

ALLEGRA CHAPMAN

## Divergent Creatives

*Reclaim your creative power on your own terms*

Copyright © 2026 by Allegra Chapman

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.*

*First edition*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

*Find out more at [reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com)*

*For Chloe and Noah, the two most authentic creatives I know.*



# Contents

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>                | iii |
| Introduction                          | 1   |
| <br>I Resistance                      |     |
| 1 Your Right to Create                | 13  |
| 2 Creative Myths                      | 28  |
| 3 The “Right” Way To Think            | 39  |
| 4 The “Right” Way To Create           | 59  |
| 5 How They Stole Your Confidence      | 72  |
| 6 Deficiency Is Cultural              | 86  |
| 7 Practical Challenges                | 100 |
| <br>II Revolution                     |     |
| 8 We Need Your Voice                  | 121 |
| 9 What If Society Valued Creativity?  | 135 |
| 10 What If Society Valued Difference? | 148 |
| 11 Decentring Productivity            | 157 |
| 12 Back In Your Body                  | 171 |
| 13 What Can We Do?                    | 187 |

### III Reclamation

|    |                                |     |
|----|--------------------------------|-----|
| 14 | Regaining Creative Confidence  | 195 |
| 15 | Mindset Reframes               | 214 |
| 16 | Following Your Rhythm          | 225 |
| 17 | Understanding YOUR Way         | 240 |
| 18 | Low-Demand Habits              | 256 |
| 19 | Leading With Joy               | 268 |
| 20 | Your Creative Fix              | 282 |
| 21 | Conclusion                     | 293 |
|    | <i>Resources</i>               | 302 |
|    | <i>References</i>              | 304 |
|    | <i>Further Reading</i>         | 311 |
|    | <i>About the Author</i>        | 314 |
|    | <i>Also by Allegra Chapman</i> | 315 |

## Acknowledgments

Thanks must go, first and foremost, to my husband, Peter, without whom this book would never have been written. I am eternally grateful for the space you have created for me to write, for all the snacks and coffees you have brought to fuel the process, and for your never-ending patience at me continually offering you a glass of water, disappearing for varying lengths of time, and inevitably returning with no water. I love you!

Thank you to Sarah Wilson and Sarah Raad for insisting that *this was a good idea* and that *I was, in fact, capable*. As always, you were both right. I've said it before and I'll say it again: you are so wise!

Thank you to Sarah Lewis and the team at Writers' HQ for making writing fun, snack-based and meme-fueled. (My daughter has now banned me from making friends with anyone else named Sarah; apparently I've hit my quota.)

A huge shoutout to my awesome Divergent Creative friends who have cheerleaded me through this process—there are too many to mention really, but particular thanks to Lelie Verlinde, Sam Galloway, Elly Marie, Gabrielle Treanor, Kathryn Vercillo and Steven Cowling.

There must always be a special mention for my mum, who has never stopped believing in me, even when I didn't believe in myself.

Finally, Chloe and Noah. Every single day I am amazed by how

incredible you are, and I learn something new from you. I feel incredibly honoured to be your mother, and your faith in me means everything. Love you around the universe and back.

# Introduction

Hello my friend! I'm so glad you're here.

I'm guessing that, if this book has attracted your attention, then you're someone who feels deeply drawn to the creative life. You know there is art in your soul—images and words and music *call* to you. They sparkle in your blood like diamonds, and, when you let yourself play with *making* art, you feel lifted to a whole new state of being, where you are more alive and more in love with life and the universe than you feel at most other times.

But you're not letting yourself fully connect to the creative life yet. Something is holding you back.

You've probably always felt a bit different. You never seemed to be like other people, and you couldn't do things the way other people did them. Other people found you a bit... weird. You didn't quite fit in.

Maybe creativity was your safe space for a while, where you could express yourself and make sense of all the emotions and ideas swirling around inside you. But, as you got older, you got the message that you weren't doing it quite *right*. Never mind art, you weren't doing *life* quite right. And so you put your art away, and focused on trying to make yourself seem... normal.

Perhaps you know, now, that you are neurodivergent. Or perhaps you're just starting to question it. Maybe it's not that you're neurodivergent, exactly, but you still don't feel like you

fit in with the “normals”. You still can’t follow the advice and the programmes and the career paths that society sets out. You might be disabled, or have a chronic illness, or maybe your life and who you are just doesn’t fit into the neat boxes our culture insists on.

Whatever the reason, standard creativity and productivity advice haven’t been working for you. So you thought you weren’t cut out for it.

Except that you still hear the call. You still yearn to make your art. Your art is still yearning for you.

And the world needs to hear your voice.

I’m saying all of this about you, but I’m really talking about myself. And wondering if you’re a bit like me. In which case, hi, it’s awesome to meet another member of my tribe. It took me so damn long to find you folks.

## A little about me

My name’s Allegra. I’m an author and columnist. I get a little thrill saying that, because it was my dream for *years* to call myself a writer. I first started writing stories when I was about six years old. (They were about a kitten that saved people from various situations of peril—look, I was only six.) I was *obsessed* with writing. I even won a few competitions as a child and teenager, and accidentally became a fan fiction writer for a teenage online magazine when I was about 14... That’s a whole other story, but it was my first taste of fan mail!

Somewhere along the way, though, I got the idea that I wasn’t cut out to be a *proper* writer.

I was bullied all the way through school, even into university, and I never seemed to be able to make any lasting friendships.

Teachers mostly found me *difficult*, because I asked lots of questions and didn't like blindly following rules without knowing why. When I went into the world of work, I did well, but I felt constantly uncomfortable. I still didn't like blindly following rules, I couldn't focus until 11am so I was often in the office until 7pm most days to make up for my "lost" mornings, and I put so much pressure on myself to perform that I burned out over and over again without knowing what was happening. I changed jobs *a lot* to try to find somewhere I could settle. I never did—I now work for myself, all by myself, on my own schedule. It's wonderful.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-30s, after having my first child, that I started to realise I was neurodivergent. At first, I read a few lists of ADHD and autistic traits whilst muttering, "That's not ADHD, everyone does that," and, "That's not an autistic thing, that's just what we all do." After a while, I had to accept there was a pattern emerging...

Now, it seems so fucking obvious. Of *course* the girl who had 10 million ideas but struggled to finish anything, who would watch the same TV shows and listen to the same songs over and over and over on repeat, who didn't understand social cues, and who always seemed to miss the "implied" instructions, was AuDHD. But no one really understood neurodivergence when I was growing up.

I was born at the end of 1983—at that point, received wisdom was still that only boys could be autistic. ADHD, also, was thought to mostly impact boys, and the impact was thought to be that the boys couldn't sit still and would be running around the classroom being disruptive. A girl who could stay in her seat and listen, and behave, and who was perfectly capable of communicating (who, in fact, communicated a bit *too much*)

couldn't possibly be either of those things. It simply never occurred to anyone.

It never occurred to me, either. My idea of what autistic people were like was shaped exclusively by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. That was the only media example I saw in my youth. I wouldn't have thought for a moment that autism had anything to do with me.

Funnily enough, I remember reading a book with my mum when I was about nine. One of the characters had a sibling who was autistic—they were only mentioned casually, and not in any detail, but, having never heard the word before, I connected “autistic” with “artistic”. I said to my mum, “I’m autistic.” Realising I’d misheard, she explained that autistic was different to artistic, and we carried on reading. But now, a little part of me wonders if, on some level, I’d recognised something... (I mean, I’m partially deaf, so mishearing is probably more likely. But still.)

The upshot was, I had no idea why *getting stuff done* seemed so much harder for me than other people. By the time I was in my 20s, I had *hundreds* of half-written stories, even a half-finished novel, but very little completed work. I tried a bunch of courses, read a load of books, but I couldn't seem to follow through with any of the advice.

Case in point: I have now read half of *The Artist's Way* three times, but never managed to finish it, and never managed to stick with the programme.

I figured that I was the problem. I wasn't talented enough, wasn't dedicated enough, wasn't cut out for writing. I wasn't up to the challenge. I put my creative work away, and told myself I'd grown out of that now. I was going to focus on being a “proper adult”.

Then I became a mother. I'm not sure what happened to me, creatively, after my daughter was born. For most of my pregnancy, and for the first six months of her life, I couldn't read. Even after I gave up writing, reading had remained my major hobby. I always had a book on the go (or three books on the go), and I enjoyed nothing more than curling up with a good read. But pregnancy scrambled my attention span until focusing on even a social media post felt like hard work. With a newborn baby, I had little time or energy to read anyway, so I didn't worry too much about it, except for periodically hoping that one day I would be able to finish a page again.

"The moment" came when my daughter was six months old. It was nothing big or dramatic, just a sudden flash of light inside my brain. I needed a pen and paper, *immediately*. Words started pouring out of me. I hadn't written that much or with that intensity since I was a teenager. Suddenly an entire book was flowing out of my fingers.

I started writing again. I started reading again, too, which was a huge relief. I have no idea what caused the change, but my writing was tired of my bullshit and was not sitting quietly on the sidelines for one second longer.

When I got pregnant with my daughter, I had to give up my career. Not by choice—I was frequently told I should go self-employed while I was working in marketing because of how much money there was to be made in freelance consultancy, but I always laughed the idea away. There was no chance of me going out on my own—I was perfectly happy collecting a steady pay cheque every month, while someone else had to do all the hard work of actually finding clients that would supply the money. But, once I was pregnant, I went from being the golden girl of the agency to being harassed, bullied and threatened by the boss

I'd previously thought was a friend. No one was going to hire a pregnant woman (believe me, I tried), or one with a newborn baby, so I had no other option but to go it alone.

It's amazing what desperation will do for your confidence. I would never have risked putting myself out there to big publications when I had a steady job, but, with my back against the wall and a baby to look after, I figured, fuck it. I started pitching newspapers and magazines in something of a frenzy. A few said yes.

Hey presto, I was a professional writer.

What the fuck?! How could it be that easy?? After 30 years of *wanting* to be a writer and finding it so impossible, how did I jump to working as a writer in a matter of months?

It wasn't easy. I've skipped over a few details. I pretty much had a breakdown when I had to leave my job, and I had to do a lot of freelance marketing work that made me utterly miserable to make ends meet to start with. It took me years to build up the income from writing, and from my membership platform for neurodivergent creatives, to make a stable living.

Plus those 30 years weren't wasted. Since I got myself going as a writer, I've been using my work to explore topics of identity, relationships, mental health and parenting that were core to the ups and downs that led me here. I had to live life, hard and deep, before I had something to write about. And I had to learn about myself and who I was as a person before I could understand myself as a writer.

Now I'm fucking ready to write.

That's my wish for you, too. That you can step into your creative power as your fullest, most authentic self. That you can make the art you want to make, and that the world needs to see. We need a greater variety of voices shaping our cultural

narrative—for too long, the stories that mould our society have been written by a very narrow group of people. And look where that's got us. We need a wider variety of perspectives. We need to imagine new possibilities.

We need your voice.

So I'm giving you the book I wish I'd had 30 years ago. This isn't a "how to be a creative" kind of book, because I don't believe in that. It would be an easy sell, if I promised to make you a creative success overnight with my trusted blueprint, but it would be a lie. I can't tell you how to do it. You've probably already read a bunch of books and bought a load of courses promising to tell you that, and none of them have worked.

## About this book

I like to think of this book as a kind of *The Artist's Way* for people who couldn't finish *The Artist's Way*. It's a guide to finding your own path for the people who assumed they were at fault because they couldn't follow someone else's route to success. Because we always put the blame on ourselves, rather than recognising that those routes were planned for people who don't share our needs and challenges.

I want to give you a book that *expands* your possibilities, rather than trying to stuff you into a box. I want to show you that your way of doing things is perfectly valid, that there's no one way to be an artist, and that you are totally fine as you are. I want to empower you to work *with* your unique mind, instead of fighting against it.

This book is divided into three sections:

## 1) Resistance

To begin with, we're going to challenge some of the pre-conceptions and assumptions about creativity that our culture plants in our brain, but that hold us back when we don't fit the mould. This section is a smashing down of the confines of narrow societal expectations and demands.

## 2) Revolution

In the second section, I'm going to look at how society could better support people who don't fit into neat boxes, and why that would benefit everyone.

## 3) Reclamation

The last part of the book is where we get stuck into practical ways to take back your creative power. I'm going to give you tools and guidance for understanding your needs and making art on your own terms.

At the end of every chapter you'll find a **"Creative Prescription"**. This is a little exercise to help you connect with your creativity and build your confidence in your practice. You don't have to do every one as you come to it—you can save them up and use them when you feel you need each one. You can also get a printable PDF or physical card versions of them at [CreativeFix.net/shop](http://CreativeFix.net/shop) if you want to use them regularly to support you through challenges or blocks.

Just so you know...

There are a few things you should know before we get going:

- I swear a lot, it's just who I am, I can't help it. Well, I probably could, but I don't want to. Brace yourself.
- You're welcome here whether you have an official diagnosis, you're self-diagnosed, or you don't know whether any particular labels fit, but you just want to be supported in your individuality.
- My work and my online spaces are fully inclusive of queer people, trans people, people of marginalised genders, and any other group that's historically been discriminated against. Hatred is not welcome here in any form.
- As someone who was born and raised (mostly) in England and is from a white, European family background, I am, inevitably, writing from a white Western perspective. This shapes my view of what constitutes the dominant societal narrative. As we will see (check out Chapter 6 in particular), perspectives vary across cultures and my experience may not always resonate with yours. However, the UK and US narratives do have a disproportionate impact on our modern world, and their influence is wide-ranging, so I hope you will find value in challenging this particular paradigm even if it isn't one that you feel bound within. I am always interested to hear about other ways of seeing the world, so please do feel very free to share with me ways in which your cultural experience of neurodiversity differs from mine.
- My essential aim in everything I do is to tear down systems of oppression and build a new world that celebrates creativity and difference. If you love the current system just how it

is, this book is probably not for you. Sorry. I can't offer you a refund, maybe gift it to a friend or donate it to a library. I wish you all the best.

If you're still on board, then I hope this book will help you see that you're not broken, and you never were. That it's the system that's the problem, not you. And that all you need is the right approach to suit who you truly are.

Then your creative soul will be able to fly.

If you need any help or support on this journey, you can find me at [CreativeFix.net](https://CreativeFix.net) or you are so welcome to join the membership community at [YourCreativeFix.substack.com](https://YourCreativeFix.substack.com). I'm also pretty easy to track down on Substack, Instagram and Threads—there aren't all that many Allegra Chapmans about... Except if you find a woman with curly red hair in San Francisco—that's not me, that's the pianist. I'm the blonde English one. Usually found by the sea.

With love,

Allegra

# I

## Resistance

*In this section, we will challenge the societal conditioning that has been planted in your brain, and attempt to deprogramme you from the cult of capitalist productivity.*

*Ready to question everything you thought you knew?*

*Don't worry, it'll be fun. And also a bit rage-inducing and sweary. But then empowering. That's the most important bit—recognising your right to be who you are and to create in whatever way you damn well please.*



# 1

## Your Right to Create

In this chapter:

- Why you might be waiting for permission
- Why you don't need to
- Taking back our power as subversive radicals

\* \* \*

How do you feel about calling yourself **a creative**?

Or an artist. A writer. That thing that you do, that you love doing more than you love doing anything, that you wish you could do all the time... How do you feel about *telling* people that that's what you do? Or, more than that—that that's who you *are*?

I'm going to guess, not great. The reason I'm guessing this, is that I suspect you're quite a lot like me. I used to die a bit inside at the thought of openly calling myself a writer.

I have been writing since I was about six years old. Basically, since I learned how to write words. I couldn't even hold a pen properly—we still had those horrible triangular prism-shaped things on our pencils at school to correct our grip, if you remember those—but I was still driven to write stories. (Come to think of it, I still don't really hold my pen properly... my primary school teachers would be horrified.) I even won a few competitions as a child and a teenager. As I grew up, I got a few pieces published. But I still couldn't bear to call myself a *writer*.

If pushed, I might have said that I *wanted to be* a writer. That feels safer. It signals, *I'm aspiring, I'm trying, but you can't judge me on the results because I've already told you that I'm not actually there yet*.

Sound familiar?

The trouble is, the language you use programs your brain in subtle ways you're not aware of. When you say, "I *want to be* a creative," you are telling yourself a few important things:

1. You're not, currently, a creative.
2. Being a creative is hard—it's something you have to work towards.
3. There will be a point when you have reached official "creative" status, but you're not there yet.

These things are all untrue, and unhelpful. Here's why:

1. **If you create, you're a creative.** There is literally nothing else to it. If you write words, you're a writer. If you make art, you're an artist. End of.
2. Sure, you have to work towards *mastery* of your craft, but that's an ongoing thing. For life. No one ever achieves

perfection. It's a seductive idea that there is an endpoint to your development that you can reach, and then you can kick back, but there's not. **By telling yourself it's hard, you make it seem scary**, and that's not really going to get your brain excited about going off and doing it. If you tell yourself it's a lifelong adventure of discovery, your brain might be slightly more on board with the whole endeavour.

3. **There is no official creative badge.** Sorry. I'd like one, but no one's going to give one to me, or you. There is no one who can give you permission to call yourself a creative. Except you. Many of us want someone to sanction our craft, and we'll talk about that in a moment, but you have to grab the status for yourself. The longer you tell yourself that you're not (yet) a creative, the harder it will get to allow yourself to be one.

## Stop waiting for permission

The arts world is full of gatekeepers. Agents, publishers, editors, gallery owners, curators, digital algorithms... there are so many hoops to jump through to get your work into the world. This paradigm is fraught with complications for those of us who don't fit the standard mould. We've already been told about a million times that who we are isn't quite right for a multitude of situations before we ever get as far as submitting art somewhere.

We're expecting to be cast out of almost any room we're in at any moment, because we're so used to being told we don't belong.

I was talking to a friend once about how, as a child, I would always become incredibly anxious whenever a teacher did that "*The person who did this knows who they are...*" speech. You

know, the one where someone's done something wrong and the teacher's trying to guilt them into owning up. It never worked on the guilty child, but it did a right number on me. I'd be shaking, on the verge of tears, and feeling an urge to confess, even though I'd had nothing to do with the misdemeanour in question. My friend, who is also AuDHD like me, said she was exactly the same when she was young. "Bloody autistic oversensitivity," she laughed. And I laughed with her, at the time.

But afterwards, I thought about it. We weren't oversensitive—we were hypervigilant. People like us are so accustomed to being abruptly reprimanded for some infraction that we had no idea we had committed, that our nervous systems are constantly primed for an attack. When someone begins announcing that a crime has been committed, we brace—this may be the moment we've been waiting for.

There's so much subtext that we stumble over, too. We're never sure of our standing in any given room, because we're afraid we're not reading the cues and unspoken rules correctly. We've fallen foul of those before.

So, sure, we want permission. We want to be told *expressly* that we're invited into this space. We want someone to tell us that it's ok for us to be here, to be doing this thing, so we don't get shouted at for being wrong, **again**.

For a lot of us, too, there's a desire to feel wanted. We've been excluded and bullied and made to feel like an outsider for most of our lives. We crave belonging. The idea of someone stretching out a hand and saying, "You are worthy, you are invited in," is the stuff of dreams.

Well, I'm super sorry, but I've got bad news. It's just not going to happen. Or, at least, it might happen, but you need to choose yourself before anyone else chooses you. Gatekeepers

can smell fear, and if you go to them believing that you're not a real artist, then they won't believe it either. More importantly, your chances of getting a piece of work together that's ready for submission to a gatekeeper will greatly improve if you have confidence in your own self.

Waiting for permission holds us back from creating at all.

If you've been telling yourself that you're not a "creative type", or that creativity is for other people, then, I say this gently and with love, but stop it now.

What is a "creative type", anyway?

I literally do not know what that means. Everyone is creative. If you're alive, you're being creative. We make creative choices everyday, about what to wear, how to put together a meal, how we'll decorate our homes, how we'll overcome challenges, what we'll say to the kids about what happened to the hamster...

This planet is filled with creativity. Look at the colours and shapes in nature. Listen to the birds singing, watch a spider spin a web. Watch plants grow out of the ground, and taste the honey bees make from them. We're surrounded by creativity all the time. And we follow along—we sing, we dance, we play heavy metal really loudly as we drive and bash the steering wheel to the beat (just me?!). We make and mend and bake and grow. We tell each other stories, and anecdotes, and jokes. We make up games.

