

Creativity: The Spark That Never Burns Out Dr. Linda Karges-Bone

Did you know that the famous American painter *Grandma Moses* took up her craft *after* she was 78 years old? French masters Matisse and Monet continued to paint while they were in their 80's, working from a wheelchair or fighting blindness. The creative spark does not seem to dim as one matures. Rather, the rich experiences of life and complexity of neural pathways, fed by these varied experiences may produce more creativity!

How can one revisit, regenerate, or rescue creative feelings or activities once they have been traded for years of work, family responsibilities, and duties or perhaps depleted by stress, illness, or fatigue? This article examines the roots and blooms of creative thinking and then offers some simple, yet creative strategies for re-potting a wilting creative soul.

What Is Creativity?

According to a National Curriculum Advisory Committee Report done in the UK, (1999), creativity can be defined in four ways:¹

- Thinking or behaving **imaginatively**.
- Leading to **purposeful activity**,
- These processes must generate something **original**.
- The outcome is **valuable** in relation to the purposeful activity

The idea of *value* is interesting in a discussion of creativity. There may be some tension associated with the idea that creativity has to do something. Isn't it sufficient just to be creative?

Yes and no. True creativity has a goal, a purpose, an outcome. The imagination looks around, sees something that only it can see and then acts on that impetus, creating something original that brings a sense of completion, satisfaction, and connection.

Creativity can be something as simple as tying a scarf in a fresh way to complete an outfit; adding a different spice to pot of chili to satisfy a taste; or

¹ National Advisory Report on Creativity (1999) www.ncation.org.uk

as complex as shaping a piece of art that allows an audience to connect with feelings in a powerful way.

What are the attributes of creativity? Try this completely unscientific Creativity-Meter Quiz to assess your volume of creativity.

1. I enjoy trying new foods and flavors.	YES	NO
2. I approach life with eagerness.	YES	NO
3. I feel that there are many solutions to problems, not just one.	YES	NO
4. I see something new every time I take a walk or a drive.	YES	NO
5. I enjoy writing down thoughts or ideas.	YES	NO
6. If something doesn't work, I try a new approach.	YES	NO
7. Colors, shapes, and textures give me pleasure.	YES	NO
8. I would describe myself as curious.	YES	NO
9. Seeing new places or meeting new people brings me joy.	YES	NO
10. My mind is always busy, turning up unexpected ideas and responses.	YES	NO

So, how did you do? Here's the rubric for the *Creativity-Meter*.

7-10 YES Responses: Your creativity meter is reading HIGHLY CREATIVE. You are an original thinker who is comfortable with being creative and being among the creative. You may just need more opportunities to use your creative spirit. Recommendation: Act on your feelings. Rekindle a hobby or craft that you set aside to raise your children or finish a degree or career. You have a lot to offer.

4-7 YES Responses: Your Creativity Meter is reading *Moderately Creative*. You appreciate creativity, but don't really think of having a lot of it yourself. Perhaps you admired creative people from afar, but thought: "That's not me". You have more potential than you realize. Recommendation: Engage in some creative activities . Give yourself permission to try a few new things. You just need a spark.

Fewer than 4 YES Responses: Your Creativity Meter is barely registering. Somewhere, perhaps back in childhood, you were told that you didn't have "it" or that you didn't need to concern yourself with such foolish ideas. Your Creative Spark was just about extinguished. Recommendation: It isn't too late. Start by watching. Look at some beautiful art. Listen to some stirring music. Touch some alluring fabrics. Spend time with one or two trusted friends whose creativity you admire. See what happens.

Why Should We Nurture Creativity As We Mature

Our aging brains, and that is any brain past the age of 25, offer more reasons to *be creative* than to put it aside. Here's why:

1. The rich experiences of living can fuel creativity.
2. We may have more time and greater resources to pursue creative passions.
3. Research shows that more experiences beget more neural connections, and it is from those connections that creativity emerges. One study showed that creativity may help glial cells in the brain to behave in ways that extend the brain's capacity for neural plasticity over time. ²
4. Creativity may help to relieve anxiety and depression, both threats to our well being as we mature.

²Diamond, M. University of California. <http://www.musesmuse.com/art-graymatters.html>

5. Social connections, so vital to our physical and mental health, and discussed in detail in the last issue of *A New Day*, can be built through creative activities.
6. We have earned our right to creativity, by making lots of mistakes in the past, and it is from failures that creative solutions come.
7. The world needs more creativity. Research suggests that recent college graduates aren't thinking "outside the box". They are too focused on making money, rather than on making innovations. ³

Infusing Creativity Into Your Life

Institutions and organizations that serve senior adults, or those that seek to improve the quality of life, thinking, and well-being for that matter, can infuse creativity into daily living and meaningful encounters in several distinct ways. Let's deconstruct the word CREATIVITY, using each of the letters to spell out a suggestion for stirring up creative juices.

C.....**Consider** the interests of your audience. Do a simple needs assessment for creativity by asking: "What kinds of creative things would you do if you had time or support?" or "Did you ever draw, paint, write, or try something creative only to have to put it down in order to take care of work or family?"

R.....**Respect** differences in individual performances and products. Look for small, significant, creative contributions in what each person develops or designs and comment on them.

E.....**Embrace** journaling as a vehicle for infusing creativity. Make journals as a group and then practice writing down words, thoughts, or ideas that are interesting or worth pursuing. Create lists of "interesting" words and then use them in writing or speaking.

