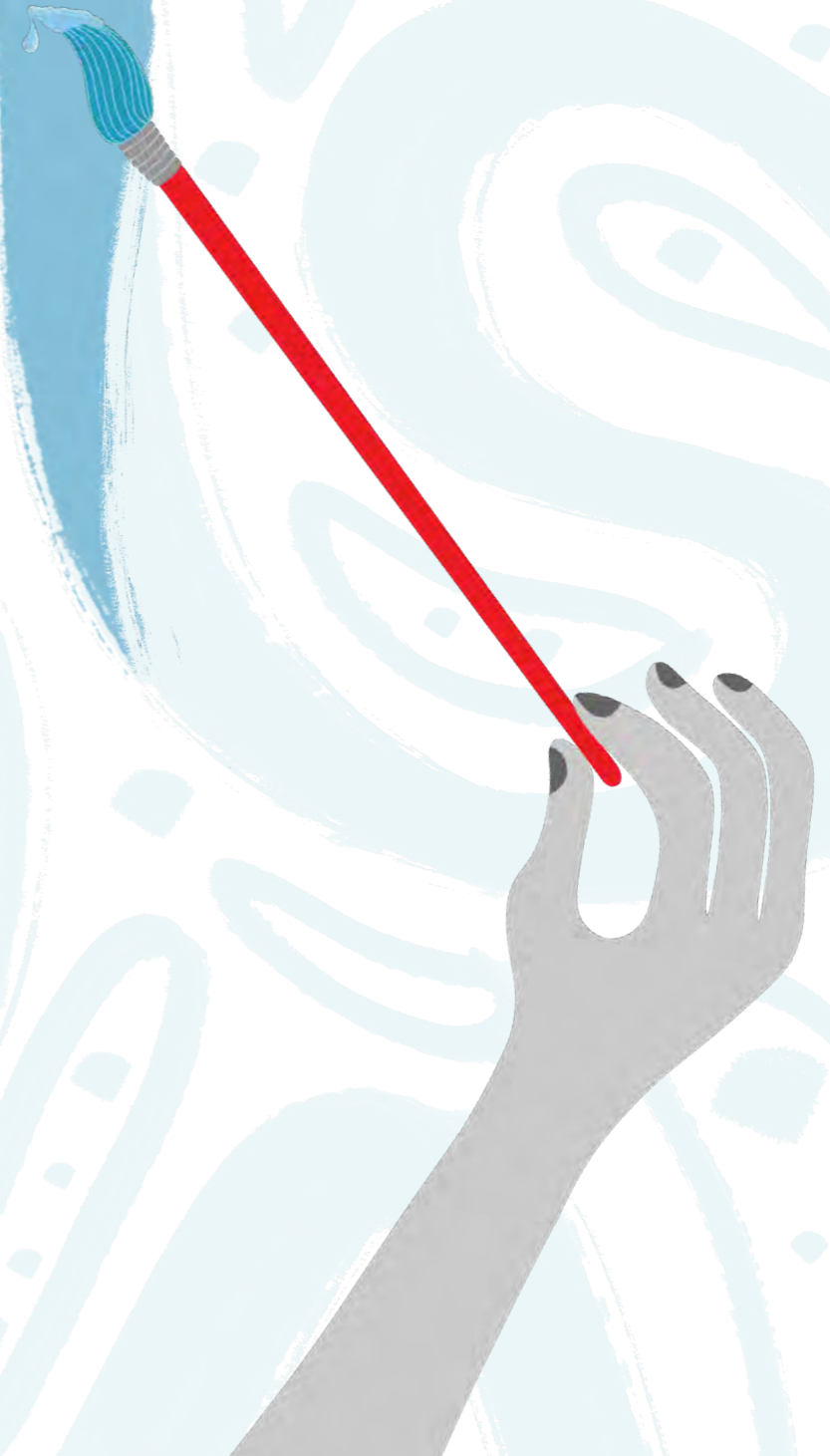




About
**CREATIVE
BLOCK**

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Creativity is possibly one of human beings' most valued abilities, but one that is complex to define, measure, or conceptualise. It also requires nurturing, internal motivation, effort to break habits and courage to follow new paths, envisage alternative perspectives, face the decision-making process, handle the uncertainty of the end result and dealing with the pressure of creating something that might help to transform our social and economic environments.