You can't be alive and not be creating. If you're breathing, you're a creative type.

## Who is creativity for?

We have an ingrained cultural fantasy that some people are born with creative genius status, and that for these people the muse descends from the gods and magic pours from their fingers. Whilst the rest of us plebs shuffle about grunting in awe. It's not true. Some people are born with natural talent, but they still work their arses off to hone and develop it. Most of us aren't communing with the muse on the regular, we're just chipping away at an immovable block of stone until it starts to look like something vaguely interesting.

As Thomas Eddison said, "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration". You might get the odd brilliant idea land in your brain in a glorious flash of light, but mostly you're stumbling around in the dark trying to figure out where the ladder to the next stage of your project is.

Who's to say what "genius" is, anyway? Talent is subjective. Have you seen the pieces that have won the Turner Prize lately? One year it was won by an artist who builds stacks of empty avocado trays. Apparently it's about trans-generational trauma. I don't get it. But some people love it. I have also passionately hated three books that won the Booker Prize. That's just the way it goes. You can't please all of the people all of the time. If you try, you end up pleasing absolutely no one. You've just got to make the art you want to make and it will find its people.

But you can't rely on anyone else to decide whether you have talent or not. If Veronica Ryan (the avocado tray artist) had asked my opinion, I'd have told her to pack it in. Pun fully intended. Luckily for her, she doesn't give a shit what I think.

Every artist has been rejected a million times. When I was doing my Master's degree in Publishing, a very successful editor

came to speak to us. He told us about all the very famous books that he had rejected before they went on to huge commercial and/or critical success. One of them was Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, which was made into the movie *Schindler's List* and won seven Oscars. So, yeah. Gatekeepers get stuff wrong.

Above all else, I need you to know that no one else has the right to decide whether or not you are a creative. That choice is for you, and you alone.

## Creativity is your birthright

Humans have been making art and telling stories since we arrived on this planet.

The oldest known cave paintings are more than 50,000 years old. I mean, we only started building structures to *live in* around 12,000 years ago. We were making art before we were making homes. That's how deeply rooted our drive to create is.

There's evidence to suggest we were telling stories around a fire more than 200,000 years ago. For a species that's only 300,000 years old, that's some going.

Creativity is a primal drive. It's how we make sense of the world, and of each other. And of ourselves. It's how we connect with our fellow humans, by taking a look at the world through their eyes, and giving them a glimpse into our own experience. It's the way we process our thoughts and feelings, and express who we are, who we want to be.

No one has the right to keep that from you.

## Capitalist overlords

Unfortunately, humans also seem a bit over-keen on power and control. So some of them try to undermine and stand in the way of others. Either in an attempt to make money out of them (“you can’t be a real writer until you’ve bought my expensive course”) or just to make themselves feel bigger and more important (“I get to tell my story and you don’t, because mine matters more than yours” or “because I’ll feel less special if lots of other people do it too”).

When we started building those fixed homes 12,000 years ago, we accidentally invented commodification. *Stuff* became property. Someone could own it, which meant someone else didn’t have it. Down the line, that way of thinking gave birth to capitalism. Now everything has to have a value, because everything has to be owned privately, available to some and not others, so that it can be made profitable. We determine the value of an item, not by the benefits it gives us, but by the extent to which we have to strip essential parts of our planet away to make it. We worship money like a god, and everything has to have its price.

In her powerful book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, explains how differently indigenous North American people see wealth. Whereas our modern society defines it as how much we can hoard for ourselves, “Wealth among traditional people is measured by having enough to give away.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine if we thought like indigenous North Americans, looking to demonstrate our abundance by sharing what we have. But we don’t.

Creativity, that outlet for humans for thousands of years, is

no different. Rather than sharing it and ensuring the whole community could access and participate in it, creativity had to be commodified. Now some people think they own it. And they can't feel truly comfortable in their ownership unless they're making sure some other people *can't* have it.

Of course, like good little capitalists, the people who "own" creativity want to profit from it, which means they need to make everyone else think that only *they* can give them access. There has to be something only they can give, that they can charge for. This model thrives on inadequacy—you have to be made to feel that there is something wrong with you, that you are in some way deficient, in order to convince you to fork over your cash to someone who will fix you. It's all a bit gross.

The other side of this need to own something by keeping it away from others is the way that the exclusion of certain groups is baked into our society. The arts world, like almost everything else, is dominated by wealthy white men. Having worked in the publishing industry for a while, I can tell you that this is not by accident—the system is designed to favour clones of the people already at the top of the tree.

I loved publishing, but I simply couldn't survive within it. I mean that quite literally. I'll tell you more about my personal adventures in Chapter 9, but, for now, let me tell you about the industry more generally.

To get a job, you must first do months, or even years, of internships. You will not be hired if these are not on your CV. Internships, though, are almost always unpaid. Which means you have to survive *in London*, one of the most expensive cities in the world, without a salary.

When you then *do* become seen as adequately qualified for a job, you finally get a salary. And it's shit. The pay in publishing

is absurd, and yet all publishing companies want you to be living in that expensive London place.

It's also an industry that runs on wine and cheese. Your prospects for promotion rest fairly heavily on who you know and who you socialise with.

Basically, if you come from a wealthy family, who can pay your rent and introduce you to the right people, you're set. If you don't... you end up working in marketing instead.

Although, on the whole, I'd rather be sitting in a cottage deep in the woods writing everything with pen and paper and then using my crow familiar to deliver my manuscript to a printing press, I have to say that technology is doing a lot to disrupt the standard model in a way that could seriously empower creatives. Self-publishing tools and online platforms for creatives to showcase their work are cutting out the middle-men. They're becoming more and more affordable by the day, too. It's possible that they might make some of these gatekeepers redundant. Perhaps, in turn, that might reduce how many people are actively trying to undermine the confidence of creatives.

Flash back again with me, will you, to 2010 when I was a Master's student. At a publishing industry event, a group of senior industry figures sat on a panel discussing how evil Amazon was for demanding such ridiculous sales terms, and how they were damaging the industry. Not one of them seemed motivated to come up with a solution—they were simply furious that someone wasn't doing things their way. 16 years later, they still haven't come up with any solutions. Amazon isn't the good guy, for sure, but publishers haven't felt driven to come up with a better model because they're caught up in their own sense of entitlement. The industry is moving on without them.

## This is not a game for rule followers

Creativity is inherently subversive. It is an act of rebellion.

In a society that pushes passive consumption and mindless productivity, that values conformity and compliance, creating something unique, for the sake of joy and beauty and expression, is deeply radical.

Art is dangerous. It challenges perspectives, it shows us new ways of seeing the world, it gives us new and alternative possibilities.

Art fosters connection. With ourselves, bringing us back into our bodies, and enabling us to process, interpret and express our thoughts and emotions. With other people, allowing us to see through their eyes, and showing them how the world looks to us. And with the wider world—we create in community not only with the humans that we share our work with, but with the planet that provides our materials, our inspiration and our nourishment.

Stories and art are how we drive change forward.

By sharing different perspectives, we help to change minds. We influence kinder, more positive behaviour based on empathy and understanding. We treat people more fairly when we relate to them.

By showing what's possible, we help others to imagine better systems, which encourages them to demand better of our leaders.

By asking questions, we chip away at the dominance of the status quo, and open the door for change.

No wonder artists are always among the first to be silenced in repressive regimes. No wonder they ban books and imprison creatives. They don't want us to hear the hidden stories, they

don't want us to imagine something better, they don't want us to feel at home in our own selves.

So. Since creativity is a subversive and rebellious act, you can't be sitting around waiting for someone's permission to do it. That's not how rebellion works.

It's time to accept that you are a radical, and make your art with zero regard for what anyone thinks. If you're pissing people off, you're doing it right.

## Art activism

I'm always baffled when people tell artists not to get political. Art is the most political thing there is.

Writing, painting, film-making, music composition... any form of art involves saying to the world, "This is how I feel, this is how I see the world... and I want to inspire feeling in you." Any view of the world is innately political, because it involves an assessment of how things are, and how they should be. It presents a perspective to the viewer.

When people say they don't want their art to be political, what they really mean is that they want their art to reflect and reinforce the status quo. That is a political stance. Artists can support the current system, and encourage their readers / listeners / viewers to see the current system in a positive light, or they can challenge the system and ask their audience to question it. Either approach is an active political choice. There is no apolitical art.

Those of us creatives who are neurodivergent or disabled, or whose lives simply don't fit into society's boxes, present a view of the world that is inherently inconvenient for the current system. We show up the ways that certain people are excluded,

we shine a light on inequalities, and we challenge whether things have to be the way they are. We ask questions, we break the mould, we show that other ways of thinking and being are possible. We show the limits of existing thinking and offer alternatives.

We are born art activists.

Using art as an activism tool is a whole other subject, and you can find out more on my website, [CreativeFix.net](http://CreativeFix.net). But, once you recognise the subversive nature of art and its potential to disrupt the status quo, you can start to reclaim some of your power.

They're trying to silence you because your view of the world is dangerous to those who want control. So shout louder.

You don't need their permission to challenge them.

You don't need acceptance from a system that has deliberately excluded you.

Your viewpoint has been missing for too long—the world needs it now.

Ultimately, if they're afraid of you using your voice, then you know that your voice has power.

## This is your permission slip

In her rousing book *We Need Your Art*, Amie McNee points out that choosing yourself, instead of waiting to be chosen, is really the only way. Even if someone does give you the permission you thought you needed, if you haven't given *yourself* permission first, it will feel hollow:

"You can see the dire consequences for creatives who have received huge amounts of external validation but never validated themselves," McNee writes. They've been given permission by

some of the biggest names in the biz, but they're not having a good time. They aren't joyful. They are creatively blocked or stagnant. They don't like themselves or their art."<sup>2</sup>

When you wait for permission, you give away your power:

"Your worth is in the hands of others. You constantly need more and more external validation ... no matter how many times you are chosen, you never feel like you're enough. Because you're not actually looking for *their* approval, you're looking for your own approval, but you've been rejecting yourself every single day of your creative life."<sup>3</sup>

McNee urges us all to coronate ourselves, and I'm here for it. She suggests writing yourself a permission slip, holding an actual coronation ceremony for yourself, and/or writing your permission daily in your journal.

But, if you don't feel able to give yourself permission just yet, I will give it to you. Consider *this* your permission slip.

I want to read your stories. I want to see your art. I want to hear your music, or watch your film. I want to see you smiling broadly while wearing clothes you made yourself.

The world needs your voice.

People like us have been excluded and silenced for way too long. So I suppose I'm less giving you permission and more asking you, pleading with you, to share what you have to say.

You are a creative.

Create with joy.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you feel you need / don't have permission.

**Take:**

A piece of paper and a pen.

Write "I [creative action], therefore I am [creative identity]."

For example:

"I write, therefore I am a writer."

"I paint, therefore I am an artist."

**Repeat daily until you believe it.**

## 2

# Creative Myths

In this chapter:

- The major myths society uses to silence creatives
- How to combat those myths

\* \* \*

As we saw in the previous chapter, art is subversive, particularly when created by those of us who see the world differently, and the dominant culture wants to keep us quiet so that we don't rock the boat.

Ironically, stories are one of the most powerful weapons that the dominant culture uses to silence us. Does it seem counterintuitive that a system that tries to suppress creativity would actively *use* creative techniques to do so? It makes sense when you consider that both the suppression and the utilisation show that they recognise just how much power lies in a story.

Stories shape our understanding of the world. And possibly the most potent example is the myth. These stories have endured for hundreds, even thousands, of years, passed down from generation to generation. Reimagined for different times, but carrying deeply encoded messages about the nature of our world. They tell us how to behave, what (and who) to be afraid of, who (and what) to trust. They tell us what makes a good life and what actions will get us cast out into the darkness.

Myths connect with us at such a deep and primal level that they program us without us even realising it. They become encoded deep within our cells, guiding our behaviours and our judgements throughout our lives.

In folklore, across a range of societies, you can see the tension between the stories of the dominant culture—the stories that tell women not to stray from the path and to obey their husbands, the ones that tell men to take on the dragon and take ownership of the princess—and the stories of the people, that encourage a little more creative ingenuity to get young women out of doing hard work and punish cruel husbands.

These times we live in are no different. Our society uses a number of myths to keep us under control. And maybe we've forgotten how to push back with stories of our own.

There are a number of myths about creativity that society perpetuates to diminish or deter creatives. I'd like to tackle some of the big ones here.

## The starving artist

“No one makes any money at writing.”

I've lost count of how many times I've been told this. My “careers advice” at school when I was 17 consisted entirely of

the following conversation:

Me: I want to be a writer.

Careers Advisor: That's not a proper job. If you like writing, be a journalist.

With that, she dismissed me from the room. Now, this would have been around the year 2000, and I'd like to think that careers advice has improved since then... but, sadly, stories I hear from young people and parents of young people suggests that little has changed.

The myth of the starving artist is deeply rooted in our society. We have been led to believe that anyone who tries to make a creative living will end up in a garret, pale and thin, eventually dying of tuberculosis.

Look, I'm not about to tell you that a creative career is a quick route to a life of luxury. It's true that our society doesn't value the arts anywhere near enough, and that, as a consequence, artists are not paid as much as we should be. It's rare that creatives make *big* money. But it's perfectly possible to make a perfectly comfortable living in a creative career.

I'm a full-time writer. I'm not rich, but I'm doing fine. Plus, I *love* what I do. After 20 years of miserable jobs that sucked the life out of me, that's worth a lot. Working for yourself is a highly unpredictable rollercoaster, but you have greater control and freedom than when you work for someone else. And the potential is uncapped.

I know a lot of professional creatives, and none of them have bought their own private island, but they're all rubbing along quite sufficiently. And they're *happy*.

## The crazy artist

Do you have to have a mental illness to be an artist? Or does making art drive you crazy?

The dominant cultural narrative seems to suggest that it's one or the other. The mythology machine loves to promote stories of creatives who have had dramatic psychotic episodes or who took their own lives—those stories are more attractive to our somewhat macabre psyche. They form a useful deterrent: if you become an artist, you'll be deeply unhappy and die a grisly death.

Again, I know a number of creatives, who are mostly bumbling along just fine. Now, a lot of us *have* had experience of mental illness, but, then, so have a quarter of the population. The negative portrayal of the “crazy” artist rests on the demonisation of, and discrimination towards, mental health issues that is so prevalent in our society.

Many neurodivergent, disabled and chronically ill people experience depression and anxiety. Being unwell for long periods of time, struggling to do things you want to do and access all sorts of environments will, inevitably, get you down. As will being continually gaslit that you are both “faking it” *and* the major problem in our society. Those of us who were diagnosed late, and spent a lifetime being told we were difficult, lazy, not trying, not doing anything right, and so on, have an extra layer of trauma that we are rarely supported to heal.

So yeah, we might have some mental health challenges. But not because of our art.

Art is incredibly healing. It can help us to process thoughts and emotions, and let go of some of the pain we've been holding on to. It gives us a voice, it gives us back some of the power and

control that we've had taken away. It's mindful, embodied and calming—deeply soothing to an unregulated nervous system. Study after study has shown that creativity has a positive impact on depression, anxiety, self-esteem, confidence and sleep.

That's not to say there isn't a dark side to art. Sometimes we might go to painful places and revisit traumatic memories in order to create a work. Deadlines and tax returns and rent / mortgage payments all create stress. Rejections are an inevitable part of the job, which isn't ideal for people who often struggle with rejection sensitivity. Plus, in a world where everyone has a platform for their opinions in their pocket, noise from critics can be intense.

Learning how to manage your wellbeing is important for an artist; but I would argue that it is vital for anyone. Our cultural approach to mental health means that we often ignore it, until we hit crisis point. We need to take a more proactive approach, as we do with our physical health. We don't wait until we get sick to exercise and eat well; we should be looking for ways to manage and maintain our mental health well in advance of it breaking.

I have a theory that people with mental health challenges and neurodivergent people are highly represented in the arts. I think there are a few reasons for that: we tend to be highly empathetic and to feel very deeply, which makes us want to communicate those feelings; we may not have felt heard or seen by the people around us, so we use our art to be seen by those who get it; we're trying to make sense of ourselves and the world (a world that often confuses the hell out of us), and art is a great way to do that; and we see and experience the world differently, which lends itself nicely to creativity. For example, I have synaesthesia, meaning that words and sounds have colours in my head—it's

hard to explain to someone that you don't like a particular song because it's a harsh shade of red, but it does make for quiet poetic prose!

So maybe we are, mostly, a little crazy, but that's OK. We have our ups and downs, our strengths and our weaknesses, like everyone else. Mostly, we get along fine. Tragedies happen to artists and non-artists alike, unfortunately. But that alternative view, that questioning and refusal to just accept, and that dissatisfaction with the way it is that they try to paint as crazy... that's where the magic is.

They tell us it's "crazy" not to fit in with their ways or accept their rules, but often that's just another way of sidelining us. Trying to keep us quiet and to invalidate our point of view.

You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps.

## The prodigy

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, natural talent is a very small part of the equation. We are sold an idea that, if we're not showing Mozart-like gifts at a young age, then there's no point bothering. But that's ridiculous. Very few people are Mozart-style prodigies. Off the top of my head, I can only think of Mozart...

I've lost count of the number of people I've seen asking if they're too late to take up a creative career. This is particularly painful when it's someone who's only in their 20s. How can you think you're too late for anything when the vast majority of your life is still ahead of you?!

I remember setting myself a goal to publish my first novel by the age of 25. At the time, in my late teens, 25 seemed incredibly old and grown-up. I'd have life figured out by then, I was sure.

But then 25 arrived and I had absolutely *nothing* figured out. My life was utter chaos. So I pushed the deadline back to 30. Then 35. I finally published a book at 40, but the novel is still a work in progress!

You don't have to be displaying genius before you can walk or have won an award by the time you leave home to be a successful creative. There is no deadline, you cannot be too late. There are a few artists who show exceptional talent early on and achieve acclaim at a young age, but they often burn out very quickly and then disappear from view.

I'm actually glad, now, that I started my creative career a little later in life. I feel more certain of who I am and what I want to say in my 40s than I would have been in my 20s. I am better equipped to deal with the practicalities and challenges of the industry and running my own business. I've also run out of fucks about what anyone thinks of me and am happy to do the work that matters to *me*, rather than what anyone else might try to push me into. I'm less susceptible to being manipulated or intimidated. This is definitely the right time *for me*.

You'll know when the time is right *for you*. Maybe you'll publish your first book at 18, and go on to have a long and glorious career. Maybe you'll have your first gallery showing at 73 and move into a whole new phase in your life. Wherever life takes you, and whenever your art steps forward, you can't rely on natural talent. You're going to have to work your arse off.

It's likely that you have some talent if you've chosen to throw yourself into this—very few people choose to dedicate themselves to something they're crap at. But no one just downloads a work from the universe and dumps it, fully and perfectly formed, onto the page. Your work will suck for a while, and you'll keep working at it, and it'll get better.

As Ernest Hemingway is widely credited with saying, “The first draft of anything is shit.”

## The waste of potential

Oh god, the word “potential”. It sends an uncomfortable shiver through my whole body. How many of us neurodivergent folks have been hounded about our *potential*?! We’ve been told since childhood about all of this supposed potential we have that we’re not living up to.

One of my biggest blockers as a young creative was that I had had all this alleged *potential* as a child, but had failed to translate it into... Into what, exactly? I wasn’t really sure. No one gave me any specifics, just a vague sense that I had under-achieved somehow.

I was always underachieving on my potential. My teachers wanted me to go to Oxford or Cambridge universities, and were deeply saddened when I didn’t even apply. I don’t know if I would have been accepted, but I do know that I would not have fit in and would have hated every moment if I had gone. Yet it was chalked up as a failure. The lesson I received wasn’t that I had been right to effectively assess and respond to my needs and preferences, it was that these should be suppressed in pursuit of external validation. A lesson that had a *lot* of negative influence over the next 20 years of my life. I got an A, two Bs and a C at A-level in the end, despite having a breakdown halfway through the process; but rather than celebrate the achievement, everyone shook their heads sadly at the waste of potential.

I stopped submitting to publications and entering awards, not because I didn’t have writing to put forward, but because I’d become terrified of this potential I was consistently living

beneath. If I submitted and wasn't accepted, or didn't win, it was confirmation of my inability to fulfil my potential. If I didn't try, then I couldn't fall short.

