5 Creativity Exercises to Keep You Sharp While Working From Home

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In times of duress, it can feel like we've hit a wall when it comes to creativity and innovation. In fact, studies have shown that our brains diminish in performance and problem-solving capacity when we're burdened by chronic stress.

The cost is more than just peace of mind. McKinsey found that highly creative leaders at companies outperform their peers in multiple categories and achieve above-average revenue growth. Developing your creative process and being able to tap into it on command can increase sales and sharpen entrepreneurship at any stage.

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In our economic climate, the ability to focus on innovative solutions is more valuable than ever. You may find yourself offering products or services that didn't even exist a month ago or scrambling to rebalance your budget. Or perhaps a project you've been working on now needs to be completed remotely, quickly, and with fewer resources. The pressure is on to deliver fresh, new solutions in a timely manner.

Help yourself unleash more winning ideas with one of these five tools designed to jumpstart your creativity.

Embrace freewriting

A common obstacle to creative problem-solving is that we're editing for quality from the start; our standards are too high during what should be a messy, sloppy idea generation phase.

To fully uncensor your thoughts, consider freewriting, an activity formally defined by Peter Elbow in 1973 (but leveraged by great authors for centuries). Freewriting forces you to write continuously, which taps into your stream of consciousness and overrides your tendency to censor and filter your ideas.

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For entrepreneurs who thrive in high-pressure situations, consider Squibly's Most Dangerous Writing App to turn up the heat. This free desktop app lets you assign a length of time (and will assign you a topic if you choose) to write about continuously; if you pause for more than five seconds, everything you've written will be erased. If you need to shatter writer's block, this unorthodox approach may do the trick.

Gamify your productivity with time tracking

If you respond well to friendly competition or contests, gamification may help with productivity, especially during a time when many of us have less structure than we're accustomed to.

How quickly can you complete a task on your to-do list? Consider using a timer or time-tracking software to measure your output and race against the clock. Toggl is free to use and has a browser plugin for easy start and stop access when you're feeling inspired to put blinders on and get the job

done.

There are different schools of thought on how you should divvy up your working time to be most productive; some entrepreneurs swear by the pomodoro technique of 25 minutes on, five minutes off, while others shun it completely.

Stretch your problem-solving muscles

“Mindstorming” is a tactic purported by personal development guru Brian Tracy; in this exercise, you write down a problem, then brainstorm 20 unique solutions.

As Tracy points out, the first five solutions usually come easily, the next five are more challenging, and the last ten are downright excruciating. This deep work not only stretches your creative thinking but can also bolster your confidence in the face of challenging business obstacles. Over time, you’ll notice yourself become more facile with problem solving.

Visualize next steps through “sketchnoting”

Why be bound by words? Sketchnoting refers to note-taking or information-processing that incorporates shapes, arrows, containers or other visual representations.

As explained in Dr. Betty Edwards’ seminal book *Drawing On The Right Side Of The Brain*, verbal function and cognition mainly live in the brain’s left hemisphere, while visual function is processed in the right hemisphere.

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If you need to get your creative gears turning, sketchnoting possible solutions through conceptual shapes and structures

might help unlock new and fresh ideas. A study from Drexel University found this artistic approach even lights up our reward pathways, making us feel more accomplished and motivated.

Do something analog

From 1980 to 2015, jobs that required analytical and social skills increased by 94 percent, whereas manual labor and jobs contingent on physical skill rose by 12 percent, according to the Pew Research Center. An abundance of screen time, however, can actually increase stress and anxiety and erode focus.

Incorporate something hands-on into your day. Even if it’s a chore like organizing your closet or deep-cleaning areas of your living space, you’ll rebalance your brain and come back to your workload fresher than if you just try to plow through.

In a famous CBS News interview, neuroscientist Kelly Lambert coined the term “behaviorceuticals” to describe how certain offline behaviors were capable of altering brain chemistry just as much as their pharmaceutical counterparts

If you’re not used to working from home, open structure and necessary self-motivation can be a challenge at first. Incorporate one or more of these tactics to stay sharp, and you’ll bring a flexible and focused energy to your work at hand during this uncertain time.

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