Although it is often glamourised as a boundless and spontaneous process that allows the creative person to interpret and represent the world in their own terms (Głaziewicz & Golonka, 2024, p.1), for many artists, illustrators, and creatives in general, the act of creating can also be a very meandering path that might involve, regardless of training or experience, the paralysing distress of creative block.

Undeniably, the best thoughts always come when we feel relaxed and at peace with the world around us. In the best creative scenario, the creative person can effortlessly be led by their thoughts and ideas. However, the creative flow sometimes falls out of balance, no matter how hard they try.



‘Creative block is not an immediate challenge of the design process but a consequence of either internal or external factors’

Creative block, in fact, does not appear to be an immediate challenge of the design process (Meier, 2023, p.69) but a consequence of either internal or external factors.

There are numerous reasons, both extrinsic and intrinsic to the individual, why creative block might occur: from ill health to financial difficulties, from fear of failure to burn out or simply focusing too much on rewards, like achieving a work commission or obtaining good grades at school. Everyone might experience it at some point, depending on their very own circumstances.

According to Doctor Rosa Aurora Chávez-Eakle (2012, p.76), psychoanalyst at the Washington Center for Psychoanalysis, character and temperament, which are closely related to an individual’s personality, can also affect creativity. A person’s everyday emotions, thoughts, behaviours, changes in mood, motivation, environment, or cognitive disposition are some of the factors that might hinder the creative process.





The list of things creative people might want to do, or feel they need to do
Illustration by Juan Guirao

According to creativity expert and founder of the 'School for Creative Businesses' *Monica Rodriguez (2019)*, there are different types of creative blocks, all of which can, she assures, be neutralised and overcome.

Creatives might want to do too many things simultaneously: In creative individuals, the boundaries between different disciplines might cross as a person can have the potential to develop work in different sectors. Since childhood, we are conditioned to become specialists in a specific field. When an individual likes different disciplines, it may be perceived that their focus is too scattered to be successful at any or all of them.

Rodriguez states that this has its origin in how the educational system was structured after World War II, when specialisation was necessary to ensure a professional career after education.

While a multidisciplinary approach is encouraged in today's context, particularly in creative disciplines, there may still be an underlying belief that specialising is a safer route towards professional success. In addition, while institutions promote a collaborative approach to creating, individuals are generally rewarded for their personal achievements, which might ultimately generate a feeling of individualisation.

Whether an individual wants to do too many things or feels they need to in order to succeed, and either cannot decide or their list becomes too overwhelming, these can be contributing factors for the manifestation of a creative block.