We're constantly disappointing people by showing great promise and then not immediately being, somehow, *epic*. Well, just living your life and surviving a world that seems to be out to get you and figuring out who you are is NOT a waste of potential. It's the most important thing you can do.

I'm not sure if I'm living up to my potential now, writing my third book and being invited onto BBC Radio 4 to discuss my latest newspaper column. I *do* know, however, that I now know how to define my own concept of success, and how to enjoy working towards it. I know how to live on my own terms. And that feels better than any external validation ever could.

Stop worrying about this abstract potential that people like to threaten you with, but that no one will define, like a bedtime story boogeyman. Create on your own timeline and at your own pace. Potential is a trap.

## The waste of time

I coach neurodivergent creatives, and quite a few of them are trying to allow themselves to make art again after being conditioned by well-meaning parents and teachers to believe that it's a complete waste of time.

Our society frames art as frivolous, a luxury, childish, a slightly embarrassing hobby. By now it should be abundantly clear why the system would try to undermine it—because it holds so much power to bring the whole thing down. As soon as you hear someone saying, “Oh, bless you, with your little poems, isn't that sweet,” you know they're fucking terrified.

Creativity is powerful. It's also important. Numerous studies have found extensive benefits for physical and mental health including:

- Lessening of depression and anxiety
- Reduction of chronic pain
- Lowering of high blood pressure
- Improved heart health
- Strengthened immune system
- Greater social connection and decreased loneliness
- Better coordination and balance
- Improved memory and problem-solving

Art is incredibly good for you. Plus it builds connections between humans, and between humans and their planet. As we've seen, it shapes our entire world order. There's nothing frivolous about this stuff.

These stories have done a number on us, certainly. But don't they just prove the power of art?! The fabric of our society is woven from stories. The perspectives shared in our dominant narrative have built the system we currently have. Which means that, with different stories and different perspectives, we can build a new one.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When the negative stories seem frightening.

**Take:**

One creative myth or negative story about art in general or your own art.

Write out (in full or in bullet points) the overview of the story you've been presented with. Take the personal out of it—make it about a generic artist archetype, rather than about you.

Now write an alternative. For example, instead of an artist who is constantly hustling and failing to make money to pay the rent, tell a story of an artist who is making a comfortable living. You could even seek out real life examples to inspire your story.

(If writing feels too much, try voice-noting it.)

**Optional:**

You might like to draw / paint an image, or make a collage of images, to represent your new story.

Revisit your new story whenever the old one gets loud.

## 3

# The “Right” Way To Think

In this chapter:

- How our society demands conformity of thought
- Why this damages creativity
- Different types of neurodivergent thought that are discouraged in our current systems
- Why these different ways of thinking can actually be beneficial
- What we can do to unlearn this conditioning

\* \* \*

For neurodivergent people, trusting ourselves and our ability to do pretty much anything is severely undermined by the fact that we’ve had a lifetime of being told that we approach everything the wrong way. We’ve been told, over and over, that the way we think is wrong.

We ask too many questions.

We are too erratic.

We do too many things at once.

We jump around too much.

We are too loud.

We are too quiet.

We are too sensitive.

We are too blunt.

We are too much.

Given that we've already established that the system wants to silence creatives, especially creatives like us that think differently, this makes us fairly easy targets. It's not hard to convince us that we're not doing creativity right and that we shouldn't be sharing our thoughts if we are already primed to believe that the way we think is wrong.

The problem is, neurodivergent brains are inconvenient for the system, not inherently flawed in themselves.

Our education and business environments are set up for a very specific type of neurotypical brain, and they don't allow for any deviation. We are asked for conformity from a very young age, and punished if we don't, or can't, provide it.

How many times were you told at school that there was a specific way to solve a problem or pursue a project? And then reprimanded if you didn't follow it? Then, in the workplace, we're given prescriptive processes to follow, and treated with contempt if we suggest alternative approaches.

Many of us at school were told that we asked too many questions. We were told we were being rude, simply for looking for clarity. As adults, we're still told that questioning—which, to us, is an attempt to understand, to show that we care or to ensure we get the right result—is offensive. We've internalised

that to mean that we are doing it wrong, rather than recognising the truth: bosses and teachers don't like being questioned when they don't truly understand the matter themselves.

I had a few teachers at school who loved me. The rest hated me. The ones who loved me were the ones who were passionate about their subject—they genuinely enjoyed talking about it, and they were thrilled to see a child taking an interest. They could answer, and have interesting discussions around, the questions I brought up. If I asked something they couldn't answer, they were excited to go and find out and come back to me.

The other teachers, however, worried that the fact they didn't know an answer made them seem weak. I now realise that they, too, were victims of social conditioning that makes us believe that the person in charge must know everything. That makes us see control as a mark of success. A question they couldn't answer made them feel vulnerable and afraid. It also probably made them worry about deviating from the prescriptive curriculum they needed to cover. They wanted to shut it down.

Bosses, similarly, panic in the face of what they perceive as a challenge to their authority. In our culture, to be viewed as a leader, we believe that we must be all powerful. Respect is shown by silent obedience. So when neurodivergent people look deeply at a situation in order to fully understand it, and possibly find alternative approaches, we are punished.

So we stop doing that.

The trouble is, this sort of thinking often comes naturally to us. Depending on our particular neurotype blend, we might have a flair for big picture thinking, or a talent for spotting small details. We might be trying to ensure that we follow the required steps exactly right, or that we deliver the desired outcome. We

might just be really excited about the topic and want to know as much about it as possible. But we're told this is wrong, without a clear explanation that would help us contextualise *what* was wrong or how we're expected to change.

Neurodivergent thinking is actively discouraged by schools and workplaces. Not only does this result in neurodivergent people losing confidence and being demotivated and silenced, but it means that we are missing out on the opportunities that these different ways of thinking offer.

## The death of creativity

As someone who coaches creatives, I'm often asked to speak to businesses about cultivating a creative mindset. Corporate leaders can't understand why their teams are losing the ability to innovate, to come up with new ideas, to problem-solve... They don't very often like the answer I give them: that they have systematically crushed this ability.

Insisting on conformity and actively punishing deviation from the accepted way of thinking kills any chance of coming up with anything new. When you add in the constant mental overload and incessant task-switching that are expected of modern employees, no wonder innovation has tanked. No one's brain has the space or energy to generate new ideas.

Modern businesses are struggling with potentially fatal creativity gaps, which won't be remedied unless we can make space for different ways of thinking from childhood. If we breed a future workforce that doesn't dare think outside the box, we're in trouble.

These are a few of the neurodivergent ways of thinking that are being blocked by our current society, and ways that they

might be able to help us if given the chance.

## Non-linear thinking

### *What is it?*

Thinking in associations or bursts, rather than step-by-step sequences. It might appear that a non-linear thinker is jumping around randomly from one topic to another, which can be hard for linear thinkers to follow. But, in fact, they are making connections between a variety of different topics, sometimes with these connections happening in their mind all at once.

### *What's the problem?*

Most educational assessment criteria and workplace processes rely on linear narratives (this, then that, therefore...). Non-linear thinking can be harder to document or measure, and is treated as scattered or unfocused.

### *How can it help?*

Pattern recognition, synthesis and insight generation enable non-linear thinkers to spot and prepare for potential problems, predict future trends, and come up with creative breakthroughs. Non-linear thinkers are able to bring together different concepts and integrate learnings from varied situations to generate new ideas, explain insights to a broad range of audiences, and deepen understanding. They can also identify new applications of existing knowledge. These people often see a much bigger picture than linear thinking allows.

## Lateral thinking

### *What is it?*

Similar to non-linear thinking, but more structured and deliberate. Lateral thinkers will look for different angles and unorthodox approaches to help them solve a problem.

### *What's the problem?*

Lateral thinking involves purposefully stepping outside the box, which is a nightmare for process-driven organisations that require things to be done in a specific way.

### *How can it help?*

Lateral thinkers can solve problems that stump vertical thinkers (that's the traditional approach), and find ways to approach an issue that differentiate them from the competition. Fans of the TV show *Taskmaster* will recognise the advantages of lateral thinking: when challenged to throw a ball into a hole whilst your feet remain on a red mat, which is a long way from the hole, vertical thinkers will fashion elaborate contraptions to improve their aim; lateral thinkers will move the red mat close to the hole.

## Bottom-up processing

### *What is it?*

Starting with details, specifics, or concrete data and building meaning from there, rather than starting with a big-picture frame.

### *What’s the problem?*

Business and educational hierarchies prioritise strategy. We are asked to start with a big vision, and to then make the specifics fit that picture—this is “top-down” processing. A focus on details can feel like it’s slowing down or overcomplicating the standard approach.

### *How can it help?*

In an ideal situation, top-down and bottom-up processors would work together. A top-down approach is usually led by values and emotions, focusing on the outcome we *want*, whereas bottom-up processing is led by data, and can therefore identify where the facts don’t support the big vision. Whereas top-down processors are working towards an imagined future, bottom-up processors are more rooted in the present reality, and can therefore identify and adapt to issues more quickly.

A top-down processor can inspire and unite others with a story about the future, whilst a bottom-up processor can translate that story into practical actions and adjust direction as roadblocks pop up.

## Monotropic focus

### *What is it?*

Intense focus on one subject, problem, or interest at a time, often for long periods.

Similar to hyperfocus, except that monotropic focus is a consistent way of being in the long term, whereas hyperfocus comes and goes in temporary bursts.

### *What's the problem?*

Modern work culture worships multitasking and quick context-switching. The expectation of always-on productivity demands that we are endlessly moving from one thing to another, and deep focus is seen as inflexible and unproductive.

### *How can it help?*

Task-switching is a drain on most brains, not just neuro-divergent ones. This culture also encourages surface-level appreciation of a subject, not in-depth knowledge. Monotropic focus offers an opportunity for mastery of a topic, and higher quality thinking. Whereas it's useful to have some people who have an overview of lots of different areas, sustained attention from others on specific topics provides greater understanding of the details and better information. Immersion in a particular subject can enable a better quality of work and greater depth. Again, combining different approaches in collaboration will yield better results than one type in isolation.

## Literal interpretation

### *What is it?*

Probably one of the most mocked aspects of neurodivergent thinking, this is the tendency to take words at face value.

I mean, we're sorry we foolishly believed you meant the thing you said... [/sarcasm]

### *What's the problem?*

Neurotypical communication relies heavily on implication, euphemism, and unspoken rules. This can be utterly baffling to neurodivergent people, who often struggle with things like subtext, sarcasm and inference. A failure to grasp what hasn't been said is often seen as naïve or obtuse, at best, or offensively obstructive at worst.

### *How can it help?*

So many misunderstandings—in the workplace, in social situations, in relationships—arise from imprecise language. Having literal thinkers around who can sense-check what's being said and look for clarity where it might be lacking can save us from all sorts of trouble!

## First-principles thinking

### *What is it?*

Questioning assumptions and wanting to understand *why* things are done a certain way before accepting them.

### *What's the problem?*

As we've seen, institutions demand compliance, and leaders prefer blind obedience over independent thought. Asking "why" is often seen as a challenge to authority, or as being argumentative.

### *How can it help?*

Doing things just because "this is the way we've always done it" is how organisations run into trouble. They get stuck in ruts, they follow inefficient processes, and they normalise harmful behaviour (like inherent ableism... <cough>) because no one stops to question *why* or whether there is a better way. First-principles thinkers innovate by looking for better ways.

## Emotional-cognitive integration

### *What is it?*

Thinking *with* emotion rather than trying to exclude it. Feelings are treated as data.

### *What's the problem?*

Western culture is weird about emotion. It's treated as weakness, or frivolous. It's supposedly "unprofessional" to have feelings. As if human beings weren't *designed* to have emotions. We're taught to suppress our feelings and focus on cold, hard facts.

### *How can it help?*

Listening to and responding to emotions allows for more thorough decision-making. Not only in understanding and meeting your own needs, but in taking into account the needs of others. All decision-making groups should include at least one person who can take emotion into account and be the voice of empathy and ethics.

## Time-fluid thinking

### *What is it?*

An experience of time that is non-linear. The future can often feel abstract, and deadlines seem artificial.

This is why I can either be 10 minutes late or an hour early for everything, and there is no in between—time just doesn't make linear sense in my brain.

### *What's the problem?*

Productivity culture relies on schedules and deadlines. Most of us are judged by how much outcome we can generate in a specific amount of time, and we're supposed to replicate that

level of production over and over.

### *How can it help?*

Rather than falling for the false panic that deadline culture creates, time-fluid thinkers are able to step back from artificial demands and give projects the time they truly need. They also have greater sensitivity to, and respect for, internal rhythms, which, in the long term, makes work more sustainable.

Time-fluid thinkers are good at long-arc thinking, which involves not only greater strategic foresight but also better contextual awareness. They also often have greater patience and resilience.

I'll admit, though, it's not great for catching trains and requires a complex system of alarms to keep to scheduled appointments.

The point here is not that neurodivergent thinking is *better* than neurotypical—it's just different. Both neurodivergent and neurotypical modes of thinking come with strengths and weaknesses. Being inside a neurodivergent mind can be an exhausting and overwhelming blur a lot of the time, but it's made worse by the fact that we are constantly being asked to suppress our nature and adapt to the expectations of neurotypicals, whilst also translating neurotypical communication and behaviour. It's pretty tiring.

Rather than putting this additional strain on neurodivergent brains, if we made space for all sorts of different types of thinking and allowed them all to contribute their strengths, we would *all* benefit.

## Reclaiming neurodivergent thought

We've been conditioned to think that we're the problem, not because we cause any actual problem, but because we are inconvenient—a threat, even—to a system built on command and control.

Our cognitive processes have been framed as some kind of glitch, but that doesn't really hold up when you realise that **one in five** people are neurodivergent. 20% of the human population is not a glitch. The truth is that any community—human, animal, plant—thrives on diversity. Different modes of thinking are a strength, not a flaw. As we've seen above, there are plenty of useful applications for neurodivergent thought.

There are challenges too, no doubt.

I often fantasise about what it would be like to be able to think about... nothing. I used to believe that when people said they were thinking about nothing, they meant nothing *important*. It turns out, they literally meant *nothing*. My husband and I were sitting outdoors once when he asked me what I was thinking about. I rattled off a long list of all the concerns, big and small, that were bouncing around my brain. He looked surprised. I asked him what *he* had been thinking about. He replied, "... There's a nice tree over there." Dude, what the fuck?! It must be so *quiet*.

I wish I didn't have to wait until five minutes before a deadline to get motivated to do anything—it is not good for my blood pressure. I probably could have had a luxury holiday if I'd saved all the money I've paid out in fines for late fees and missed appointments that simply fell out of my brain. I'd get so much more done if I could just *reply* to an email without agonising about it for a week first. It would be lovely to navigate busy

places without a sense of panic mounting in my chest when the noise gets too loud or there are too many people surrounding me. And, man, I'd love to be able to tidy my desk properly, but I need everything I'm working on to be on show or, as far as my brain is concerned, it will cease to exist.

Depending on what flavour of neurodivergent you are, you might relate to some of those challenges and you might well have a bunch of your own. We're conditioned to think that these shortcomings mean that we are inherently flawed. That there is something wrong with us. That having needs that require accommodation makes us problematic.

Here's the thing though: **everyone has needs**. It's just that society only accommodates some of them.

Neurotypical and non-disabled people have needs. They have challenges, they have strengths and weaknesses, they have aspects of life that they need support with. But society makes those accommodations so automatically that they don't even notice it.

For example, no one is complaining that people can't simply fly up to a second-floor room, or scale a wall—they build in stairs. We make doors of a height and width that most human bodies can fit through—we don't measure them to specific individuals. Some people have great internal time-keeping, but we still put clocks in public spaces and on devices so no one has to guess the time. We produce calendars so people can track dates, we make cups with handles so they can be picked up, we make windows out of glass so we can see daylight... you get the idea.

The more common the challenge, the more likely it is to be accommodated. Eyesight deterioration comes for most of us, especially as we age, so no one makes a fuss about people

wearing glasses. You don't get politicians complaining that it's "political correctness gone mad" that schools and offices use central heating in cold weather.

There is deliberate discrimination against, even persecution of, neurodivergent and disabled people, because we challenge the dominant narrative. We undermine productivity culture and reject empty conformity. So they try to shut us down. They act like our accommodations are problematic and unnecessary so that they don't have to listen to our contributions. It's easier and cheaper for them to pretend *we're* the issue, and convince everyone we don't deserve to be included.

Well, they can't ignore us forever.

There's been a real shift lately, particularly as more and more people are learning about their neurodivergence. We're starting to realise just how many of us there are, and how much we've been gaslit up until now. We're pissed off about it, and we're not prepared to take it anymore.

It's not just us, either. Neurotypical and non-disabled people are realising that this toxic productivity culture doesn't serve *them*, either. They've worked their fingers to the bone and towed the line for so long, and they've been rewarded with... nothing. Worse than nothing. Rising living costs, an insurmountable housing market, no job security and utter exhaustion. We're all waking up to how we've been disrespected and bled dry just to line the pockets of a few wealthy individuals.

There's a revolution underway. One that rejects conformity, and celebrates difference. That means enabling and empowering *everyone*. It means letting go of this idea that access needs are a problem to be resented, and instead meeting them enthusiastically and joyfully because we *want* everyone to be able to participate. It means wanting to hear everyone's

perspective and therefore making space for all contributions.

It means respecting all ways of thinking, and valuing everyone's strengths.

If, up until now, you've been struggling and feeling like you're always getting it "wrong", then I need you to know that that is a direct result of the system attacking you. It's their failure to support you—or their choice not to support you—not your inadequacy.

Your way of approaching tasks, your way of processing information, your way of working through projects... none of it is wrong. It is unique to you, which gives it value. It makes you creative and innovative, and gives you something special to offer the rest of us.

The trouble is, you've been expending so much energy trying to make yourself do it the way you've been told you're supposed to, that you're struggling to do it at all. If you were allowed to work in a way that suited you, you'd get far better results.

Your way of thinking isn't wrong—it's a unique contribution to humanity. It's honestly shit that that contribution hasn't been appreciated enough. Frankly, humanity doesn't deserve you, but I'm glad you're still showing up anyway.

## Unlearning your conditioning

Letting go of these sorts of deep-rooted beliefs is easier said than done. For many of us, this is programming we've been receiving for decades. It takes time to retrain our brains to believe in a new approach, especially when the old way is constantly reinforced by so much of society around us.

However, there are steps you can take to start to unlearn the teaching that there is a "right" way to think.

### *Name the problem*

Being aware of the issue is half the battle.

When you notice that inner voice criticising yourself for doing it wrong, name it:

"Oh, there's that old 'right way of thinking' belief again."

This takes the emotion out of it, and distances you from it, meaning you can look more objectively at what's going on.

### *Ask questions*

Hey, we're good at this.

If you're worrying that you're doing something "wrong", ask yourself:

- According to who?
- What makes it wrong?
- What's the danger, if any, in doing it this way instead of another way?
- What might be the *benefits* to doing it differently?

Treat it as an investigation. Maybe try a few different approaches and see which works best.

### *Respect your needs*

When you stop asking "is this right?" and start asking "what is this costing me?", everything changes.

There are probably several different ways that you *could* do something. But then you notice that one approach drains you and makes the process take twice as long compared to another

approach that *feels* more comfortable and yields better results. Now the choice of which to use is a no-brainer.

If you're feeling anxious or uncomfortable about a task, stop trying to suppress that feeling. Treat it as information. It may well be a sign that this approach isn't working for you, and, if you listen, it might lead you to a better way.

### *Reframe failure*

Instead of beating yourself up for “failing” at a task, look at what you can learn from it.

Not being able to do something isn't a sign that *you're* wrong; it just means your approach needs to change. So examine what *didn't* work for clues to how you can build a better system.

You're not *bad* at this, you're just not getting the support you need. This is a quest to discover what support would help.

It's not your job to prove your way of thinking is valid. Trying to justify and prove yourself is exhausting. The results speak for themselves once you stop treating someone else's way as the default.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

When you worry you're “doing it wrong”.

### **Take:**

A piece of paper and a pen.

Draw two lines down the paper, dividing it into three columns.

In the left-hand column, write down what you perceive to be the "weaknesses" of your way of thinking.

In the middle column, for each "weakness" on the left, write down an action (or two) you can take to support yourself. For example, if a weakness is being on time for appointments, an action could be setting several alarms leading up to an appointment to keep you on track.

