



Creativity Enhances Our Lives

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Creativity is the human capacity to come up with a new idea or way of doing something. We most often think of creativity in terms of art and music, but creativity is part of our everyday lives.

We all enjoy some amount of creativity, though each of us uses it in different ways. We may use it to write poems or draw pictures, but also to help us solve problems, to change our behaviors, to entertain ourselves, or even to be more social. Creativity actually enables us to grow and mature.

Benefits of Creativity

According to Matthew Swan, MA, Registered Art Therapist, outpatient therapist for Upper Bay Counseling in Havre de Grace, "Through creativity, we often find answers to our problems."

He says when we're stuck, it helps if we can step outside the box and find another way of doing something. To be successful at this, we need to do things outside of our normal, everyday routine and to make connections between things that we had not thought about before. In fact, the creative process is the act of making these new connections.

Marsha McGlinchey, MCAT, Registered Art Therapist, art therapist for Upper Bay Counseling, takes a similar view. She says our creativity opens us to the idea that anything is possible and therefore it can boost our self-esteem.

"Creativity offers us choices, new ways of looking at things, more possibilities," she adds. "And this is not limited just to those who express themselves as artists, but to everybody. Each person has a certain amount of creativity."

She suggests another benefit. Creativity may offer us hope because it informs us that not everything has to be the same. We can always imagine something different, something more.

The Creative Process

Most creativity follows a similar process, though we may not be aware of it. The first step is to identify the problem. What is it that needs a new solution? Then we begin to consider different options for our solutions. This is often called "brainstorming." Then we usually stop our conscious thinking about the problem, letting the options mull around in our head. Psychologist Jacob Getzel called this the incubation stage, a time of "chaos of ideas and knowledge." Then the ideas we like best begin to surface and we select the one or two we like best. Finally, we test one new idea, revise it, test it again, and then we settle on this option and use it as our final choice.

Matt Swan says that people's creativity becomes blocked when they're too concerned with the product. There's something to be learned by paying attention to the process. The process includes everything we do in the creative act. There's joy in the process.

Swan believes that creativity is a combination of unbridled emotional energy and critical thinking. The raw energy gives us the drive that starts the creative process while the critical thinking helps us assess whether any of our new ideas are worth trying. When drawing a picture for instance, we get an idea of putting some lines on paper. Then, as we put them to paper, we evaluate whether those lines will work.

We turn on the creative energy then we step back and judge what we've created, then we turn on the creative ideas, then we step back, and so forth, until we have something that "works."

Indeed, this process applies to more than just art. McGlinchey notes that we're all creative in different areas. Of course, we have the outlets of art, or music, or movement (as in dance), but our creativity comes into play when building a house, organizing a business, making up a new recipe for dinner, or writing a computer program. She says we can be just as creative when we're sitting alone and thinking of ways to change our lives as when we're in a social setting interacting with others.

Becoming More Creative

Most experts believe that creativity is a good thing. It helps us to solve problems and invent new things. McGlinchey says we all have the potential for great creativity. The problem is that many people become stifled. When this happens, it limits us in our thinking and in our ability to grow. As a society, she believes we need to teach more about the creative process in our schools. That way, from childhood to adulthood, we'll be prepared to think creatively.

Similarly, Swan relates creativity to our childhood. He says we first start seeing creativity among children, especially in the way they play. A child might play "doctor," and this helps her deal with the real-life situation of going to the doctor herself. She might practice giving a doll a shot or taking its temperature. This whole process of imagining oneself as a doctor requires creative thinking. Interestingly, this type of play may specifically reduce the child's anxiety when she does go to the doctor.

Imagination, play and creativity are all related and all help us to understand the world around us. Unfortunately, many adults look down upon play or imagination. But these creative faculties can help them too. When adults are stuck on some emotional issue, play or imagination can help them find ways to deal with it or change it.

"As adults, we need to be able to let go of things," Swan continues. "When we're feeling overwhelmed with stress, anxiety, or depression, our creativity can stagnate. Creativity itself is a free-flowing process. So to bring it out, it helps if we can unburden our minds."

We also need to overcome the "inner critic." Many adults will say, "I can't draw," though as kids they were perfectly capable of drawing. For this reason, Swan recommends that we drop any mental constrictions that keep us from going back to our "free" childish ways.

Since May is Mental Health Awareness Month, this is a great time to consider any traits that help us maintain a positive, mental outlook. Creativity is one of those traits and one worth nurturing.

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