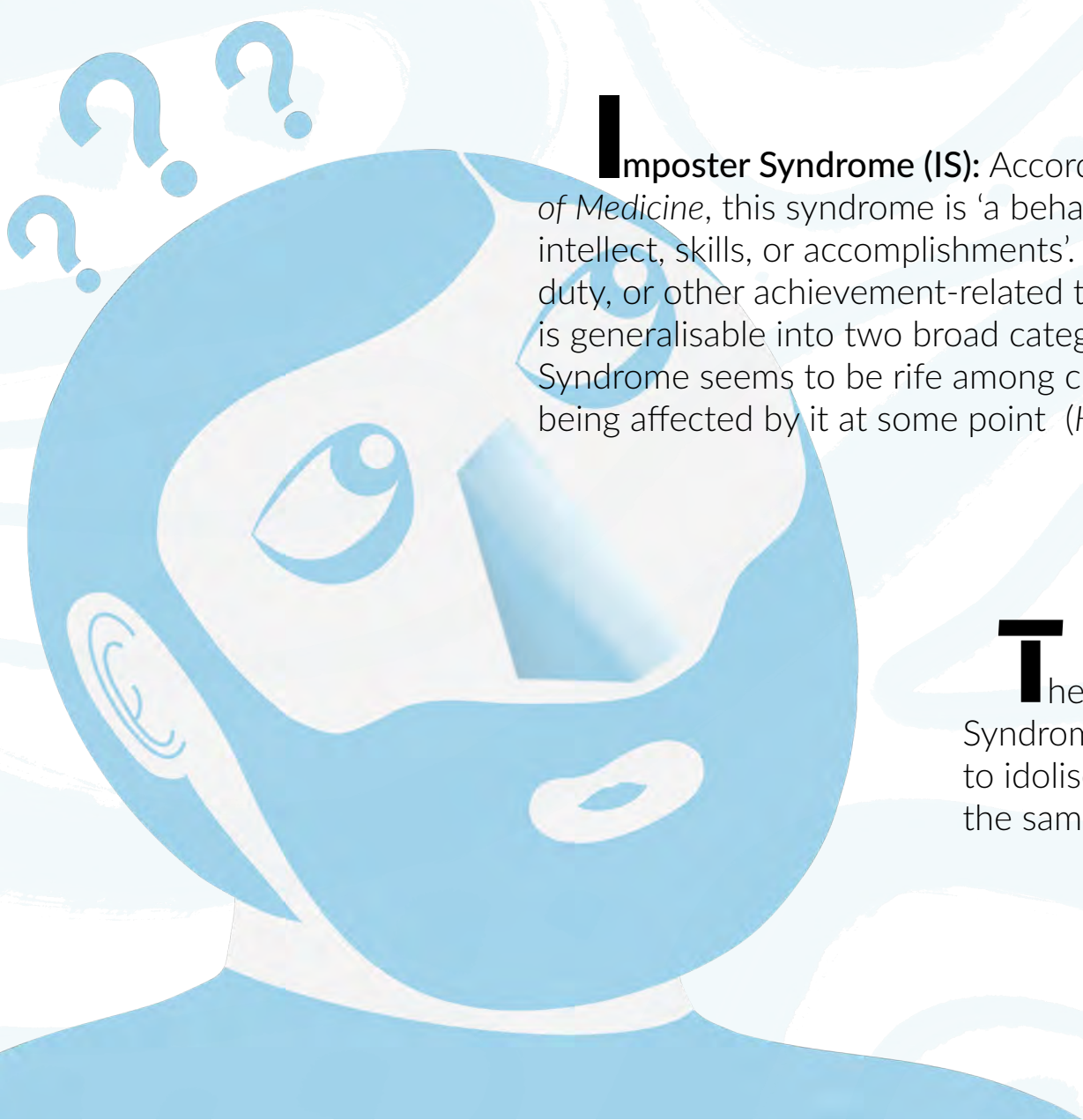
'When perfectionism is maladaptive, the creative might feel unable to declare their works as finished'

Perfectionism: This concept is a double-edged sword as it can positively and negatively affect creativity. Creatives tend to be perfectionists and spend large amounts of time perfecting whatever they are working on. This can affect their personal lives, as trying to perfect an outcome might deprive them of pursuing a more balanced way of life where work, rest and play are attributed the right amount of time.

When perfectionism is maladaptive, the creative might feel unable to declare their works as finished, which might lead to burnout and to a creative block. In this case, the proverbs 'progress is better than perfection' or 'better done than perfect' seem, according to Rodriguez, the advice to follow.

It can be said, however, that perfectionism might also have a positive side since it can lead the creative to produce high-quality work with relevant attention to detail, and to develop the creative's discipline and work ethic.





Creatives have a tendency to **undermine the value and quality of their work** if they find it easy to make and take pleasure in making it. This has cultural origin in the fact that humans traditionally associate work with obligation, effort and sacrifice; hence, if it is pleasurable, we tend to think that it must not be good, or not good enough. The Oxford English Dictionary even attributes a sense of suffering and distress to the etymological origins of the word work (*Oxford English Dictionary, 2014, Meaning & use, Section III*). It is undeniable that the result of any creative work is often much better when it comes from enjoyment rather than duty.

Imposter Syndrome (IS): According to Huecker & al. (2023) for the USA National Library of Medicine, this syndrome is 'a behavioural health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments'. 'When individuals with IS face an assignment, obstacle, duty, or other achievement-related tasks, their response to this achievement-related task is generalisable into two broad categories: over-preparation and procrastination'. Imposter Syndrome seems to be rife among creative minds, with 86.96% of creative individuals being affected by it at some point (*Hollowood, 2021 & Turner, 2023*).