In the right-hand column, write down your strengths. This might feel harder, but push yourself to think of at least 10. You can do it, trust me. For example, perhaps you notice details that other people miss; maybe you see connections between different topics; you might be more aware of how other people are feeling than your peers...

Now rip or cut the paper along each line, separating the three columns.

### **Left-hand column of "weaknesses"**

Throw this away (or burn it, if you can do that safely). You don't need it anymore.

### **Middle column of actions**

Keep this somewhere you can refer to it regularly. Make sure you are actively using these actions to support yourself.

If you're ever tempted to think of them as excessive support that other people don't need, remember that no one makes anyone feel bad for wearing glasses. This is glasses for your

brain—it's totally reasonable.

### **Right-hand column of strengths**

Keep this in a place that you can go to when you need a lift. You could paste it into your journal, or put it up on the wall next to your mirror.

Any time you're feeling bad about things you don't do so well, go back to this list and remember that, whilst no one does *everything* brilliantly, there is plenty of stuff that you're bloody great at.

## 4

# The “Right” Way To Create

In this chapter:

- Taking established artists’ advice with a pinch of salt
- Learning to believe in your own way of making your art
- Getting to know what works for you
- Choosing between routine and ritual

\* \* \*

One of the most popular pieces I’ve ever written was a Substack post entitled “Stephen King can get fucked”.

I think part of the reason that it went viral was that quite a lot of people wanted to tell *me* to get fucked for daring to criticise one of the most beloved writers of our age. But far more people related hard to the piece, so I don’t care about the ones who got mad—I’m happy to be screamed at if it helps people who’ve previously felt silenced and excluded to finally feel validated.

The piece was a response to Stephen King's assertion that "real" writers write every day. Those who don't, he has claimed, are amateurs. As a professional writer who couldn't write every day even if I wanted to, I wish to take issue.

In his book *On Writing*,<sup>1</sup> which has become something of a Bible to many fledgling writers, King says he writes 2,000 words every day, and he thinks that a daily goal of 1,000 words is perfectly achievable for anyone serious about their craft.

Look, I like Stephen King's books, I really do (although I wish it didn't turn out to be aliens in the end quite so often...), and he seems like a decent guy. But on this particular issue, he can absolutely, in British parlance, *do one*. 1,000 words a day is *not* perfectly achievable for a lot of people. And the idea that there is a certain way that people *should* show up to their craft is undermining and silencing a huge number of voices that we need to hear.

It's not just King. Ray Bradbury, Ernest Hemingway, and many other high profile names have also suggested that daily writing is necessary if you want to call yourself a proper writer. Hemingway spoke about getting up to write "every morning as soon after first light as possible. There is no one to disturb you and it is cool or cold, and you come to your work and warm as you write."<sup>2</sup>

There's a man who's never been woken up at the crack of dawn by a toddler singing directly into his face.

And therein lies the problem. Most of these daily writers had wives to take care of the day-to-day inconveniences of life—like making food and making sure everyone has clean pants. That's before we talk about health and energy concerns, or socio-economic constraints.

It's one hell of a privilege to be able to write every single day.

There's also the fact that Stephen King was stuffed to the eyeballs with cocaine for much of his early career... I wonder if that might have helped his word count.

I've no interest in bashing other writers for their processes. If writing every day works for you, have at it. (For that matter, if you want to knock back a gram of cocaine while you do it, it's none of my business. Although I will point out that King reports reaching a stage where he had to shove cotton wool up his nose while he wrote to prevent blood dripping all over his typewriter. So it might not be advisable.) My issue isn't with any of these people having strict writing routines, it's with them trying to say that other people should follow them.

It's one thing to take guidance and inspiration from the methods of established artists, it's another to feel constrained by the idea that there's a particular way to create. And that failing to follow it means that you're failing as an artist.

Side note: Maya Angelou and Octavia Butler both spoke about how they personally liked to write every day, but they didn't try to suggest that it was a requirement that anyone else approach writing in the same way they did. Make of that what you will...

Stephen King isn't successful because he writes every day. He's successful because he has found a method that works for him and he's stuck, zealously and unapologetically, to it. (Also, because he's worked on his craft, he has good ideas, and he has a wife who has tirelessly supported him and rescued work that might otherwise never have seen the light of day. Every writer needs a Tabitha King in their lives...)

For those of us who have unpredictable health and energy, who have children that we actually have to care for ourselves, who have day jobs and cooking and shopping and laundry to manage, and who are trying to navigate the end times of capitalism in a

constant state of anxiety, daily writing not only isn't possible, it's damaging.

## Inspiration not instruction

*On Writing* is a great book. If you're a writer, I highly recommend it. Just don't take it as gospel. The same with Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, or Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic*, or Margaret Atwood's *Negotiating With The Dead*, or Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*.

It's worth knowing how other people do it, because they might give you some ideas you can try out. The trouble comes when we start treating those ideas as instructions.

When we start to believe that there is a "right" way to create, we start trying to force ourselves into patterns that don't necessarily work for us. Then, when we can't follow the programme as it was set down by the person we consider to be the master, we feel that we're failing. We beat ourselves up for not being good enough, we get discouraged, and then we quit.

The trouble with capitalism's commodification of creativity, that I talked about in Chapter 1, is that, in order to cash in on our creative aspirations and turn that all-important profit, the people doing the selling have to convince us that we *need* what they're offering. People running writing courses can't, therefore, tell us that their methodology is just one option that we might want to try. Why would we hand over our hard-earned cash for a "maybe"? So they tell us that **this is the only way**.

Of course we'll shell out money for an officially sanctioned route to success.

It's so tempting to believe that there is a way that will guarantee results. Art is such a flimsy, ephemeral thing—it involves

so much luck and subjectivity that it can be hard to know which way is up half the time. We’re stumbling around in the mist, never sure if we’re making much progress, if we’re going in the right direction, or if we’re about to step off the edge of a cliff. When someone steps forward with a torch and says that they can show us the one sure, safe road, everything in us wants to believe them.

I have bad news. It’s a trick. They’re just after your money. They’ll lead you somewhere, but it might not be where you want to go, and they might drop you off the edge of that cliff anyway.

There is no right way to create. There is only the way that is **right for you.**

We’re so used to being told, very prescriptively, how to do pretty much everything, that it can feel really, *really* hard to let go of the idea that we need to follow instructions. But if you can learn to see different theories as suggestions and options rather than rules, then you can begin to give yourself space to find and follow your own path.

You are not inherently deficient

Society has done a number on all of us, when you stop to think about it. From a young age, we are made to focus relentlessly on our weaknesses. School will always flag the things we struggle with, that we need to work on, before they’ll mention the areas we excel at. Especially if the skills we are strongest in are ones that aren’t easily graded and therefore won’t help the school secure funding or high assessment scores... Then capitalism kicks in as we get older, and starts trying to market various things to us, which requires us to believe there are issues in us that need fixing.

If humans were all really that deeply flawed and substandard, evolution would have done away with us way before we invented capitalism. And we wouldn't have developed in such magnificent diversity if we were all meant to be the same.

You don't need fixing. You just need to figure out how to be the best and fullest version of yourself that you can be.

You don't want to be like anyone else

Following Stephen King's advice to the letter would only make sense if you wanted to create the exact same work as Stephen King. But you don't.

Stephen King's work already exists in the world. You don't want to replicate it. That would be pointless. And illegal. I don't fancy your chances in a plagiarism case against one of the most commercially successful writers of all time. But, more importantly, we don't need another Stephen King; the one we have already is great. We need **you**. We don't have another one of you. You are the only person who can create *your* art.

The whole point of art is to be original. You want (I assume) to create something different, that shows your unique perspective. So why are you so keen to copy someone else's approach? If you want to produce an original outcome, you're going to need an original process.

That makes so much sense logically, and yet we resist it with every fibre of our being. We want someone else to show us the way. But the scary truth is that no one else can. They can show us the route *they* took, but that route led to *their* work. The route to *your* work is entirely your own. Only you can figure that out.

How do you know what works for you?

Ok, so how do you find *your* method?

The best way is to try lots of different options. Rather than worrying about succeeding or failing with other people’s techniques or programmes, treat it as an experiment. Test out an approach, and take note of what did and didn’t suit you.

When I was writing my first book, I spent about a month getting up at 5am so I could write. At the time, a number of writers that I respected were advocating this practice, so I thought I’d give it a try. In some ways, it worked pretty well—I got a lot of words down and I liked feeling I’d accomplished something before my day even started. It took the pressure off the rest of my day, too. With a decent amount of writing in the bag already, I felt more free and relaxed. In the evening, I was able to rest, without my usual productivity-based guilt hovering around the edges of my brain and taunting me that I needed to be doing something constructive.

But I couldn’t keep it up. For one thing, my then-three-year-old son abruptly decided he had completed sleep and was going to spend his nights using me as a climbing frame. I was getting a grand total of about 45-minutes of sleep a night, and there was no way I could lift myself out of bed at 5am. Even if I had been able to extract myself from under my pre-schooler without waking him, thereby prompting him to demand I play superheroes, I would not have been able to write coherent sentences. That aside, though, it was just too exhausting. Energy is not something I have in abundance at the best of times, and starting my day so early was draining the life out of me. I was exhausted by 6pm and had nothing to give my children, and could barely speak to my husband. I didn’t feel

able to socialise with friends, or even go for the walks on the beach that I love so much.

I gave it a go, but I had to conclude it was not a long-term solution for me.

Instead of beating myself up for not being able to manage it like the other writers could, I looked at what the major issue was. For me, it didn't suit my energy levels. I'm at my best writing in the afternoon—that's always been when my brain hits its stride. Once I recognised and accepted this about myself, I was able to design a writing routine that makes the most of my natural rhythms rather than trying to force a pace that drains me.

A popular self-help book claimed, a while ago, that whatever you want to be, you should do first thing in the morning. I can only deduce from this statement that the author does not have ADHD. I do, and just no. My brain needs space to faff around first thing in the morning.

"Eating the frog" (the idea that you should tackle the toughest task of your day first) is also terrible advice for a lot of neurodivergent people. It's overly pressuring and draining. Our brains don't respond well to that kind of pressure; we're more likely to simply shut down and do nothing. A series of smaller tasks and gentle dopamine hits that give us a run-up to bigger work are much more helpful.

All of these gurus sound so bloody confident that they convince us they know exactly what they're talking about and they must be right about everything. But we need to start interrogating them a little more. How much do they really understand about different neurotypes? How much awareness do they have of intersectionality and the range of factors that impact focus and motivation? Usually, absolutely fuck all. They just know what works for them (or what sounds snappy on a

podcast), and they set about making a quick buck out of it. Good for them, but don’t put them on some kind of pedestal.

The only expert on your brain is you.

The trouble is, you’ve probably had your expertise undermined so many times that you don’t trust yourself anymore. You’ve been told over and over again that you’re doing it wrong and other people know better. Rather than admit that their way might not be perfect, they blamed you for not following it to the letter, or for being lazy, or told you that you obviously didn’t want it enough. And you’d been conditioned to believe them.

That’s ok. Go easy on yourself for that. You’ve been fed these messages for a long, long time—of course you were susceptible. It’s ok to feel any sort of way about that: anger, grief, regret... but please know that it wasn’t your fault and that nothing is too late. Now is the perfect time to start pushing back on some of this messaging.

Once you let go of the idea that someone else can tell you the right way to work, the next step is to allow yourself to get curious about how *your* brain operates. You’ve probably never been shown how to get to know your own ways of working and thinking, because society likes to pretend there is only one. But hopefully by now you believe me that that’s bullshit. We’ll get into ways that you can get to know the inside of your own head in Part 3 of this book, but for now I just want you to let it sink in that everyone’s brain is different, it’s ok for yours to be different, and that there is never going to be one approach that works for everyone, so it’s ok to find one that is specific to you and your needs.

## Routines gone bad

One other thing that I want to talk about is the idea that everyone needs a routine.

It sounds good, in theory. It makes sense that a regular habit would move you forward and make you more organised.

But routine doesn't work for everyone.

I speak to so many people who have tried, over and over, to implement a regular routine and are deeply frustrated with themselves because they can't stick to it. They're exhausted from trying, and the repeated "failures" (as they perceive them) have convinced them that they're not good enough. They're demotivated and scared to try again.

So this is your permission slip to let go of trying to implement a fixed routine.

That being said, abandoning your creative practice to pure chaos can be a bit risky. So I have an alternative offering for you: ritual.

## Ritual vs routine

If you have a brain that responds well to strict routines, absolutely lean into that. For some people, doing the same thing at the same time in the same place every day (or most days) is comforting and encouraging and stimulates productivity. If it's working for you, don't change it just because this crazy hippie came at you with another option that sounded cool. You can weave in elements of ritual to your set routine if you fancy it, but you do not need to let go of the structures that support you.

However, if rigid routines make you want to claw your own skin off, then you're never going to be able to vibe with them. If

you try to force yourself into it, your brain will shut down and you’ll find yourself procrastinating or self-sabotaging in a bid to avoid it. That’s when you might want to give ritual a go.

Rituals are simple ways to tell your brain it’s time to create. They prime your nervous system for the task you’re wanting to direct it towards, and open up a container for that task that feels safe and supportive. It’s a way of forming a habit without a strict routine—rather than having to write for two hours every Monday from 10am, you use your ritual to mark writing time when you have space and capacity.

A ritual can be as simple as lighting a candle before you start work. It can be a particular playlist you listen to, or a certain way you set up your space. It might be an essential oil blend or room spray of a particular scent that stimulates your creative senses, or it could be burning herbs and/or drawing personal sigils to set a specific intention to guide your focus.

It could be journaling for five minutes before you start to write, or reading a couple of poems for inspiration. It might be going for a brief walk to get your energy moving and to mark the transition from previous tasks to creative time. It might be a combination of several of the above.

The important thing is that your ritual feels nourishing, enjoyable and encouraging for you.

Whereas routines are rigid, and missing a day induces feelings of shame and failure, rituals are flexible. Routines are pressuring; rituals are joyful and uplifting. Routines contain us; rituals hold space for us.

Rituals are sensory experiences, which engage our bodies in the creative process, bringing us back fully into ourselves. Stimulating the senses helps us to tap into different parts of our brain and different ways of thinking and approaching

creative projects. It can also be a comforting and encouraging experience. (We'll talk more about connecting with the body through creativity in Part 2.)

Also, rituals feel magical. And that's just fun. Fun is an underrated part of the creative act. We often start our creative habits because we enjoy them, but then start to treat them like a job, turning ourselves into harsh and demanding bosses, and suck all the fun out of the project. Having fun with our practice, though, allows our imaginations to come out to play. We come up with bigger, better ideas when we're relaxed and enjoying ourselves. We're also more likely to show up to our creative practice regularly and stick with a project if we're getting the dopamine hit of pleasure that tells our brains this is something we want to do.

Creativity is a kind of magic. Conjuring worlds and people out of nothing. Transporting an audience through time and space. Eliciting emotions in people you may never even meet. What's more magical than that?! So it makes sense to lean into that sense of magic and cultivate that mindset in our creative time.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When a standard routine isn't doing it for you.

**Take:**

A creative ritual.

Try out a few ritual elements and find what works for you. These might include:

- Scent (essential oils, incense, room spray...)
- Light (candles, lamps, sunrise, sunset, golden hour...)
- Taste (herbal tea, cacao, your favourite snack...)
- Sound (music, nature sounds, white noise, noise-cancelling headphones...)
- Touch (comfortable socks, cosy blanket, a smooth pebble, different textures, fidget toys...)
- Practice (meditation, stretching, chanting, breathwork, dance, walking...)

You might find it useful to state an affirmation or intention as part of your ritual; something like:

- I give myself permission to create imperfectly
- I will do what I can, and that is enough
- I am allowed to share my voice
- I will write for 20 minutes, and then rest

A closing statement can also be useful, to acknowledge your achievement and give yourself permission to stop. It can be as simple as, **“That is enough for today.”**

Play around with different practices and design your own personal creative ritual.

Remember, you don’t have to stick rigidly to it—feel free to change up elements, or completely change the whole thing, any time you like.

## 5

# How They Stole Your Confidence

In this chapter:

- Why so many neurodivergent people go undiagnosed and unsupported
- How the lack of understanding undermines your confidence and self-esteem
- Why you still don't get much support even after (self-)diagnosis
- Grief for what could have been
- (Self-)diagnosis is just the beginning of your journey to understanding yourself

\* \* \*

I didn't realise that I was neurodivergent until I was in my late 30s.

By that time, I'd navigated the UK education system, having

two breakdowns in the process, then bounced around employed roles that I hated before having to leave the corporate world entirely because it was pushing me over the edge of another breakdown.

How different might things have been if I'd known that I was autistic and ADHD? If I'd understood why everything felt so much harder for me, why I felt like such an outsider, and how to manage it all.

I'll never know.

Ultimately, I feel like everything worked out the way it was supposed to. I am the person I am now because of every experience that led up to this point. If I changed one tiny aspect of it all, I would completely change me. And—now this is a massive sign of personal growth—I don't want to change me. I actually quite like who I am.

I wouldn't have been able to say that a few years ago!

But it was not an easy ride. Going for that long without knowing about such a key part of yourself puts a terrible strain on your soul. And I'm very far from alone in the experience.

In the US, more than half of all ADHD adults<sup>1</sup> and around two-thirds of autistic adults<sup>2</sup> didn't receive their diagnosis until adulthood. In the UK, research suggests that the majority of neurodivergent adults don't know about their neurodivergence. It is estimated that 89% of UK adults with ADHD are currently undiagnosed,<sup>3</sup> and, when it comes to autism, the proportion of adults undiagnosed ranges from 53% of autistic people aged 20–39 up to 97% of those aged 60 and above.<sup>4</sup>

Let that sink in for a moment—almost every single UK autistic person over the age of 60 has lived their entire life not knowing that they're autistic. I mean, fucking hell.

I fall into the 40–59 age bracket, where 89% of autistic people

are undiagnosed. So, in that context, I should consider myself lucky to even be aware that I'm autistic *and* ADHD.

## Reasons for lack of diagnosis

It's so easy for smug commentators to look at the rising rates of autism and ADHD diagnoses and declare that this is a trend that everyone's jumping on. Sure, Brenda, I just felt so left out of the club that I decided to go up and down the stairs five times this morning without once managing to do the actual thing I'd gone upstairs *for*, just for shits and giggles.

People saying, "There were no neurodivergent people in my day!" reminds me of the time that an older female relative once casually remarked, "there are a lot more gay people around these days than there used to be." She doesn't know I'm bisexual. I didn't mention it... I did subtly suggest that perhaps people didn't feel quite so able to be open about their sexuality when she was a lass...

People have always been neurodivergent. (More on this later.) It's just that it wasn't a thing that was talked about. Or a thing that was understood.

When I was a child, it was generally believed that only boys could be autistic. Also, that autistic people universally had communication and socialisation challenges. They never would have even considered that someone like me—female and impossible to shut up—could be on the spectrum.

Similarly, ADHD was believed to only impact boys. Boys, that is, not men, because the greatest minds in healthcare were adamant that ADHD was something you grew out of. Being an ADHD adult was simply not an option.

Now, we know better. We know that girls and boys can be both

autistic and ADHD, and that girls often present in very different ways. With ADHD, for example, the “hyperactivity” is often more internalised—it’s the brain that’s excessively busy, rather than the body. (Note I said “often”, though, not “always”; there are no absolutes here.)

We also know that autism is a spectrum. The understanding of that term, however, is fairly patchy. The autistic spectrum is not a line from “not autistic” to “very autistic”, as many people seem to conceive of it. The best explanation I have ever heard was to imagine that autism is a bit like the dials on your cooker. You can turn one hob up to 5, one up to 7, maybe one is simmering lightly at 2, while one is switched off altogether. Meanwhile, you’ve got your oven at 180°C and your grill on at 200°. Similarly, one autistic person might have their communication dial at 8, but their spatial awareness dial at 2, their need for routine at 5, sensory sensitivity at 7... Everyone’s dials will be set at different levels, leading to entirely unique autistic experiences.

All this increased understanding means that healthcare professionals have got better at identifying neurodivergence when they encounter it. On top of that, many more people are now talking about their experiences. So many of us have found this sudden understanding of our brain so entirely liberating, that we want to share that joy with others, and also support those who are coming through it all behind us. Because the whole process is a bit of a head fuck. And as more of us talk about *our* experiences, other people start to recognise *themselves* in what we say.

More awareness is always going to equal more diagnosis. That is a good thing.