A....**Act** on creative impulses by providing opportunities. Start new classes such as pottery, jewelry making, or poetry and give incentives for participation. Let people know that it is not for "experts", but for anyone who wants to try something new.

T....**Think** like a child and help others to do so. Research suggests that most young children think of themselves as "highly creative" and then adults barge in and destroy the confidence and freedom.

³ BCA (2006). *New Concepts in Innovation: The Keys to a Growing Australia*. [Business Council of Australia](#).

I.....**Invite** creativity by putting out “toys” and materials that initiate creative action. Play dough with tools for shaping and imprinting is useful. Colored chalk and dark paper. “Slinkys”. Sand arts is textural and fun.

V.....**Validate** creative efforts by giving specific praise and encouragement. People, especially anyone older than 4 needs permission to be creative. Fitting in is so much more affirming and easy to praise.

I....**Introduce** the study of the masters as a way to inspire creativity. For some, just this kind of thinking is satisfying. An emerging program called “Museum One” actually trains activity directors to use slide shows and other materials to do a mini “Art Appreciation” program that stimulates creative ideas.⁴

T.....**Tune** into music as a way to inspire creativity. Bring in music from other cultures and play it in the background as you try foods from that culture or study art from that culture.

Y.....**Yield** the fruits of creativity by displaying the artifacts and products in safe, yet responsive environments. Submit someone’s poem to a contest or anthology. Frame and display art. Send a recipe in to a contest. Publish an on-site magazine.

A great deal of research is going into the idea of promoting creativity as a way to extend neural plasticity. In fact, the National Endowment for the Arts has actually developed an impressive list of organizations around the country that promote and provide programming that encourages creativity in older adults. Supported by grants, these programs may be accessible in your community and can be found at

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/rlists/ArtsAging.html>

Thirty day Creativity Craze

Perhaps you aren’t feeling too creative yourself right now. The busy demands of your schedule as an activity director are sapping your own creative spirit. Here’s a table with 30 days of creative ideas to help nurture the spark in your program.

⁴ Museum One. www.museumoneinc.org

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Put out a vase of yellow sunflowers or daisies. The color yellow inspires creativity.	Take a walk together and <u>listen</u> for sounds. Come back and write a list of sounds using scented markers.	Read about a famous artist who did significant work after age 60. What motivated him or her? See list.*	Plan a trip to an art gallery or museum.	Collect buttons and use them to design jewelry.	Bring in stamps and recycled cards * to design original stationary.	Create a "new dip" by starting with a mixture of fat free yogurt and sour cream. Provide different spices, chopped veggies, and dressings. Sample and critique your dip.
Cut out colored construction paper in different shapes, such as triangles, squares, circles, stars and the make new "animals" by gluing the shapes together.	Take a walk together and <u>attend to smells</u> . Come back and write a list of smells using scented markers	Play "I Spy" to stimulate visual awareness.	Give out instant cameras and film and go on a hunt to find something new. Print out the pictures and play a guessing game as to what others have found.	Finger paint with purple paint. The color purple is known to unleash creativity.	Play with play dough while listening to jazzy music.	Bring in rhythm instruments and play along with some unique tribal music.
Read some humorous poetry	Take a walk together	Chill shaving cream and	Bring in some coffee	Do some math problems	Spray the room with a cinnamon	Read a children's book that

aloud. Write a silly rhyme as a group.	and <u>watch</u> for nature signs. Come back and write a list of the signs using scented markers	"paint in the snow". The menthol scent and chilly texture boost creativity.	table books of art prints and discuss them in terms of a specific theme, such as landscapes.	without a calculator.	or apple scent.	has won the Caldecott Award for beautiful artwork and examine the art. What textures, styles do you see as beautiful. *See list
Read a comic strip aloud and then "add on" a new frame of your own design.	Take a walk together and <u>pick up</u> objects to create a "texture" table. Label the objects by texture.	Use a thesaurus to find synonyms and antonyms and create a list .	Imagine that you are a Super Hero. What would your name and attributes be? What would your costume look like?	Create sand art using colored sand and old perfume bottles or small vases.	Make a display out of fruits for a centerpiece.	Put 10 common objects into a shopping bag and ask folks to select one and brainstorm a fresh way to use it.

*Creativity, it has been said, consists largely of re-arranging what we know in order to find out what we do not know." **George Kneller***

Consider that quote and remember that inspiring creativity helps the brain and the body. One feels stronger, more purposeful, more eager to participate in life with fullness and flavor. Creativity may have been snatched from us as young children, but we can always capture it again, if we take the time and give ourselves permission to see life with fresh eyes and touch it with open hands.

List of Caldecott Books to Read and Study Artwork

Arrow to the Sun by Gerald McDermott

My Friend Rabbit by Eric Rohmann

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat Simms Taback

Mirette on the High Wire by Emily Arnold McCully

Owl Moon, illustrated by John Schoenherr

The Hello, Goodbye Window Illustrated by **Chris Raschka**

Tuesday by David Wiesner

Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears, illustrated by Leo & Diane Dillon

Creative People Who Defied Age

Bach

Candice Bergen

DiVinci

Einstein

Jimmy and Roslynn Carter

Sally Field

Sophia Loren

Grandma Moses

Oscar Niemeyer (Won Pritzker Prize for Architecture after 80)

Verdi