The idea that **everyone is better than you**: This relates closely to Imposter Syndrome. It is linked to the creative's own self-esteem and might lead an individual to idolise other creatives, emphasising the feeling that their work would never be at the same level as that of others.




Types of creative block



Mental Fatigue or Burnout: A study on burnout syndrome including 532 visual artists, from the perspective of art block (Głaziewicz & Golonka, 2024), indicated a strong link between art block and burnout exhaustion. Long periods of work, insufficient sleep or unhealthy life choices can also all contribute to an individual's ability to think creatively.

In a creative environment where the boundaries between making and living become blurred, where developing ideas, practising techniques or improving skills are part of the creative's daily routine within a constant cycle of learning and productivity, fatigue and burnout are common occurrences amongst creatives.

The White Page: Facing a new project always involves a certain amount of anxiety about devising what to do, whether it will be successful, and whether the audience will enjoy it. As author *Elizabeth Gilbert explains during her TED talk 'Your Elusive Creative Genius' (2009)*, this feeling has been common among creatives throughout history. She experienced this anguish herself after writing her best-seller book 'Eat, Pray, Love' as she was faced with the idea that her best work might have been behind her and that anything she would write after that book would always be compared to it.



Work not being recognised by critics: This relates to both the creative's internal dialogue and their own assessment of their work, as well as their capacity to overcome any negative criticism. Ultimately, it is worth taking into account that taste is a very particular factor and that no matter how deserving the criticism or praise are, the creative requires a certain amount of resilience to be able to withstand any negative criticism in order to continue creating, experimenting and taking risks.

Work has to be original and unique: This evokes the idea that a creative person always needs to produce something completely original, that no one has ever done before, as if only creative genius would suffice. While the ancient Greeks and Romans 'externalised creativity, attributing it to divine spirits and offering a healthier, more collaborative view', the idea of attributing creative genius exclusively to human agency was only postulated during the Renaissance (Gilbert, 2009).



Creative

In his review about creative genius, American psychologist *Keith Sawyer* (2006, p.47) explains that pioneering researchers on creativity made the distinction between what they named **'small c'** referring to smaller acts of creativity, like 'modifying a cooking recipe when you do not have all the ingredients or a clever argument in conversation', which are important to the individual but do not have an important sociocultural effect, and the **'big C'** ideas which have a wider impact.

According to Sawyer, in order to be accepted as creative, ideas must not only be groundbreaking but also have their appropriate place within the constraints of the society in which these ideas are exposed.

This statement aligns with the idea that creatives should not produce work in isolation from their environment. However, the fact that someone creates something with their own aesthetic or approach, already makes it unique as it has the point of view of the individual, with their own particular characteristics and their own way of communicating about their output.

If creatives focus on the idea that they need to create something that might be considered as a **'big C'** idea, a mental block might occur that would prevent the individual from developing any other **'small c'** ideas that might potentially lead to a **'big C'** idea.

Types of creative block



How creative block might feel like
Illustration by Juan Guirao

The points developed here are not exhaustive, and there are possibly other elements that can contribute to creative block like a fear of failure, a lack of knowledge or structure, or a negative feeling towards a routine.

Nonetheless, what transpires from this research is that creative block can result as the interplay of personal, environmental, and cultural factors and that it is a much a personal trouble as it is a culturally constructed dilemma that requires creative individuals to keep faith in themselves, develop strategies that enable them to work through periods of decreased creativity and face these with a certain amount of bravery.