Yet people still seem resistant to this change. Hardly a

day goes by without some “think piece” by someone entirely unqualified, and without any knowledge or lived experience of neurodivergence, attacking the entire neurodivergent population and insisting that everyone should shut up and get on with it.

Why are they being such dicks? Hard to say for sure. For some, there’s probably an element of grief that they didn’t get support they could have done with as children (or adults), and this leads them to be angry that other people are getting it. Others are simply unilaterally opposed to the system helping *anyone*, when it could, instead, be used to turn a profit for them. Still more are out to make a quick buck by spinning a hot take for any rag that would like to take advantage of the increased clicks that outrage generates.

Not unlike the parallel with the LGBTQIA+ community, though, all this hostility pushes many of us back into the closet. We start to recognise and understand our own neurodivergence, only to push the knowledge away again when we’re afraid of being judged, belittled or discriminated against by others.

Two steps forward, one step back. But that’s still progress.

We are, ultimately, getting better at recognising and understanding neurodivergence. We are, slowly but surely, taking back our power and refusing to be ignored or sidelined. And the dickheads will just have to suck it.

## The impact of late diagnosis

If you, like so very many of us, didn’t come to an understanding of your neurological wiring until later in the day, then it’s worth acknowledging the impact that had on you, and giving yourself a bit of grace for it.

You've spent *years* not being aware of how your brain worked, or how it was different to society's expectations. This included your formative years, the time when you were most impressionable and when you developed your deepest rooted beliefs about yourself and the world. During this time, you were being told that you were doing things "wrong". You were getting in trouble for transgressions you didn't understand, leading you to feel on edge and uncertain. You were told that your natural reactions or behaviours were inappropriate, leading you to constantly second-guess yourself. You were told that your needs were excessive or problematic, leading you to believe that your discomfort and distress was to be suppressed and overcome.

You were told that you were lazy, undisciplined, unfocused. Not a team player. Difficult. You were made to believe that you just needed to try harder, work more, be "better".

No one ever showed you a way that worked for you, they just berated you for not doing it the way that worked for them.

You always felt like you didn't fit in, that there was something different about you, and that you were slightly out of step with all your peers, but you didn't understand why. People might have told you that you were weird or annoying, or they might have just avoided you, which gave you the same message. You started masking, trying desperately to fit in with everyone else, to act like everyone else, so that you'd be accepted. You had varying degrees of success.

You didn't understand why certain things seemed harder for you than for others. Everyone else could do it, and the trusted adults around you—parents, teachers, the responsible people that you assumed knew everything—seemed to think it should all be obvious and easy. So you assumed there must be

something fundamentally wrong with you.

By the time you got to adulthood, you were exhausted. You had become hypervigilant—constantly watching how people behaved so that you could try to do the same, studying everyone's reactions for clues on how you should behave next, on the lookout for the next criticism, the next sign that you'd got it wrong.

Still you kept on trying to ignore the messages that your body and brain were screaming at you. You pushed through the exhaustion in your soul, trying so very hard to be the person everyone wanted you to be—even though you could never get a proper handle on exactly who that person was.

You felt uncomfortable, unseen and invalidated in every relationship, workplace and social situation that you tried to get into.

Depending on how long it was before you discovered your neurodivergence, this might have added up to *decades* of the world sending you messages that you were broken, deficient, disagreeable, maybe even unlovable. Years of feeling like an outsider, not understanding what you were doing “wrong”.

Maybe it made you sad, maybe it made you angry, maybe it turned you into an obsessive people-pleaser, maybe you tried to drown it all out with destructive behaviours... maybe a combination of the above.

All because the world didn't make space for you as you truly were. Everyone—some with good intentions, some not so much—was trying to fit you into a box that was entirely the wrong shape for you. Of course that was never going to work. But you didn't have the words to explain why, even to yourself.

## Lack of support post-diagnosis

Once you finally get a diagnosis, or you come to a point of self-diagnosis, you'd think things would improve. But, unfortunately, they don't change a whole lot.

In the UK, only 10% of businesses consider neurodiversity in their people management practices.<sup>5</sup> In the US, only 14% of employees say that their workplace provides training on managing neurodivergent employees.<sup>6</sup>

Not only that, but society at large is still pretty intolerant of any kind of difference. The media, around the world, has been busy attacking accommodations and support for neurodivergent people just lately, and there is a certain degree of skepticism in the general population about whether we're all just making it up or making an unnecessary fuss.

Sure, Alan, because I love starting the day by losing my keys three times and being filled with panic when someone near me is breathing too loudly.

Even once we know why our brains work differently, we might have our work cut out convincing our friends and family that we have a difference that needs, and deserves, to be accommodated. We might still have a boss tell us to get over ourselves. We will still receive negative messages from the world around us. All of that will still hurt.

But at least now we know. And we can be kinder to ourselves. Plus, we have each other.

What (self-)diagnosis does give you is access to a lovely community of people (even if they only live in your phone) who *get it*. They have your back.

I have your back.

## Take a breath

Can we pause for a moment? This is a lot. If you're a hugger, I offer a hug. If not, I offer my presence—I'm here with you. I get it. I lived it too.

It was a lot. And it left its scars.

You've spent a lifetime feeling you needed to hide who you truly were, and never feeling able to trust or believe in yourself.

It's been a whole lot, and you are amazing for getting through it. It is completely understandable if you have struggled, if you have lashed out, if you have retreated inwards, if you have shut down or burned out or never felt like you got it together.

No one can fucking blame you, given what you've had to contend with.

I think you're flipping awesome.

Incidentally, if you're wondering why you weren't a huge star at the age of 25 (like all those people with the shiny interviews in glossy magazines, and like your *potential* suggested you would be), then give yourself some slack and appreciate that the fact that you made it this far at all in the face of all that crap is pretty impressive.

Getting a diagnosis or coming to a point of self-diagnosis is liberating and illuminating—finally, everything makes sense. Finally, you realise *why* you've been finding it hard, and you can start to make helpful changes.

But that realisation also comes with a certain amount of grief. Grief for the younger you who went through so much when they should never have had to. Grief for all that you were excluded from and denied. Grief for all that could have been if you had known, if *anyone* had had a clue.

It's important to give yourself space to feel that grief. Sure,

everything you go through makes you the person you are now, and who you are now is fabulous. But that doesn't mean it doesn't suck that you had to have it so hard for so long. It doesn't mean that it doesn't still suck that you *still* have to have it harder than other people.

We're not good at grief, of any kind, in our society. We find it uncomfortable, and we try to rush people through it. We want everyone to just get over it and move on. But that simply results in people pushing pain and trauma down, where it gets stuck and either causes emotional blocks in the long term, or bubbles up and then boils over into bigger psychological problems later down the line.

Allow yourself to feel the pain. Reach out for professional help if you can—therapy is not, and should not be, just for emergencies. Look for as many self-care tools as you can find. Talk to people you trust.

Take care of yourself.

(Side note: There are a bunch of creative therapy tools at [YourCreativeFix.substack.com](http://YourCreativeFix.substack.com) that you can add to your self-care kit should you wish to.)

## The turning point

The (self-)diagnosis point is just the beginning.

It opens a door, but you still have to walk through. And then there's a whole new world to explore.

Five years or so after discovering that I'm autistic and ADHD, I'm still asking myself what that really means. Who am I when I'm not masking? What behaviours are natural, and what is the mask? What *are* my actual needs? I've been pushing them down for so long, masking for so long, that it's hard to separate

myself from the pretend neurotypical I've been portraying. Like an actor who's been in a soap for 25 years and can no longer disentangle themselves from the character. Even their friends call them "Barry from *Eastenders*". (Niche joke for the UK folks, there.)

There's a lot to figure out. You're uncovering who you truly are. It's exciting, and daunting, and it won't be over in a weekend.

Figuring out who we are is the work of all of our lifetimes. Undiagnosed neurodivergent people might have been held back on the starting blocks, but gaining that insight gives us more information about ourselves than most neurotypicals ever receive. So maybe we gain a little boost at this point. It is, however, a quest that never ends, so don't panic that you haven't nailed it—if you're still alive, you're still learning about yourself. And yourself is still changing; there's always more to learn.

Take it steady.

There are so many questions:

- What *are* your needs, emotionally, physically, psychologically, energetically...?
- What triggers you?
- What depletes you?
- What support helps you?
- What environments suit you best?
- What environments or circumstances challenge you?
- How do you work or operate best?
- What ways of working or operating don't suit you?

And so on, and on, and on.

This book can help you begin to work through some of them.

My Divergent Creatives course will help you explore some more (check out [CreativeFix.net](http://CreativeFix.net)). There are also some great resources out there to give you more information (I've listed a bunch in the Further Reading section of this book). But a lot of it is over to you.

This is a process of experimentation and exploration. It's trial and error. You give things a go, you notice what works and what doesn't. You check in with yourself and work, over time, on connecting the dots between how you feel inside and what's going on outside you. You keep notes and begin to recognise patterns. You adapt accordingly.

Most importantly, you give yourself grace.

Sometimes things won't work. Some times or situations or experiences will feel harder than others. Sometimes you won't be able to do the thing you wanted to do at all. One day you might think you've got an issue cracked, then the next day it'll come crashing down again.

All of that is ok.

This is all a work in progress. *You* are a beautiful work in progress, always and forever in the act of becoming. You are part of nature, and everything in nature is continually changing, moving through cycles—not as a circle, but a spiral, towards something new.

You don't have to have it perfect. You don't have to have it all figured out. You don't have to have it all done. In fact, you're not meant to. When you have all the answers and you've done all the things, you've completed life. And you, my friend, have so much more yet to do and experience.

So yes, all of these challenges knocked your confidence. You learned not to trust yourself, not to truly *know* yourself, and it's hard to rebuild an entire relationship with yourself.

But it's also exciting. And filled with possibility.

So please do mourn what you've lost and respect the fact that it is totally fucking unfair that society let you down so badly.

But *also*, when you're ready, allow yourself to soften into the opportunities to redefine *everything*. Give yourself permission to dream into being a whole new way of living and creating and being.

Go gently with yourself, and give yourself the care and patience you deserved from the very beginning.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you feel sad about what could have been.

**Take:**

A piece of paper and a pen.

Write a letter to your younger self. Talk to them with the knowledge, care, empathy and support that you wish someone had given you back then.

Tell them what they need to hear, and what you wish someone could have said to them at the time.

When you're done, read the letter, with the knowledge that your inner child / younger self is reading it too.

**Optional Follow-up:**

Write a letter *to* your current self *from* your future self.

Reassure yourself about the self-confidence and self-understanding you have gained. Paint a picture of a time when it all feels a bit more under control.

Read the letter and allow yourself to fully imagine living in that future.

You could even post the letter to yourself (or schedule it as an email to yourself to be sent in a few weeks' time) so that you receive it at a time when you're not expecting it, and can sit down to read it afresh.

## 6

# Deficiency Is Cultural

In this chapter:

- Reframing disability as a social issue rather than a personal defect
- Is neurodivergence a disability?
- Different cultural perspectives on neurodiversity

\* \* \*

We think of neurodivergence as a deficiency, as a problem to be dealt with. And there's no doubt that it does come with a few challenges (see next chapter).

But how much of this framing is cultural?

Western society labels neurodivergence as a pathology—a condition that needs treatment—but other cultures have very different framings.

## The social model of disability

Even in the West, where we love a diagnostic label, there has been a movement advocating for consideration of the context of disability.

The social model of disability says that it is not the *person* that is disabled, but rather it is the *society* that disables them.

Stairs, for example, are an unnecessary way to insist people enter a building. A ramp, as an alternative, provides access for everyone. We have designed systems and processes, in all areas of our lives, that unfairly exclude certain people and favour others. Rethinking our approach to everything, from transport to working hours, would level the playing field and remove barriers, reducing the impact of a person's disability.

The problem is, the way that society is currently set up favours the people who have the most power and control. They got that power and control *because* the system favours them—why would they want to change it?! So, although we have made some steps forward in terms of inclusion, people are still unnecessarily disabled by the society they live in.

## Is neurodivergence a disability?

This is a hot topic.

I know a lot of people who passionately want neurodivergence to be regarded as a disability, because they want the same rights and protections, and recognition of their challenges, that are afforded to people who fit the accepted definition of “disabled”. They want people to understand that there are significant challenges that they face, which don't impact neurotypical people, and which deserve consideration.

I know lots of other people who passionately *don't* want neurodivergence to be regarded as a disability, because they want the world to recognise that neurological differences are a normal part of humanity, and that different neurotypes have a number of strengths that they can offer the world. Neurodivergence, for these people, isn't an error—it's an intentional part of the diversity of humanity, with challenges and strengths, the same as any other neurological wiring.

I can see both points, and I'm not here to tell you how to think about your own brain. My view is that each individual person is the best judge of their own identity—in every sense—and if you identify as disabled, then you are. If you don't, you're not.

I'm a big fan of the social model, though, and I can't help but think that most of the challenges that I experience as a neurodivergent person would be considerably lessened, if not eradicated, if society were organised in a different way, and with less emphasis on conformity and specific types of productivity.

There are certain things that simply are issues, no matter what accommodations are provided. For example, I'm partially deaf. I cannot hear you if you talk into my left ear, and I'll struggle to hear you if you stand behind me or face away from me while you're talking to me. Facts that my children have failed to grasp, no matter how many times I remind them. In loud spaces, like pubs and clubs, I'm likely to just nod and smile and not even try to get into the conversation because I'll only annoy everyone by asking them to repeat themselves over and over, and even when they've said the thing three times I still won't have heard it. That's a disability—my ear doesn't work the way it's meant to, and no amount of changes to society are going to fix that.

Neurodivergence is a little different. A lot of people tend to think about autistic people, for example, as having learning

disabilities or being minimally verbal, but this is true of only around a third of autistic people. You also get autistic people like me, who rarely shut up. The rate of learning disability in the general population is around 15%,<sup>1</sup> so, whilst the rate is higher in autistic people, learning disability isn't exclusive to this group. We could also talk about diagnostic criteria and the lines we draw between learning disability and neurological differences too... but that might be too big a discussion for this book. Suffice to say, the Western system has a very narrow, medicalised view of neurological difference, and it tends to lump a lot of things under the same umbrella without much thought for the nuances of the human experience.

So some people have parts of their brain that don't work as intended, meaning they're unable to interact with the world around them in the way that they might want to. But those sorts of learning disabilities or communication disorders aren't the same as differences in neurological wiring. A person might be neurodivergent and not have any issues with learning or communication—at least, not any that aren't caused by our current system and processes.

If we see a disability as something not working as intended (like my ear), there's a huge question mark over whether neurodivergence fits that criteria. There are lots of reasons why evolution might have fully intended our brains to work in these different ways.

## Wired this way

In prehistoric cultures, having a group of people willing to engage in risky behaviour—like hunting wild boar while evading sabre-toothed tigers, for example—and make snap decisions

to take decisive action in the moment on instinct—such as relocating a camp on a vague sense of danger in the air—would have been, not just an advantage, but entirely necessary. Your ADHD friends would have been saving your lives. You're welcome.

Likewise, having members of the group who paid meticulous attention to detail (shifting weather patterns, signs of potential predators or prey, the types of plants that yielded edible berries, and so on), who were cautious of new foods and sensitive to the tiniest bit of sensory information the world around them offered, would have meant the difference between life and death. Again, on behalf of the autistic community, you are welcome.

Admittedly, many of these traits are less useful in the 21st Century. But nothing about the way we live today is natural. In fact, our modern society is designed to keep nature as far away as possible. We've paved over it, built around it and done our level best to replace it. We're no longer living in an environment that we were designed for.

Of course we're overstimulated in this era of electric light, constant artificially-produced noises, and ceaseless information broadcast from all angles. Of course we're uncomfortable wrapped in man-made fabrics, thrust into crowds of strangers whilst being isolated from any sense of community, surrounded by concrete and completely out of sync with our circadian rhythms. Yet we hand out diagnoses to the humans whose systems reject this unnatural way of being.

Is it the sign of a pathology to be uncomfortable in an environment so different to the one we were designed for? Or is it, in fact, a sign that your senses have been dulled through over-exposure to find it all manageable?

I mean no disrespect to neurotypical folks here. Ultimately,

they've evolved for our new reality more effectively than we have. They're ready for this phase of the human story, while we've not completely come to terms with the change. As Yoshifumi Miyazaki explains in his book *Walking in the Woods*, humans have been evolving for more than 7 million years, and we've spent 99.99% of that time in a natural environment. It's only in the last 200–300 years that we've lived in urban habitats. "But," Professor Miyazaki says, "genes cannot change over just a few hundred years, so we live in our modern society with bodies that are still adapted to the natural environment."<sup>2</sup>

This disconnect from nature, from our natural selves, is making us all sick. It's just that neurotypical people are less aware of the impact it's having. Their bodies and minds aren't railing against it as loudly as ours. However, according to Miyazaki (and the numerous studies he cites in the book), their bodies and minds are still suffering.

But capitalism prefers it when we suffer more quietly.

Katherine May, in her incredible book *Enchantment*, shares a theory put forward by psychologist Julian Jaynes, that it was once completely normal for humans to hear voices. Jaynes claims that, up until around 2,000 BCE, the human mind was bi-cameral, or two-chambered. This divide separated our thoughts from the awareness that processed them, meaning that we experienced our thoughts as a voice outside ourselves. All humans were hearing a "god" speak to them, which they then obeyed.<sup>3</sup>

Hearing voices, then, was not always considered the frightening illness that it is now. It was part of daily life.

This might go some way towards explaining why, according to many ancient texts, once upon a time almost everyone was hearing god speak to them, whereas nowadays (s)he seems

much more selective about who (s)he chats to.

When the experience of hearing voices is depicted in modern media, it's usually a malevolent voice that urges the person to hurt themselves or others. This certainly does happen, but it's nowhere near as common amongst voice-hearers as Hollywood would have us believe. The vast majority of people who hear voices experience them as benign and harmless. In fact, one in ten people will hear voices at some point, and often they'll cause no issues whatsoever. It's not even automatically diagnostic of a mental health problem.

As a writer, that doesn't really surprise me. Most writers are used to sharing brain space with beings that don't exist—it's how we operate. Characters are chattering away in our ears all day long. We've just managed to convince the world to label it legitimate work instead of psychosis. Alice Walker apparently began writing *The Color Purple* after she had been sitting quietly in a house and suddenly heard the characters talking to one another. Maybe the difference between a writer and a "normal" person is that, when we hear voices or see people who aren't there, we don't freak out and call a doctor, we just write it down.

So perhaps hearing voices is another neurodivergence that is actually built into our design, it's just that at some point it became inconvenient and so we learned to overcome it. It still pops up from time to time, though, because it's not a "flaw", it's part of our natural state. Just another element of nature that we no longer tolerate.

## Diversity by design

If anyone should know about nature and its diversity, its conservationist and broadcaster Chris Packham, and this is what he has to say on the subject:

“Neurodiversity is an in-built, important part of our species. [...] We need variation in any species, because if resources change, positions change, certain members of that species will prosper above others; it’s a survival mechanism. You can’t argue that neurodiverse people haven’t been shaping civilisation, I think we have been shaping civilisation. Perhaps it’s an important part of our function, perhaps that’s why we’re there. [...] There’s the expression, ‘that person sees outside the box’—I don’t see a box. In a time of crisis, whether it’s climate, biodiversity, cost of living, we need people who don’t see boxes.”<sup>4</sup>

I don’t believe that neurodivergence is an error. It’s necessary. It’s there for a reason. Maybe it’s how we were initially meant to be. Sure, times have moved on and it might not always be practical now, but we need to question why we place so much value on sameness and conformity, and whether that’s really helping anyone.

It seems strange, to me, that we consider a lack of sensitivity to the world around us and a lack of deep interest or close attention to be so much “better”. That we are all quite so eager to fit comfortably within the box and trundle on through life following an entirely unnatural and societally constructed way of being and doing.

I’m not saying that being neurodivergent is “better” or more desirable, and I’m certainly not suggesting that it doesn’t come with challenges (although, as we’ve seen, many of those are,

themselves, societally constructed and could be easily alleviated if we relaxed our obsession with “the way things are meant to be done”). But it also comes with advantages, and I don’t think those are there by accident.

## Different cultural perspectives

I’m writing this as a white woman, born and raised (mostly) in England, raised by Anglo-European parents. Most people reading this will probably have been raised, mostly, within a Western paradigm. Our way of seeing ourselves, and what’s desirable for a person’s thinking and behaviour patterns, has been influenced by that paradigm.

