

8 Things to Do to Become More Creative & Insightful

Neuroscientist John Kounios, a professor of psychology at Drexel University, along with colleague Mark Beeman, studies how creativity and insightful thinking begin in the brain. He says there are some very simple things we can all do to set the stage for insights, out-of-the box thinking, and creativity. Below are the explanations of 8 things that Professor Kounios discussed in a 2015 interview with Brigid Schulte of the Washington Post. See which of them you can work into your daily routine!



1. Positive mood

There is a lot of research going back 20, 30 years showing that being in a positive mood improves creativity. When you're in a somewhat negative mood, a little anxious, that actually improves analytical thought.

Creativity flows from a state of feeling safe or secure. When you feel safe or secure, you can take risks. And creativity is intellectually risky. When you come up with new ideas, they can be wrong. When you try to implement new ideas, you can meet resistance.

But when you feel subtle, unconscious threat, you feel you can't make mistakes. You have to stay focused on the topic, so you don't stray far from what the problem is, or what you need to do.

We also found that having a deadline, which carries with it the implicit threat of a negative consequence if you don't meet it, can create anxiety and shift your cognitive strategy into a more analytical mode of thought. Deadlines can increase analytical productivity, but if an employer really needs something outside the box, innovative and original, maybe a soft target date would encourage more creativity.

In another study, we found that, for people who solved problems analytically, they had more activity in their visual cortex – they were outwardly focused. But before people solved problems with a flash of insight, they had less activity in their visual cortex – they were focusing their attention inwardly.

And before a flash of insight, there was more activity in the anterior cingulate, right in the middle of the head. What the anterior cingulate does is monitor the rest of the brain for conflicts. It also detects different strategies for solving problems. You can't use two strategies at the same time. Some are strongly activated,

because they're the most obvious. And some are weak, or more distant – inklings, hunches, that tend to be more creative, even strange or off the wall.

When you're in a positive mood, you're more sensitive to picking up these weakly activated, unconscious ideas and, when it's detected, your attention can switch to it, and it can pop into the head as an insight. If you're in a bad mood, and the anterior cingulate is not activated, it just goes with what's strongest, which is usually the most straightforward.

A good mood literally expands the scope of your thought.

2. Large spaces

Perceptual attention – how you focus your vision — seems to be related to what's called conceptual attention. If you're in a cramped space, say your office is a little cubicle, your visual attention can't spread out. It's focused in this narrow space. Just as your visual attention is constricted, your conceptual attention becomes narrow and focused, and your thinking is more likely to be analytical.

But if you're in a large space – a big office, with high ceilings, or outside — your visual attention expands to fill the space, and your conceptual attention expands.

That's why a lot of creative figures like to be outdoors, to take long walks in nature, and they get their inspiration from being in the wide, open spaces. If you can see far and wide, then you can think far and wide.

3. Avoid sharp objects

We've found that if you have striking objects, ones with sharp edges, pointy features, like a sofa with angular sides, or a letter opener

that looks like a dagger, it can cause this subtle, unconscious feeling of threat. When that happens, attention narrows. So the ideal environment for being insightful would be large, airy spaces with soft, rounded features.

4. The colors of nature

The color red — we think of it as an emergency color, associated with blood, fire engines and stop signs — grabs the attention and narrows it. But the outdoor colors, like the blue of the sky or the green of the trees, has been associated with relaxation, expansion, which creates a feeling of safety, which helps the attention expand and increases creativity.

It's not true for everybody. Say your hobby is growing roses, and you could associate red with roses you love.

5. Take a break

When you take a break from a problem that you're stuck on and do something completely different, you forget the bad idea that you were fixated on. It allows other ideas, better ideas, to bubble up to the surface. And if you're working on a problem, but failing to solve it, when you take a break, your brain becomes more sensitized to anything in the environment related to the problem. So you notice more, you may make an association, which then pops into your awareness as a sudden insight.

6. Sleep

One of the most powerful tools for promoting insight is sleep. If you're stuck, take a nap, go to bed, you'll more thoroughly purge the bad idea you're stuck on, and you'll be more attuned to clues that might solve the problems.

One of the most interesting discoveries of neuroscience of the last 20 years is that when you acquire memories, they're stored in temporary, fragile form, like cement. When you pour it, initially it's soft, but when it dries and hardens, it becomes strong and durable. Memories are like that. They become hardened through a process of consolidation, which happens largely during sleep.

Memory consolidation actually transforms the memory, as well. It brings out details, hidden relationships. That can be the stuff of creativity and insight.

That's why there are so many stories of people waking up in the middle of the night with a new idea or solution to a problem. Like Paul McCartney. He was awakened one morning with this melody in his head. It was the song, "Yesterday." It just appeared to him. Sleep supercharges creativity.

7. Do nothing

Doing nothing is creative work. Because when you're consciously doing nothing, the conscious part is only a tiny part of what your brain is. The rest of it, the unconscious, is chugging away all the time. There's this process cognitive psychologists call "incubation" – the brain churning over associations. And these associations can pop into awareness as insight. The incubation process is supercharged during sleep, and also when doing nothing, letting your mind wander and having no particular task to perform.

If you keep people's minds busy all the time with tasks, that inhibits this incubation process. I don't want to say that people should become Luddites and get rid of all the gadgets and become hermits – all that provides raw data for incubation.

But what we need is a balance between doing nothing and doing something – we need both to fuel creativity and insight.

8. Take a shower

The shower is a great place to let your mind wander, to incubate thoughts and set the stage for insight. In the shower, the water is warm, you don't feel a boundary between your skin and the outside of your body. You feel sort of expansive. There's white noise in the background. What you see is kind of blurry, so you turn your thoughts inward, like sensory deprivation. It allows your mind to wander and your attention to broaden. That's why people tend to have great ideas in the shower.



Schulte, Brigid, "Do these eight things and you will be more creative and insightful, neuroscientists say" The Washington Post, July 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/07/06/seven-things-to-do-that-neuroscientists-say-will-enhance-insight-and-boost-creativity/>.