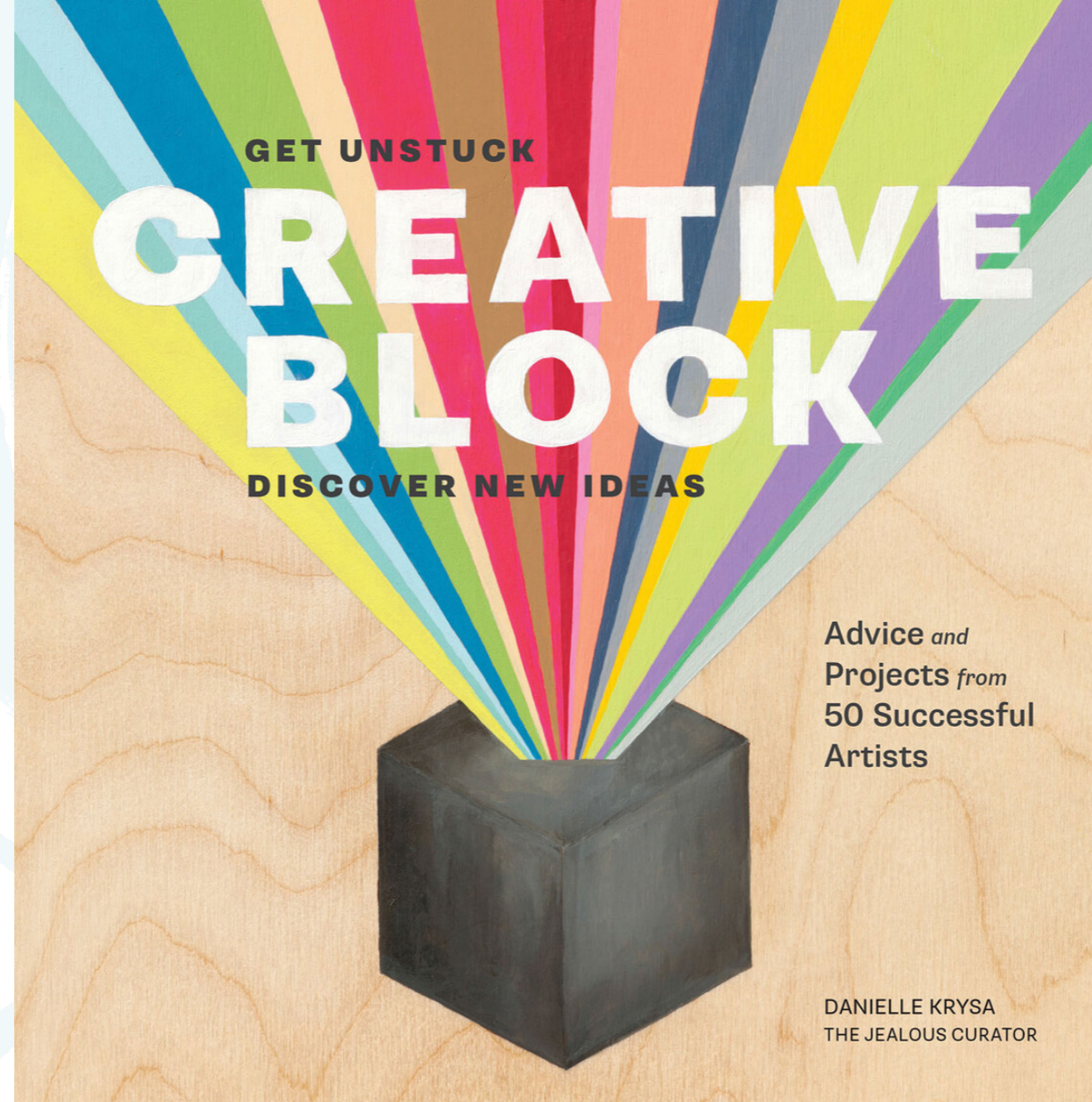
'The existing research has shown that positive emotions have been found to relate positively to creativity in a number of ways, such as broadening thinking and attention, and expanding the array of percepts, ideas, and images that enter one's awareness'

Doctor in Psychology Lillian Hemingway (2013, p. 213) asserts that 'resolving creative block is relatively uncharted territory in psychology literature', which hints at the fact that the subject is still understudied. For Hemingway, 'the existing research has shown that positive emotions have been found to relate positively to creativity'. (Hemingway quoting Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987, p.68).

It appears that any personal circumstances that might convey negative emotions would have a direct effect on creativity.

'Creative Block has, in fact, been associated with self-blame, rumination or catastrophising'. It is, however, worth noting that it also might allow the creative, when dealing with it adequately, to refocus in a more positive manner (Głaziewicz & Golonka, 2024, p. 1).





Book cover courtesy of Danielle Krysa

Artists and creatives themselves constantly search for ways to become unstuck and enhance creative production.

To that extent, author and visual artist Danielle Krysa (2014) interviewed fifty successful artists who opened up about their own experiences with the subject. Krysa's book provides a number of exercises that have been helpful to these artists in order to overcome their own obstacles.