But it’s not the only paradigm available.

Here are a few examples of different ways that neurodiversity can be framed.

### Māori

**Takiwātanga**, meaning “in their own time and space” is a Māori word for autistic people, which sees autistic processing as simply different to allistic (non-autistic) processing, not worse or better. It recognises that this form of neurological wiring comes with its own strengths and motivations, and doesn’t ask them to conform to those of other people.

Whilst, takiwātanga is a fairly recently developed term, an older Māori concept is “**kura urupare**”, translated as “gift of the sensories” or “treasure within the head / senses”. This frames autism as a *gift*, and highlights the unique sensory experience that it brings.

ADHD, in te reo Māori (Māori language), is “**Arorere-**

**tini**” — “attention goes to many things”. Don’t it just?!

## Hindi

**Dimaag alag chalna** (दमिाग अलग चलना) means “a mind that moves differently”, and is frequently used in Hindi and Urdu as an umbrella term to describe neurodivergent people. It makes space for differences in wiring and experience, without pathologising.

**Gehri soch wale log** is translated as “people who think deep and layered”, which I think a lot of us can relate to, and also focuses on the strengths, rather than the challenges, of autistic or neurodivergent thought.

## Tamil

**Thanithanmai sinthanai** (தனித்தன்மையை சிந்தனை) refers to someone with a unique or independent cognitive style. It implies having one’s own perspective, rather than following the crowd.

## Arabic region

**Mufakir bi tariqa mukhtalifa** (مفكر بـقـيـرطـب رـكـفـم) means “a thinker in a different way”, and is often used to describe someone who adopts a unique, unconventional, or “out-of-the-box” approach to thinking or solving problems.

Elders in Amazigh communities in North Africa sometimes refer to neurodivergent children as “children with spirits talking louder inside them”, or those “tuned to the unseen”.

## Mandarin

**Shénjīng bǐ rén mǐngǎn** ( ) translates as “nervous system more sensitive than other people’s”, and gives more of an indication of how to accommodate a person rather than simply labelling them.

**Màn rè xìng gézi** ( ) means “takes longer to warm up internally”, and is a subtle way to describe someone with autistic or introvert traits, or processing delays. Again, it seems to give the person much more space to be themselves, and a gentle understanding that they need a little more time.

**Sīwéi tiàoyuè** ( ) is “a leaping, non-linear mind”, a rather perfect description of ADHD.

## Korean

**Jipjung-e ppajineun saram** ( ) translates to “someone who dives deep into focus”, and refers to someone who becomes completely immersed in a particular task, hobby or thought. Hyperfocus, anyone?

## Indigenous North American

Terminology varies across different communities, but children who don’t respond to typical teaching are sometimes described as “**spirit learners**”, “**star children**”, or “**thunder minds**”.

Indigenous North American perspectives are shaped by a cultural worldview that places the community at the centre, so different traits are viewed through the lens of their unique gifts and contributions. The focus is on the positive attributes that benefit the group—such as high focus, sensory sensitivity,

and non-linear thinking—and on how the individual can be supported to be *part* of the group.

## Yoruba

**Ọpọlọ miiran** translates as “another brain”, and can be used in Nigeria either to refer to the need for a different perspective, or to contrast two different people’s way of thinking. It is a concept that demonstrates that different approaches are normal and expected, even needed.

**Ọmọ tó ń rí ayé ní ọ̀nà tirẹ** means “a child who sees / experiences the world in their own way”. This gives respect and consideration to the way a neurodivergent child processes and interacts with the world.

## Turkish

**Hızlı zihin, yavaş dünya** means “fast mind, slow world”—a phrase that, I imagine, is deeply relatable for a number of us. It captures the friction of a brain that might, in ADHD, be racing at a million miles an hour with rapid-fire thoughts, whilst experiencing the lag of executive function challenges, which make mundane tasks or processes feel painfully slow.

**İçi kalabalık insanlar**, or “people with a crowded inside”, is sometimes used to describe sensory overload or racing thoughts.

The TL;DR (that’s Too Long; Didn’t Read, for those not fluent in internet-speak) version of all this is, there are lots of ways of framing neurodiversity that allow for difference, and that focus on strengths and opportunities—making space for people to demonstrate these—rather than focusing on challenges and

labelling people as a problem, which is more likely to put barriers in their way.

If you grew up with this sort of terminology shaping your thinking, chances are you'd be much more accepting of, and well-disposed towards, people whose brains worked differently.

Our Western lens is just one way to look at the world, and, when we start to question and challenge some of the assumptions inherent in it, we open up a wider range of possibilities for everyone.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

Questioning the status quo.

**Take:**

Your own personal experience.

Create a term to describe your unique way of being in the world.

Think about the way you experience and process and communicate. What are the key elements that shape your needs and behaviours? What are the things you wish people knew about your experience? What attitudes would be more helpful to you than the ones you're usually faced with?

Feel free to play around with different words and terms until you've got something that feels right. You can always change it

if you later think of something that feels better!

The word or term you settle on could be real words, or a totally invented word(s) that you create a new definition for.

**Optional Follow-up:**

Write your word or term on a piece of paper.

Colour it and/or decorate it however you like.

Keep the finished image somewhere that you can refer back to when you need a reminder that you are unique, and you are allowed to take up space in whatever way suits you.

# 7

## Practical Challenges

In this chapter:

- Common challenges that neurodivergent creatives experience
- These issues don't exist in isolation
- New approaches to try that take different issues into account

\* \* \*

Ok, I've talked a lot, so far, about how neurodiversity deserves respect and support, and how many of the negative views we might hold about ourselves have been unnecessarily programmed into us by a society with its own agenda.

But I'm not about to pretend that there aren't any challenges that come with a neurodivergent brain. I am absolutely not about to tell you that "neurodivergence is your superpower". (Ugh!) That sort of talk is patronising and infantilising, however

well-intentioned it might be. My autistic thinking and my ADHD come with many strengths (I'm great at remembering facts and numbers, I make connections between different topics that other people don't see, and I'm incredibly creative), but they also come with a lot of challenges (I refer you to my husband's quest for a glass of water that I referenced in the acknowledgements). Almost as if being neurodivergent just makes me a human being with strengths and weaknesses, like everyone else...

Some challenges might be forced on us by the system, others might cause us difficulty no matter what. Either way, for better or worse, they're ours, and we've got to deal with them.

Let's look at some of the most common issues that I see neurodivergent creatives struggling with.

(P.S. If you have an issue not listed here, or your experience of that issue isn't what I've described, that's totally fine! Everyone is different, and you're not supposed to be the same as anyone else—not even someone with the same wiring label. If you want to discuss any particular issues that you're wrestling with, check out [CreativeFix.net](http://CreativeFix.net) for information about my coaching and resources.)

## Common creative challenges

### Focus

Neurodivergent approaches to focus vary from struggling to focus on any one thing for more than a few minutes, to getting hyperfocused on something to the extent that you forget to eat, drink or go to the toilet.

This can make it difficult to start a project, because you're dis-

tracted by other things, and it can make it hard to *finish* projects, because you get bored and wander off part-way through.

The flip-side is that you get so intensely focused on a project that you quickly become depleted or altogether burnt out, or you struggle to move from one area that you've been deeply engaged in into a different brain space to focus on a creative project.

## Executive function

This is one of those terms that gets thrown around a lot in neurodivergent circles, but not everyone really understands it. So let me break it down. Executive function includes things like:

- Prioritising tasks
- Time-management
- Organisation
- Remembering where you put stuff
- Following the steps in a process
- Switching from one task to another
- Making decisions
- Controlling impulses
- Managing emotions

People with executive function issues can struggle with any of the elements on that list, even though they might excel in others. They can also find certain elements easier or more difficult depending on the context.

## Shiny Object Syndrome

Neurodivergent brains are often low on dopamine (particularly ADHD ones), leading us to chase dopamine fixes more than neurotypical people. This can make us susceptible to addiction, and it also makes us prone to Shiny Object Syndrome.

This is the tendency to start a project with the full intention of completing it and a sense of utter commitment to this work... only to then abandon it halfway through in favour of a new idea. Because the brand new idea is way more exciting and alluring.

Since we also often have issues with prioritisation and the concept of time, every idea we have seems to be *the most important idea EVER*, and seems to be completely urgent and *has to happen right NOW!*

We therefore end up constantly chasing the latest shiny thing, ending up spread too thin, burnt out, and feeling demoralised because we are surrounded by unfinished work.

## Procrastination

If you've ever found yourself sitting down with every intention to work on a specific creative project, only to then, 10 minutes later, become aware that you're getting out your phone to scroll social media having just put the bins out... you are not alone.

Procrastination is a common challenge, which can see us becoming distracted in the middle of a task, or finding a bunch of other things to do instead of *starting* the task.

Again, your brain is dopamine hunting. The long-term project is something you care about deeply, but the dopamine pay-off for finishing it won't come for a while. Whereas social media or simple household tasks give you a shot of reward straight away.

Much more appealing.

## Sensory over/under-stimulation

Most neurodivergent people are either *hypersensitive* or *hyposensitive* to sensory stimuli. Basically, the world over- or under-stimulates you. Some people can be both, depending on the situation or context.

If you are hypersensitive, then background noises, bright lights, uncomfortable clothing, a room being too hot or too cold, and all sorts of other sensory factors in the environment might be overwhelming, irritating or distressing. For obvious reasons, this can make it hard to get any work done, and it will make getting into the relaxed and open frame of mind you need to create feel almost impossible.

For hyposensitive people, the lack of stimulation you get naturally from your environment may drive you to *seek out* sensory stimulation. You might fidget around in your chair, fiddle with things, or tap on the table to make a noise. This can be distracting for your brain, and makes focusing on a single activity quite challenging.

Being aware of your sensory profile and your triggers can be really helpful—knowing that you need noise-cancelling headphones or a fidget toy to settle your nervous system can be absolutely game-changing.

## Demand avoidance

Clinicians term it “pathological demand avoidance” (PDA), which seems a bit of an overreaction to someone not wanting to obey you, if you ask me. Many in the neurodivergent community

prefer to reapply the acronym as “pervasive drive for autonomy” instead, to be less melodramatic about it. Whatever terminology you use, the crux of it is, a lot of neurodivergent people don’t like being told what to do.

Demand avoidance is **not** defiance. It is the nervous system perceiving a demand as a threat, and becoming intensely anxious when one is issued. It elicits a sense of panic, which drives the person to do what they can to escape the demand. If they can’t escape, they may become overwhelmed to the point of meltdown or shutdown.

The trouble is, it doesn’t matter if the person telling us what to do is ourselves—we still don’t want to do the thing we’ve been ordered to do. So trying to force myself to write a book by telling myself *I have to write a book* is simply never going to work. The only way to move through demand avoidance is to allow the person the autonomy they crave, by giving them choices about how they approach a task, allowing space for exploration and experimentation instead of directives, and making it an enjoyable process that the person *wants* to return to.

## Time and energy

An issue that isn’t necessarily directly related to neurodivergence, but which is still a common experience for many Divergent Creatives that I work with, is finding time and energy to create.

It takes a lot of energy to move through a world that wasn’t designed for us, so we often find ourselves more depleted by everyday life than neurotypical people. On top of that, many of us have physical or mental health challenges that also make our energy unpredictable. If we also have jobs, children, life admin,

pets, or any other responsibilities to manage, we're left with not a lot of time and space, and very little energy, to give to our creative pursuits.

## Taking a different approach

Where most Divergent Creatives feel they're "failing" is that they've been trying to follow a neurotypical blueprint that doesn't take any of those challenges into account.

Alternatively, they might identify one of their issues (such as procrastination), and try to tackle it on its own. None of these issues exist in isolation—they're part of the complex system that makes up you, and also connected to the environment that you live in relation to. So finding a solution for one challenge by itself is unlikely to work.

The first step to building a creative practice that works for you is understanding what elements of your creative practice aren't going the way you want them to, and devising solutions that take *all of you* into account.

In the third part of this book, we'll look at specific ways to build a creative practice that takes account of *your* specific challenges. However, in the years that I have been working with Divergent Creatives, I have come across four main creative blockers that I'd like to touch on now to get you started.

The main reasons creatives come to me for help is that they're finding it hard to:

- Get started on a project
- Finish projects
- Stay focused while creating
- Find time and energy for creative work

Usually, they're having these problems because they haven't acknowledged their challenges, or they're suppressing them, and they're just trying to push through with the neurotypical model.

That's never going to work.

Once I get them to let go of the neurotypical way and experiment with ways that work *for them*, they find it suddenly gets so much easier.

I want to encourage you to start experimenting with different ways of working, so that you can find what suits you. With that in mind, let's take a look at some options for those four key issues, which you can start to play around with.

## Getting started

Neurodivergent brains can find getting going on a task tricky. We have so many thoughts in our heads that we struggle to zero in on one single starting point; or we're so fixated on getting the small details right that we're worried about doing anything at all.

## *Find your why*

Neurodivergent brains rebel against work that feels empty. Even work that we know, logically, is a stepping stone towards our dreams. It's not even enough for the overall project to light us up—this specific part of it that you're trying to work on *right now* needs to feel meaningful.

## **Actions:**

- Think about why this specific piece of work matters
- Visualise the end result of this specific piece of work and what that will mean for you (and the overall project)

**Side note:** It's OK to decide that a project you've been working on actually *doesn't* matter to you that much anymore, or isn't lighting you up right now. Contrary to what you might have been told, it's a totally valid choice to give up on something and move on. Or to shelve it for a little while and see if it calls to you later down the line. You might have learned valuable skills, or tried different ideas that you gained something from, or just had fun on the way. Now it might be time for something else. Or you might just need a break.

### *Make it fun*

Just as we must have meaning, we must have joy! As much as possible, inject some fun into your creative work (and, in fact, all tasks) as often as you can. Whether it's the location, the materials you use, music, snacks, wearing a superhero costume... Whatever fun means to you!

### **Actions:**

- Experiment with different locations and methods, mixing it up from time to time
- Use the nice stationery, colour-code everything, get out big pieces of paper and coloured pens... allow yourself to play
- Gamify your tasks—set yourself challenges, see if you can beat previous results

*Break it down*

Starting a big task—like “write a book” or “paint a canvas”—can feel overwhelming. Break the overall project down into small chunks—and I mean *really* small. Never mind writing a book: Task 1 is to choose a notebook and pen. Task 2 is to write the date at the top of the first page. Task 3 is to make some notes about your story or topic. Task 4 is to write 100 words, or write for 10 minutes. And so on.

**Actions:**

- Start with your end goal, and work backwards—what steps need to be completed to reach that goal?
- Break each of those steps into its smallest component parts

*Build a runway*

Some of us need a run-up to getting going. When I start work in the mornings, I need 30 minutes to make a coffee, check emails, realise my coffee’s gone cold, make another, and mess around on Substack, Instagram and WhatsApp before I get stuck in. So that time is blocked out in my diary.

**Actions:**

- Schedule in some “faff time” as part of your planning—when you put time aside for your creative work, allow for time to ease yourself into it
- See that time as necessary, like an athlete treats warm-up time—don’t try to fit other things into it, or be tempted to

skip it

## Finishing things

There are many reasons why completing projects can be tricky, from planning fatigue to demand avoidance to self-esteem, but here are a few approaches you can take.

### *Ditch the planner*

For many neurodivergent people, once we've planned a piece of work, we feel as though we've completed it. So asking our brains to complete the work *again* (seemingly) is painful and draining. Sometimes it's better to wing it!

#### **Action:**

- Be playful with your projects—experiment, and explore different angles

### *Visual reminders*

If you're someone who forgets about something as soon as it's out of sight (raises hand!), then having post-it notes, project boards or other visual reminders of your progress somewhere prominent where you'll see them often can help to bring you back to the work regularly enough to get it done.

#### **Action:**

- Put a visual reminder of your progress or project somewhere

you can't miss it

### *Reward system*

You might have heard that extrinsic rewards are actually demotivating... Not for neurodivergent people, my friend! Sticker charts and reward systems work really well for us. Yes, even when you're in your 40s. We'll talk more about rewards later.

#### **Action:**

- Give yourself a sticker or a treat every time you make progress on a project

### *The Big Ideas board*

This is one for the Shiny Object Syndrome team. Rather than having to work on every new idea as it appears in your brain, the Big Ideas board is a space to note down your shiny new idea, so your brain feels satisfied that it's been actioned in some way, and you have a record to refer back to. It also gives you an opportunity to reflect on whether it's *really* as amazing an idea as it seemed in the moment, or whether the gloss has faded over time.

#### **Action:**

- Get a large sheet of paper / card or a space on a wall, and a supply of post-its—when you have a new idea, put it on a post-it and add it to the paper/card/wall
- Review the notes regularly to see if any should be removed

or actioned

### *Let go of the outcome*

One of the major reasons for not finishing a project is overthinking the outcome. Worrying about whether it's going to be successful, if people will like it, if it will be good enough, if your dad will approve... All of this can be overwhelming. We can also get in our heads about the individual components—how are we going to be able to do that bit? Can we move on if that's not right? Do we need more research, how will it all fit together...? Although, to get started, we thought about why we want to do this work, once we get going we have to let go of the outcome and do the work for its own sake. The process is the point—just show up, and allow it to become what it wants to be.

### **Action:**

- Instead of focusing on project goals (like “write a book”), concentrate on process goals (like “write every Sunday”)—focus on the process over the outcome (more on this later, too!)

### Staying focused

If your brain feels like an internet browser with too many tabs open (and where is that music coming from?!), then this is the section for you.

*Design your space*

If you have a dedicated workspace—or if you’re just using a space temporarily, like a café or library—try to set it up to give you the best chance of keeping on track. That means minimising distractions, and having everything you need to hand—including snacks, coffee, water, all the essentials!

**Actions:**

- Put your phone on airplane mode, block internet on your computer and avoid sensory distractions (noise, smells, bright lights, etc.)
- Think about what you’ll need ahead of time and get it all ready before you start

*Set timers*

The sense that *hours* of effort are stretching before you can make you feel fidgety. Conversely, getting too carried away in hyperfocus for ages can leave you with nothing left in the tank. Set timers for a section of focused time, then for a break to stretch, move around, and pee!

**Actions:**

- Consider what a good stretch of time is for you to get some work done but not wear yourself out
- Set timers for those blocks—say, 45 minutes of work, then a 15 minute break—and repeat as many times as you feel comfortable with (don’t overdo it!)

### *Move your body*

When you take breaks—you really do need those breaks—move your body in a way that feels comfortable. Stretch, walk around, shake. You need to be energised and physically regulated to be able to focus. If possible, schedule some time outside, even if it's just a quick walk around the block or brief sit in the garden.

#### **Actions:**

- Take movement breaks while you're working
- Spend time outside

### *Body double*

It's easy to procrastinate when you're the only person involved. Another person changes the game. Someone sitting with you to work on their own project while you work on yours gives you accountability—you'll be amazed by how much more you do when someone's watching.

#### **Action:**

- Ask someone to be with you while you work on your project

### *Overestimate time needed*

We're often very good at being extremely optimistic about how much we can achieve within a set amount of time. As a result, we plan too much and then get overwhelmed by how much we're supposed to be getting done, and then disheartened by how little

of it we got through.

**Action:**

- Overestimate how much time each part of a task will take you, and plan to do far less with your time than you normally would, so your goals are more achievable

Finding time

When you have a busy life and limited energy, it can feel like there's no time available for creativity. That's where we have to get smart about how we plan our time.

*Know your rhythm*

Trying to write at 5am, because all the gurus say you should, is no good if you're not a morning person. Map your personal energy levels and track what impacts them, so you can identify good times to block out for creating.

**Action:**

- Spend a month tracking your energy levels and what boosts / drains you

*Guard your time fiercely*

Stop trying to fit your creative time in around the edges. This is time that is vital to your wellbeing and your joy. Schedule it in and protect that time. Treat it like a meeting or an

appointment—it cannot be cancelled unless there is a *really* good reason.

**Action:**

- Schedule your creative time in and make it non-negotiable

*Recruit help*

Yes, it can feel icky, but wherever you can, call in help. Find someone to watch your kids, get your partner or mum to cook you dinner, pay someone to clean your house if you can. It's not failure, it's sensible project management.

**Action:**

- Ask. For. Help.

*Go gently with yourself.*

Be kind. That means to you too.