Some of these examples of creative 'Unblock' projects include suggestions like tearing apart a piece of work that has previously been deemed unsuccessful and creating interventions in the separate pieces, looking for 'faces' in unusual places like the folds of a rug, and draw them,

take books from a library and adapt some of their images into different artworks or create something honest and abandon it somewhere public.

The projects are diverse in difficulty and approach, but what became clear from the advice that these creatives provide is that creative block is not unusual and, as stated by many artists in the book, is also often hard to deal with.

In the open-source library of the Interaction Design Foundation, author, researcher, and university professor *Alan John Dix (2016)* provides an exhaustive list of advice for creative blocks. Here are the ideas he explains:

Exploring and engaging with sources of inspiration outside of the design industry, be it art, literature, nature or music as examples. By interacting with various inspirational sources, and potentially other creatives, individuals might broaden their perspective and develop new insights into their creative process.

Connecting with other creatives or mentors that can provide honest feedback in a controlled audience setting, and assistance to overcome the creative's mental obstacles, might stimulate their creativity and allow them to elevate their process and ideas in benefit of the general audience.

Producing quantity of work in order to obtain quality work: According to Dix, the creative process should start by generating a large volume of ideas and considering the exploration of different possibilities. This might lead to discovering something original. Allowing time for brainstorming and capturing ideas, no matter how bold, can be an amazingly valuable practice.

Engaging in activities outside the creative's comfort zone in order to expand their horizons and walk away from their preoccupations. He suggests that travelling, attending workshops and conferences, or any other enjoyable activities might help excite the brain to see things afresh.



Investigating new techniques or methods of working in order to generate new ideas is another way of developing new perspectives on the creative process.

Implementing new routines can help the creative to access what Dix names 'reserves of creativity'. He suggests that even slight changes in the creative's daily routine like moving to a different work space or even a symbolic change of clothes like wearing a 'thinking cap' could contribute to setting the right mood for creativity.

Managing projects adequately can help avoid feeling overwhelmed. Creating achievable goals and breaking these into manageable tasks, so that any small achievements can be celebrated, will boost motivation and confidence.

Enjoying a workspace that nurtures positive emotions with visual, tactile and/or other stimuli might have a beneficial effect by making creatives feel more energised.

Promoting 'divergent thinking' to develop solutions for specific problems. Some techniques include the ideation of random metaphors to create innovative juxtapositions or putting a constraint into a process, to encourage more creative thinking. Practicing lateral thinking with visual techniques like mind mapping, which can reveal surprising connections, appears to be a useful technique to overcome a creative block.



Self-awareness and adopting practices such as **mindfulness** can assist creatives in anticipating the early indicators of a creative block and enable them to take active steps towards preventing it. When engaging with mindfulness, 'an individual benefits from enhanced cognitive performance, problem solving skills and creative thinking' (Meier, 2023, p. 18). Activities like meditation or deep breathing might promote a relaxed mind and enhanced clarity of thought.

Keeping a design journal: This is unmistakably the one piece of advice that most creative adhere to. Recording thoughts, images, drawings or any other materials that can be referred to for inspiration might provide the necessary push out of a creative block.

Embracing failure as an essential part of the creative process and seeing its value as an educational opportunity, particularly if it is backed by constructive critique. A set of 'failures' or 'small c' ideas can ultimately, through iteration, become the right creative output.

Keep calm
&
carry on creating

Creating can be challenging at times, it can be emotional, chaotic and make creative individuals feel disoriented.

Environmental or cultural factors, as well as personality traits, all play a part in our creativity. As such, cultivating habits, techniques and a lifestyle that can help to nurture it seem the right approach to avoid the feared creative blocks. However, accepting the fact that these might happen occasionally, and learning how to deal with them appropriately, are responsibilities that creatives must assume if they want to develop and maintain their careers.

Being creative is not something that anyone can do without hurdles. Being able to overcome a creative block might sometimes require effort, tenacity, and pushing your inner critic aside in order to welcome the chance for change that this obstacle may present. As Winston Churchill once said:

*'Success is not final, failure is not fatal:
it is the courage to continue that counts.'*

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