You don't have to write every day. You don't have to finish a painting a week. You don't have to release a Substack post on a schedule. You are not a machine. Let go of any ideas that "proper" artists show up with a certain regularity, because that's all just a story. You're making different art in a different way to everyone else. Having unrealistic expectations of how much time you should be finding is going to make it harder to find *any* time, and make you discouraged. Work with what you've got—you'll be fabulous with it.

**Actions:**

- Have realistic expectations of what you can fit in
- Be kind to yourself

We'll go into more detail about what it means to build a personally tailored creative practice later on, but, for now, I'd love for you to start trying out some of these actions.

Treat it as an experiment—what happens if you use that approach for a bit? If it doesn't work, that's not failure, it's information. You've learned something about yourself and what suits you, or what doesn't.

Get curious. *What is it* about that thing that didn't work? What learnings can you take from that? How can that inform the next approach you try?

Have fun with it. We all work hard enough in our daily lives as it is, let's not suck the joy out of our passion projects too. If you're not having fun with your creativity, what the hell is the point?! Play, enjoy yourself, see what happens.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you feel stuck.

**Take:**

A step back.

Instead of beating yourself up for not being “good enough” or not working “hard enough”, ask yourself: what’s *actually* causing me an issue here?

Are you dealing with one of the four main challenges above: getting started; finishing stuff; staying focused; or finding time and energy?

Is it something else? What can you do to support yourself right now?

What’s working in your creative practice? What’s not working? What can you try doing differently?

Perform some creative experiments and see what impact they have. Make a note of your learnings, adjust accordingly, and go again.

## II

# Revolution

*I am not going to give you yet another book telling you how to fix or hack or change yourself, because you don't need changing. It's the culture we live in that needs fixing.*

*I do want to give you practical support, because the world isn't going to fix itself overnight, and we'll get to that in Part 3.*

*But, whilst there are ways that we can work more effectively within our own context, what's really needed is a full-scale overhaul of our society.*

*We need a damn revolution.*



## 8

# We Need Your Voice

In this chapter:

- It's hard to create when the world's on fire
- Why we need neurodivergent voices now more than ever
- How art drives change as a form of activism
- How to keep creating during an apocalypse

\* \* \*

We have been living in unprecedented times for way too fucking long now.

In fact, we've reached a point where life being unprecedented is, actually, entirely preceded. Insane happenings, sudden crises and the threat of imminent extinction are our new normal. Such fun.

It can feel hard to make art when the world is on fire. When everyone seems so constantly angry. Especially when they seem

to be angry *at you*.

There has been a lot of rhetoric in the US and the UK of late that actively attacks neurodivergent people. And we've seen the World War II movies, we know how this story goes... It's scary for everyone, but, for people like us who feel things deeply, who are particularly aware of patterns, who are good at predicting the way events will play out, and whose nervous systems are at capacity already—for us, it's fucking terrifying.

Faced with the potential end of the world, or with our own personal annihilation, it's easy to believe that our little stories and poems and paintings are pointless and frivolous.

But these are the times when we need your stories the most.

When they're trying to make people hate us, or blame us, or diminish us, that's when our voices are most important. That's when we need to speak loudest.

## The power of story

Patriarchal, colonialist systems rely on division. They need to create scapegoats and enemies in order to keep people distracted and afraid so they can strengthen their control. To do that, they need to silence certain groups and put barriers in the way of certain voices being heard. Because they know the power of story.

Stories create empathy. They encourage understanding and connection. They enable people to see situations from different angles, they raise expectations of what is possible, and they spark our collective imagination so that we can see other possibilities. The establishment don't like that.

Abraham Lincoln is said to have credited Harriet Beecher Stowe with starting the American Civil War, after her book,

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, showed Americans the reality of slavery, and provoked many into demanding change.

It's easy to hate someone when you don't know them. When they don't have a human face in your mind. When you don't know their hopes and dreams and joy and pain. It's easy to be manipulated into seeing them as a shadowy threat. And there's a comfort in allowing yourself to believe that this vague entity is to blame for everything, because that's much simpler than confronting the more complex and challenging reality, and the systemic overhaul of our society that's truly needed. But once you hear their point of view... it's much harder to hate or dismiss them.

Neurodivergent and disabled people have been systemically silenced for a long time. So many of the mechanisms that enable stories and art to be created and shared have been purposefully designed to be inaccessible to us. The rest of society has been told to mistrust or fear or simply ignore us. Or to pity and look down on us, which is kind of the same thing. And when our voices are missing from the conversation, they can say what they like about us because there's no one to contradict them.

They can say that we're scrounging off the system, that we're lazy and contribute nothing. They can say that we're defective, that who we are is to be feared and cured. They can say that we need to be managed or "protected". They can use us to distract from their own corruption.

We are living in an era, though, that, for all its very many issues, does allow greater freedom of expression than any period in history before. We don't need to rely on gatekeepers and institutions as much as we used to. We don't need anyone's permission to speak up. We can take control of our own narratives.

If you are neurodivergent, or disabled, or living with mental or physical health challenges, the world needs to hear from you. And, for that matter, if you are a person of colour, a trans person, a queer person, a refugee, an immigrant, or a member of any other systemically marginalised group. Your words, your art, your visibility can help change the direction of our world.

It's scary to be seen in this current environment. It's intimidating to step forward in the face of so much anger and aggression. And you get to set the parameters within which you share your voice. Use a fake name, don't show your face, turn off comments, don't read reactions, only share what you're comfortable with, share on a timetable that suits you... it's all your call. But your perspective is so valuable. Any little bit that you can put out into the world benefits us all.

And you can share your story. You can write the words and make the art that your soul is longing to. You don't have to follow the standard models and the guidance of neurotypical, non-disabled people who don't get it. You can do it your way. You can do it on your terms. You don't need their permission or their approval.

You just need your imagination and your inner voice.

Let them hear your truth. It's time they knew.

## Art as activism

When I was younger, I saw activism as protesting on the streets. I have been on a fair few protest marches in my life, but I'm not sure they work anymore. Maybe they never did.

I marched against Iraq, and the bombs fell anyway. I marched for trans rights, and the vilification continues unchecked. I marched for Black Lives, and now organisations are actively

rolling back their diversity commitments.

Jason McAfee says, “the system isn’t designed to respond to protest... it’s designed to absorb it.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, McAfee argues, governments don’t care if we march—in fact, it’s all part of their plan. Protests give us something to do to keep us distracted and feeling a sense of autonomy while they get on with dismantling the world. This may be true, but in both the UK and the US, we’re seeing a concerted effort to take away even this outlet for our voices, just to make extra sure we don’t get any ideas about how much power we hold.

There’s also the fact that not everyone can protest. As an autistic mother of two, large crowds of people I don’t know, all making much noise, are terrifying; and the logistics of attending one around school pick-ups are pretty much impossible. I certainly can’t bring my young neurodivergent children with me.

I often feel bad for not being at marches—I see them on the news and on social media and I think, “I should be there”. But I also know that I absolutely cannot be there.

So what can we do?

We make art. We tell stories. We hold a mirror up to the world as it is, and we show the world as it could be.

We change minds by changing perspectives.

However small you think your voice is, you have a unique view of life that can show others something they have never seen before. You have a story that unlocks new understanding and insights for people living different lives. One moment of connection that you spark, maybe in a person you’ve never met, might influence their whole worldview.

Not all of us can influence policy, or raise huge amounts of money, or chain ourselves to railings. But those of us who are

writers and artists have the opportunity to shape the cultural narrative, and that is not to be underestimated. The stories we tell, the images we hold—of ourselves, of others, of the world—control everything.

Stories shape elections—whether you’re more convinced by the story that the person crossing the sea in a boat is running for their lives and in desperate need of your help, or by the story that they’re coming to take your money and rape your daughter, not only determines who takes control of the country but how all the other parties organise their policies. They want to appeal to the stories they think you believe in.

As artists, we make change with our bare hands. Sometimes we pick up a pen and show people an alternative narrative. Sometimes we use a paintbrush to bring experiences to life in the human imagination. Sometimes we share food from different cultures, or create clothing that celebrates difference, or weave, sew, glue, fold, press and mould ways to connect, to show solidarity, to love.

We don’t have to be making overtly political art to influence politics. Simply standing up for the importance of love, beauty, kindness, nature, small pleasures or moments of joy is a radical act in a broken world.

The wonderful thing about creativity is that we can take pain, anger and heartbreak, and we can alchemise it. We turn it into something powerful. Not always beautiful, in the strictly aesthetic sense, but meaningful. Truthful. And isn’t that the most beautiful thing of all, truth?

So make something true. Share your voice with the world. Share your story. Even if only a few people hear it, who knows how they’ll be impacted, who else they might tell. And if enough of us share our stories, if enough of us share what is true, and

meaningful, and beautiful in the world, then they can't possibly keep a lid on all that.

The word will get out—a better, more beautiful world is possible. One filled with connection, and solidarity, and love.

We can't do it alone, we have to work together. We need to join our voices to make them loud enough. We pour our drops of contribution to create an ocean of meaning. But it all starts with a few drops.

## Creativity vs consumption

Our current system thrives on consumption. That's how it works. Things are produced, people consume those things, the people at the top make lots of money, the people in the middle make a little bit of money, and the people at the bottom get shit on. But for this system to work, you have to believe that's their own fault for not working hard enough.

The things that are produced have to be disposable. They can't be built to last or to be reused, because then there wouldn't be more consumption, and the system would collapse. The people at the top wouldn't be able to make infinite amounts of money from everyone else. So we have been taught to live in a disposable world, where the planet is seen as a resource to be made use of, and we are conditioned to see our value as humans in relation to how much stuff we get through.

It's not doing any of us much good, though. Well, apart from Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos—they're doing just fine out of it. (Financially, anyway. Emotionally... not so sure.) The rest of us are anxious, overwhelmed, burnt out, surrounded by clutter, and seeing our finances stretched ever thinner. We're disconnected from each other, from the planet, and from

ourselves. We're falling behind the expectations of this system, and finding it increasingly impossible to catch up, leaving us in a pit of shame and depression.

It's not doing the planet much good, either. We're going through the bounty of nature at an alarming rate, destroying forests, waterways and entire species in our quest for *more, more, more*. As much as the system has tried to construct a narrative that sets us above and apart from plants and animals, that positions them as something for us to make use of, we're actually incredibly dependent on them all. To put it bluntly, if we fuck this planet up, there isn't a back-up option. We will simply be doomed.

This society conditions you to keep on buying, keep on upgrading, keep on getting more and more and more. It makes you feel scared and insecure and deficient, so that it can sell you supposed solutions that you must always be replacing and upgrading. It teaches you to hoard for yourself, never to share, which means distancing you from other humans. On top of that, it tries to keep your brain constantly overloaded—keep on working, keep on feeding the machine, don't stop to think, and don't ever leave room to imagine other possibilities for the world.

In this environment, what a subversive and paradigm-shifting choice it is to create something.

Instead of leaning into the *take, take, take* mentality... making something new.

Instead of churning through disposable item after disposable item... carefully crafting something of quality.

Instead of hoarding stuff for yourself... putting something out into the world to share with others.

Creativity challenges the system's attempts to divide us. By

sharing our stories, our art, our perspectives on the world, our contributions to our communities... we build connection, understanding and empathy. We learn about each other, and others learn about us. We start to see one another as not so different, maybe even related.

Creativity rebuilds the self-esteem that the system tries to crush. Creating something—even something imperfect, even something that we think is a bit crap—gives us a sense of achievement. We express our deepest thoughts and feelings and, in so doing, we build a relationship with our inner selves. We start to be able to hear our inner thoughts and hopes and desires.

Then there's our imaginations. Creativity opens up space for possibility. For dreaming. For thinking about different ways the world might be... then, just maybe, it shows us the steps to build a new, better, reality.

We can't all start hand-crafting all our own clothes, and growing all our own food, and drop out of consumer culture altogether. Or even to a significant degree. I've daydreamed about it often enough, but then I remember that I can barely keep a houseplant alive, and that it takes me six months to knit a single jumper. We're not going to overhaul the entire system with a single flourish of our watercolours. But. Over time, small acts can lead to big shifts.

Every creative act is a tiny ripple in the ocean of our culture. Each time you choose to sit down and create, or dream, or imagine, or share... each word you write, each sketch you draw, each row you knit, each patch you sew, each loaf you bake... it all creates the slightest of ripples. It seems so little, from where you stand, inside your small circle. This drop within the vast ocean. But. Imagine all the ripples from all your creative acts. Then

imagine them combined with the creative acts of your friends. And their friends. And their friends. Imagine how many of us, all around the world, are engaged in our tiny acts of creation. How many ripples is that?

How many ripples does it take to create a wave? How many waves do we need to change the shape of a rock? Slowly, slowly, ripple by ripple, we create a sea-change that alters the consciousness of our culture.

For this capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist system to work, we have to believe its stories. All cultures, all systems, are founded on stories. The stories we accept about our place in the world, our relationship to each other, our relationship with the planet, what matters in life... these stories shape everything. When we challenge the dominant narrative, when we reject the myth of consumption, and instead tell a new story about the value of creativity, then we start to crack the foundations of the existing system. We open up the chance to build something new.

So don't, even for a second, think that the short poem you wrote, the tune you strummed, the cake you made or the flower you grew were small things. Never believe that they were frivolous, that they didn't matter. They are more important than you could ever know.

You are part of something far bigger than yourself. We are woven together, all across this beautiful planet, and each time one of us picks up a thread to make something new, we contribute a tiny stitch to the fabric of a brand new society.

This is a rebellion. A revolution. And every act counts.

## Making art in the apocalypse

It's hard to concentrate when you're surrounded by anxiety. Taking time away from the news or social media is almost impossible when something insane and terrifying is happening every 15 minutes.

Plus, our tiny little lives seem so insignificant in the face of... everything. How can I sit here making decisions about which shade of purple to use on a book cover when people are being shot in the streets? It feels unbearably soft and privileged to be playing around with stories when others are bracing for bombs.

And yet.

We have to keep going. If we allow them to take our joy, to suspend our everyday existence, to prevent us from building our lives, to hold us in fear, then they have won.

Our joy, our love, our pleasure, our freedom... all of that is our resistance.

But if we want to influence our current world for the better, and build a more positive future, then we need to be intentional about it.

## Find your purpose

I think I've made my feelings clear by now on this: stories make the world. Everything that's unfolding right now is the result of the stories that shaped our current society.

The USA have told stories about conquering heroes colonising distant lands and evil dark-skinned people to be afraid of for many, many, many years, with the full intention that the people would then support the government continuing to invade places, suppress the indigenous people and murder Black people. It's

conditioning that a lot of people are having to work hard to unlearn... and that many people are still so deeply embedded in that they don't even realise there's anything *to* unlearn.

We need better stories. The work I do is focused on telling stories that reshape our cultural narrative, that challenge the dominant way of thinking, and that pave the way for a different type of world. When I worry that my work is frivolous and indulgent in times like these, I remind myself why I started in the first place. I have to hold on to my belief that it can make a difference. Even if change looks a long way off just yet.

Whatever you are doing, I promise, it matters. Find the purpose in your life—whether it's helping people, caring for the next generation, making sure people can access services they need, or making your corner of the world just that little bit more beautiful. See the value in what you do, and hold on tight.

Do what you can

It's not on you to save the world all by yourself. Know that you are part of a network of people all around the globe who believe in something better. Who want to weave a more beautiful future.

Each one of us is doing our little part.

It might seem small—a poem, a colourful scarf, a cake to share with friends—but it all makes a difference.

It's another little ripple building towards that mighty wave.

The wave that will wash this brutal system away, and make space for something altogether more beautiful.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When the state of the world feels overwhelming.

**Take:**

Three pieces of paper, a pen and a pencil.

On the first piece of paper, make a list of all the causes you care about, and all the changes you would like to see happen in the world. The things that keep you up at night, the stories that make you upset and/or angry when you see them on the news or social media, the changes you'd make if you were supreme ruler of the world.

On the second piece of paper, draw three circles. Label one of them, "things I can control"; label the second, "things I can influence"; label the third, "out of my hands".

Look through the list of causes and issues you made on your first page, and assign them to their appropriate circle. Some of them might split into different elements at this point—for example, as a person living in the UK, the rise of fascism in the US is pretty much out of my hands. The rise of fascism in the UK, though, might be something I can influence. Combatting fascist thinking within my home and community is within my control.

When you're done, go through the lists within the first two circles, and give each item a score out of 10 for how passionate you feel about it. Be honest—no one is going to see this and

judge you. The fact that you care about any of this stuff at all is incredible. It really is fine to only care 3 out of 10, even about something that is causing catastrophic problems. You're only one person, you can only give in so many directions.

On your third piece of paper, create one column for each thing that scored 8 or above. These are the things that you can control or influence, and that you are most passionate about. Under each one, jot down some ideas for what you *could* do.

You might want to give yourself a break at this point and come back later.

When you're ready, look through all your ideas and circle the ones that really, *really* call to you. Choose a maximum of three. The ones that you can't bear *not* to be involved with in some way.

These are the contributions you can make right now. However small it might seem, focus here. It will make a difference. More of a difference than if you were trying to split yourself in a million directions and ending up too overwhelmed or burnt out to do anything.

Other people will choose the other stuff, don't worry about that.

Do what you can.

## What If Society Valued Creativity?

In this chapter:

- The changes needed for society to genuinely value creativity
- Why we *should* value creativity as a society

\* \* \*

There's a reason that there are so many books and courses dedicated to helping people build creative lives and careers.

Creativity is a basic human drive; so many of us (if not all of us, deep down) yearn to create (see Chapter 1). And yet, it's really, really fucking difficult to live a creative life in our society.

That's intentional—we've already seen why society wants to limit creativity. But we're not here for the status quo; we're here for a creative revolution. We're forming an army to tear down these systems of oppression and build a whole new glorious world of art and uniqueness. (I do hope that's what you're here

for—I did try to make this clear from the beginning.)

So what does that look like in practice? How do we go about building a society that values creativity?

## What does it mean to value creativity?

### Financial value

Let's start with possibly the most literal interpretation of "value"—cold, hard cash.

A society that truly values art will pay artists properly. The average UK author earns £7,000 per year from their writing<sup>1</sup> [insert crying emoji here], and visual artists can expect to take home around £12,500 each year.<sup>2</sup> I mean, that's not really enough. Given that you need, roughly, £12,840 per year<sup>3</sup> just to survive in an average UK city (rising to £25,452 per year in London, the city where most of the art stuff is located...), I can see an issue.

The trouble is, in a capitalist society, work isn't compensated based on its value to that society. If it were, we wouldn't have nurses earning £31,000 per year while footballers collect £67,000 each week. People are paid according to how much money their industry generates and how replaceable each individual is considered to be. Lots of people want to be writers and artists, and lots of us have been conned into giving away a lot of our work for free or very cheaply (thanks, internet), so the people at the top of the tree feel they can pick up a bargain. Plus, no one appreciates the effort that goes into writing a book or creating a painting. There's an "anyone could do that" mentality that devalues the work itself.

How do we fix that?

Firstly, if society recognised the true value of the arts and the benefits to the population, it would provide more funding—not just for projects and organisations, but for individual artists. Funding *work* is great, but artists need space to dream and experiment and imagine. They can't do that if they're having to constantly perform on demand to satisfy a commission.

Ireland has been experimenting with a Basic Income for the Arts scheme, which pays creatives €325 a week,<sup>4</sup> adding up to a basic income of €16,900 per year, so that their most basic needs are covered and they have space to make their art. At time of writing, this scheme is in the final stages of a research pilot, so we will have to wait to see if it becomes permanent—fingers and toes crossed! This kind of approach would recognise the importance of art to wider society and take away that creativity-crushing pressure that artists are currently under. There's a bigger conversation here about how we provide stability for *everyone* by creating a universal basic income, which has been proven to save governments money and increase employment and productivity rates... but that's outside my remit!

Think of how we currently fund libraries, museums, public broadcasting networks... We treat these as essential services. We need to see artists in a similar light.

There are also plenty of organisations making money from art *without* rewarding the creators. We need greater regulations around fair streaming and digital publishing royalties, and more transparent algorithm and payment structures so that online platforms can't take advantage of and manipulate creatives.

More than anything, we need to normalise *paying* for art. We've all got so used to being able to access music and imagery and writing for free that we simply don't value it anymore. Take newspapers: once upon a time, everyone expected to pay for

them; then digital publishing made them all freely available. Publishers began losing money, and now they're desperately trying to get people to pay for digital subscriptions, but no one wants to because they've become used to getting it for free, and they no longer see why they should part with money. There's a big campaign underway to re-educate the public about the value of journalism and why this writing deserves compensation.

As artists, we need to educate the wider public about what it takes to create our work, and why it's valuable. We can use our skills to paint a picture of a world *without* art and encourage people who value it to support us.

AI is, obviously, a big threat here. Now that people think they can create an entire book or an artwork in a matter of moments with just a few prompts, an artist who toils for months or years seems slow and outdated. But, in the long-term, I think AI might help us. The quality produced by these models is *dire*, and people are already getting annoyed by it. AI started off by scraping the work of real artists and learning from that—essentially, plagiarising from creatives to sell a shitty version of the original creation. Now, however, there is so much AI-generated content out there that the programs are learning from their own work. The quality is spiralling downwards. Although it is damaging creatives right now, AI might just end up being the thing that proves the real value of human craft. After a few years of robot slop, there may well be an audience willing to pay good money for art with soul.

Let's just hope there are enough real artists still clinging on by then.

## Education

A lot of the beliefs that hold our society back from truly valuing art begin with our education. I've already talked about some of the issues with our current education system, so, suffice to say, we need an overhaul of how we approach both creative subjects and learning in general.

Teaching creative subjects shouldn't focus on precision or perfection. Never mind spelling and grammar in the early years—start with *story*. Teach children how to generate ideas, how to build a narrative, how to find their voice, how to connect with a reader. They can finesse their spelling later.

This bleeds into a wider approach to teaching: give children space for experimentation, learning from failure and exploring different approaches, rather than rewarding conformity and replication. We don't need to remember facts by rote in life, we need to be able to think deeply and reflectively. Those are the skills our children would benefit from being taught.

Curiosity-driven learning is not only more valuable in later life, but it helps facts and insights stay with children far longer than memorisation.

Teachers have been given an impossible challenge in most schools—governments dictate curricula, not education experts. Schools are assessed and funded based on how well they tick bureaucratic boxes, and teachers are put under immense pressure to meet targets that don't actually serve anyone. Putting the power back in the hands of people who actually understand education, and who can listen to what business leaders are crying out for in terms of skills and knowledge, would make a big difference. As would educating teachers about creative skills and different neurotypes, so they can recognise and support

different strengths.

Children who were supported in their creativity early on are more likely to be able to actually *do something* with their creativity. But also, children who have been taught to recognise and value creativity will support it when they see it out in the world as adults; and they will pay for it.

## Workplace culture

We've already seen how most workplaces suppress creativity through an emphasis on conformity and obedience. Businesses are generally risk-averse and don't like experimentation or disruption. They tend to operate within rigid hierarchies with set processes.

What if we broke some of that down? Businesses that flatten their structures, giving more power, autonomy and influence to people at all levels, often see a huge increase in productivity, quality of work, and staff engagement. Psychological safety in the workplace—where staff feel able to share ideas, admit to mistakes, or question the decisions of senior staff without fear of reprisal or ridicule—increases productivity by 12% and turnover by 27%.<sup>5</sup> This kind of approach benefits everyone.

Valuing creativity also means giving staff *space* for exploration and reflection, and just to daydream. This culture of constant meetings and having lunch at our desks is bad for everyone, leaving us drained and exhausted. Breaks from work that truly allow your mind to switch off actually *increase* productivity,<sup>6</sup> because you can go back to your task with renewed energy and focus. Plus it's only when your brain is in that auto-pilot, resting state that you can come up with new ideas and perspectives.

How we reward staff matters, too. Instead of performance

metrics tied to productivity, we need to recognise new thinking and creative approaches as well.

## Protection

OK, so we've created an environment in which people can embrace and follow their creativity. Now we need to ensure that their work and their income are protected.

We need unions and labour protections for creatives that shield them from, and allow them to fight, unfair or exploitative practices.

I've mentioned AI already, and, sure, it might all work out in the end, but for now we need regulations to stop non-consensual use of creative work by AI models. A lot of digital platforms have started slipping clauses into their terms and conditions that gives them the right to train their machine learning models on our content, without making us aware that they've done this or making it easy for us to opt out. Consent like this *must* require active opt-in.

While we're at it, creatives need better protection from plagiarism in general. At the moment, legal support is expensive and takes too long, and then the punishments for the plagiarists and the compensation for the creatives don't go far enough. Our legal frameworks show what we value, and creativity is *not* supported.

## Accessibility

Who gets to tell stories and share their perspectives in this world shapes our cultural narrative—these are the voices forming the foundational beliefs that our world is built on. Enabling a wider

variety of people to contribute to this worldview is vital.

I could write a whole other book about elitism in the creative sector, but let me just tell you one story from my own experience. Having loved books and writing, and writers, my whole life, in 2010 I enrolled on a Master's degree in Publishing at the London College of Communication. I had to take out a £10,000 career development loan to do it, and then I had to go and live in London where I could only take part-time work around my studies and the mandatory **unpaid** internships I had to complete. I just about scraped through this period by keeping the internships part-time and working a flexible, and grim, call-centre job in between lectures, but it was fucking exhausting.

I struggled financially to such an extent that I ended up moving in with an abusive boyfriend just to keep a roof over my head.

After graduating, I got a job as an Editor for a prominent legal publisher. I was initially put on a freelance contract—I had to work in the office for eight hours a day, five days a week, but I was treated as self-employed so that I didn't get the benefits or protections of an employee. You might call it a tax dodge on their part, I couldn't possibly comment. I was earning around £19,000 a year, and having to live in London, one of the most expensive cities in the world, with no job security. After 18 months, I was put on a full-time employed contract (still doing the exact same job, in the same location, with the same working hours), and my salary rose to the dizzying heights of something like £23,000.

This is where I dropped out—I simply couldn't survive on the money I was earning, despite working as an Editor for a fairly well-known company. In the end, out of hunger, I moved to a marketing agency and almost doubled my salary.

My peers who stayed in the industry almost all had rich parents who were paying their rent for them, or they had family in London who were allowing them to live rent-free. The rest of us ended up as marketers, project managers, communications professionals, entrepreneurs... My friends and I joke that paying for that degree was just a really expensive way to make friends. But the best friends—totally worth it!

The point is, publishing as an industry is only accessible to the privileged few. These are the people gatekeeping which stories get told, so it follows that they will be more likely to commission work that confirms their worldview. We are not going to get diverse perspectives. The same is true in the visual arts and media.

There are more barriers than just money—ableism, racism, misogyny, classism, transphobia and so on, and depressingly on, are rampant in creative spaces, just as they are in other careers. These barriers all need systematic dismantling so that we can create a world that is accessible to everyone.

Part of this means recognising the value of diversity and how it improves outcomes for businesses and society as a whole. I wrote an entire book about this already,<sup>7</sup> and I'm going to dedicate a chapter to it next, but the bottom line is that diverse teams have 35% higher financial returns than homogenous ones.<sup>8</sup> So it really is valuable.

There's also work to be done to recognise diversity within the arts themselves. Celebrating cultural storytelling methods, facilitating accessible participation models and decolonising creativity are just a few ways to start.

## Cultural attitudes

It's clear, by now, that changing society means changing attitudes. Our whole world is built on stories, and we need to tell better stories about creativity in order to give it greater value and support.

Just like all those myths you've internalised about your own personal creativity that hold you back, we, as a population, hold myths about creativity in general that need to be rewritten.

For example:

- **“Do it for love”**—the idea that creatives should make art for love not money makes artists feel guilt and shame about asking for fair compensation for their time and energy, and provides an excuse for individuals and organisations not to pay them what they're worth.
- **“Creativity is a luxury / hobby”**—nope, creativity is a basic human need. It's vital for our wellbeing and expression. It's what makes us human.
- **“Nice but not essential”**—art (making and receiving) improves physical and mental health, increases motivation and productivity, and is woven into the fabric of all of our society. Imagine what the world would be like with no stories, music, crafts, etc. Don't come crying to me when there's nothing on TV because you got rid of all the writers and filmmakers...
- **“Daydreaming is lazy”**—a lot of creative work doesn't look like work, but that's only because we've been taught to see work as the constant busyness of cogs in the corporate machine, getting worn down and thrown out. Rest and unstructured play are vital for ideation and experimentation,

and they're really good for us. Toxic productivity only serves the billionaire bosses.

- **“Art is for the elites”**—funnily enough, a system dominated by rich white folks has mostly created art for the *consumption* of rich white folks. Shocker. Giving art back to the people, through public art, participatory community projects, affordable spaces and community engagement would go a long way towards showing people the value of art and helping them to connect with it.
- **“We need to prioritise stability”**—I get that it doesn't feel like art will be a source of economic or social stability (especially since it is, by nature, disruptive), but history says it will. Innovation in science, medicine, governance, and pretty much everything relies on creative thinking. Creativity also supports resilience and problem-solving. Societies that suppress creativity often struggle to adapt to change.

Fuck you, pay me.

## The impact of valuing creativity

What does all this mean for the world?

I know I'm probably preaching to the choir, so I'm not going to offer you a full treatise on the benefits of creativity to the world. But, for the record, I will state that a society that puts a higher value on creativity experiences:

- Better physical health
- Better mental health
- A more engaged and productive workforce

- Improved problem-solving (and, fucking hell, we've got some problems that need solving right now)
- Conflict reduction
- Greater innovation in science, medicine and technology
- Improved community cohesion
- Cross-cultural understanding and connection
- Greater resilience and recovery
- Improved critical thinking skills
- Stronger democratic participation and civic engagement
- Greater economic resilience and adaptability
- Increased entrepreneurship
- Strengthened sense of belonging and identity
- Improved education outcomes
- Reduced stress and burnout
- Greater life satisfaction

Is that enough?!

Let's go, then.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you feel like your art isn't important enough.

**Take:**

An artwork you love.

Your favourite book, painting, TV show, movie... anything that you feel a strong connection with.

Make some notes on how this work makes you feel. What have you learned from it? What inspiration have you taken? What insights has it given you? What new perspective or ideas has it shared? What emotions did it provoke? How did it influence your view of the world? What tough times did it carry you through?

Write a letter or note to the creator, telling them what their work meant to you. (You don't have to send it, but you can if you like and if it's possible.)

Now, imagine if your work had an impact like that for someone else...

## What If Society Valued Difference?

In this chapter:

- The changes needed for society to genuinely value different ways of thinking
- Why we *should* value different ways of thinking as a society

\* \* \*

You can't fully value and celebrate creativity unless you also embrace difference.

To think creatively means to think beyond existing structures, beyond what's gone before—to be able to see new possibilities, different interpretations.

Creativity allows individuals to generate new ideas. Diversity of thought allows societies to recognise, refine, and implement those ideas. One without the other tends to stagnate.

So if we're going to build a world that truly values creativity,

we also have to celebrate difference.

## What does it mean to value difference?

### Redefining intelligence

The way that our education systems and workplaces assess and reward thinking offers a very narrow definition of intelligence and competence.

Currently, our system demands fast answers and linear thinking, with an emphasis on audio processing and verbal confidence.

What if we also made space for:

- Time to reflect
- Depth of thinking
- Non-linear, associative and intuitive thinking
- Varied forms of information processing and communication

... and just generally appreciated different cognitive styles, rather than trying to force everyone into the same box?

As we've seen, diversity of thought offers so many benefits and opportunities when we focus on strengths rather than challenges.

### Learning to disagree

Schools, workplaces and most other institutions encourage and reward agreement, and actively shy away from disagreement. It feels safer to have everyone on the same page, especially when teachers and managers aren't trained to facilitate discussions

of differing viewpoints. We want a quick consensus that allows us to move forward in a friendly way.

But it's a false economy. Disagreement, when respectful and productive, gets a group to a much better result, and it does so faster, because it enables them to look at all possible angles and address any potential issues. It allows everyone to be heard, takes in all viewpoints, and reaches an endpoint that is stronger and more fully believed in.

We're currently living in a polarised world where differences of opinion are seen as threats, even reasons to turn our backs on each other entirely. In this climate, people who see a topic from a different perspective are dangerous.

We need a cultural shift that recognises the value in exploring all possibilities and looking for alternative angles. We need to reward curiosity, and see challenges to prevailing thinking as caring about getting the best outcome rather than as undermining authority. We need to stop treating an openness to discussion as disloyalty to the party line.

Good leaders actively seek dissenting viewpoints in order to test their theories and look for ways to strengthen the output. But that requires training and support in how to manage respectful intellectual conflict, and greater understanding from everyone on separating theoretical disagreement from personal attack.

Healthy disagreement is one of the strongest drivers of innovation and ethical decision-making, if we can learn to value different opinions instead of trying to crush them in the name of "culture fit".

## Teaching to think

The way our education system is set up in the UK and the US (and many other Western countries) places most of the emphasis on the outcome, rather than the process. Children need to get the right answer so they can tick the box and move on.

However, as the robots can pretty much now do most of the grunt work for us, the next generation doesn't need to simply regurgitate facts. They need to be able to *think*.

An education system that focused on critical thinking and deep reasoning would benefit everyone, and would also make space for diversity of thought.

This kind of teaching could:

- Show that problems can have multiple valid solutions
- Encourage students to explain *how* they think, not just what answer they reach
- Support different learning and processing styles
- Assess reasoning, imagination, and critical thinking alongside knowledge recall

Not only would this better prepare our children to negotiate the wider world, it would allow them to work in a way that suits their personal needs and strengths, and help them to value the alternative approaches that other people can offer.

## Prioritising accessibility

Our world is designed for one type of brain, and people whose brains work differently to society's expectations are often excluded or disadvantaged from the start. This means that

they struggle to access information, participate in different environments or activities, or share their thoughts and ideas.

When we make space for difference, we make the world accessible to everyone. Changes such as multiple communication formats (written, verbal, visual, asynchronous), flexible working and learning structures, slower decision-making processes and alternative participation methods beyond public speaking or debate, would give us access to wider perspectives, and therefore new possibilities.

## Changing narratives

The way our media and other cultural narratives represent cognitive differences does a lot to shape our societal viewpoint. Currently, people who think differently are coded as problematic, difficult or dangerous, or they are used for comic effect (think Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*, whose literal thinking is always the butt of the joke). They are labelled as weird.

If, instead, we saw media representations that depicted diverse thinking styles as ordinary parts of human variation and showed collaboration across differences as positive and productive, we would be more accepting and embracing of them in real life.

## Relinquishing efficiency

Do you want something done fast, or do you want it done well?

Mostly, our society opts for fast. We see efficiency and productivity as the pinnacle of success, even if the output is substandard.

Uniform thinking is efficient, whereas diversity of thought is

often slower, messier and more uncomfortable.

However, it leads to better outcomes, stronger teams and greater success in the long-run. We need to be willing to sacrifice a little speed to gain some quality *and* equality.

## The impact of valuing difference

As I've said, I wrote about building a culture of diversity in a previous book,<sup>1</sup> but suffice to say that a culture and an institution that embraces difference will gain:

- Better decision-making—avoiding groupthink, considering wider perspectives and generating more effective solutions
- Improved risk management—different ways of seeing the world enable a group to identify potential risks earlier, prepare more effectively, and handle the challenge better
- Increased innovation—breakthrough ideas often emerge from unexpected connections between disciplines, questioning deeply rooted assumptions, and/or lived experiences outside dominant narratives
- Greater social resilience—diverse groups adapt more effectively to change, recover faster from crises, and maintain broader skillsets and knowledge bases
- Stronger social cohesion—exposure to different perspectives expands empathy and emotional understanding (it's tempting to believe that similarity, and therefore conformity, breeds unity, but, in fact, the opposite is true—if belonging is conditional on sameness, people feel afraid to rock the boat, whereas if difference is embraced and people feel free to be themselves then everyone feels safer and belonging is strengthened)

- Better mental health—less masking, and therefore a reduced cognitive load, lower rates of burnout and increase participation in the workplace and the community
- More ethical systems—diverse perspectives uncover harm caused (unintentionally or not) by policies and processes, highlight accessibility needs, challenge biases that have become embedded in institutions and systems, and improve fairness and representation

Uniform thinking produces quick results; diverse thinking produces more complex, adaptable and, ultimately, more effective results.

We have a choice to make as a culture—which do we want?

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

Opening up different perspectives.

### **Take:**

Something you are completely sure is true.

It could be something as basic as “the grass is green”, or something more complex like “women have the right to vote”.

(**Note:** It can be really helpful to use this exercise for controversial topics. Sometimes it’s good to challenge our beliefs so that we are sure they are what we really do believe. It can also be useful to understand alternative viewpoints so that you

can disagree productively. I once had to write an article about trans rights, and I wanted it to be genuinely meaningful and persuasive to people who had been convinced they needed to be afraid of trans people by the right-wing media, so I had to spend quite a bit of time researching anti-trans attitudes, which was deeply upsetting, but meant I could then speak to the fears or misconceptions that people had in a way that they might actually listen to.

**However**, I don't recommend working with something that you're going to find triggering or distressing, unless you're doing it with the support of professionals who can help you through any difficult feelings that come up. Choose your topic carefully, and stop if it gets too much.)

Now, imagine if your "truth" wasn't so definitely true anymore.

Play around with one / some / all of the following:

- Write some notes or voice-note some points to argue *against* your original position
- Write a story or create a visual image depicting an opposing or different truth
- Depict (in whatever form you like) a discussion between three people: one who believes passionately in your truth, one who passionately disagrees with it, and one who is undecided on this subject
- Imagine what would happen if your original statement *had been* true, but then suddenly *stopped* being true—create a piece of writing, art or craft about what would happen next, and how you / society would cope with the change

After doing at least one of the above, return to your original “truth”—how do you feel about it now?

# 11

## Decentring Productivity

In this chapter:

- Why we began to idolise productivity
- Why wellness and joy matter more
- How we can reclaim our joy

\* \* \*

We have talked so far about how to put more value on creativity and divergence from the supposed “norm”, but probably the biggest current barrier to a world that supports and nurtures creativity and originality is the immense value we place on productivity.

We worship productivity in our culture, to absurd levels.

The value of a human being is measured by how much they can contribute to the machine, which is nuts when these machines (corporate entities, political institutions, educational organisa-

tions) were created to serve humanity. Somehow they've taken over. Now we have to serve them.

People who aren't constantly hustling and producing and *doing* are treated as lazy freeloaders.

This mentality runs so deep that we feel guilty about meeting our most basic needs—like rest. (More on that in the next chapter.) It also leads a lot of disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent people to feel immense shame about their perceived lack of productivity, and therefore their imagined lack of worth.

It also leads us to feel distrustful about our creativity. It feeds into that myth we talked about in Chapter 2 that creativity is a frivolous luxury, a waste of time. Unless we're going to make a huge success of it (which will be tough, because these myths teach us that it's almost impossible to make money as an artist and only the chosen few with incredible natural talent will “make it”), then there's no point. We're using time that could be spent hustling, or optimising, or improving, on something that, in our current paradigm, has no value because it doesn't make money or feed the machine.

These kinds of cultural attitudes are so deeply ingrained that we never question them. We just think that's the way it is. But it hasn't always been this way, so it doesn't need to continue to be this way. We just need enough people to reject this way of thinking to turn the tide towards a new approach.

## The productivity myth

Why do we think that productivity is so important?

Like most of our deep-rooted beliefs, it's been programmed into us from birth. The stories we're told—by our parents, our

teachers, the media, influencers, and from pretty much every angle you can think of—frame work and busyness as a virtue, and rest as laziness. An inability to work yourself to the bone is portrayed as a moral failing.

The rise of the Puritan work ethic in the 16th Century rather kicked all this off. Prior to that, work was something you did when you needed to, and when you didn't need to, you'd rest. Preferably you'd have someone to do the work for you, of course; then you could dedicate yourself to your hobbies. The English language didn't even have the word "lazy" until the 1540s.

Under Catholic doctrine, which had been the prevailing religion in Europe up until this point, all people are considered sinners and we'll all have to atone for our sins when we die, so there was a fairly fatalistic view to life. You would be judged on how much good you had done in your life, but you were bound to have done *something* bad, so you'd get that burned out of you with the holy fire of Purgatory. As long as you didn't do anything too terrible, and you did some good stuff along the way, you'd go through Purgatory like everyone else and come out the other side into Heaven.

The Protestant reformation changed things somewhat—all people were no longer equal in the sight of God; some would be "saved" (given an instant pass to Heaven) and the rest would be damned for all eternity. I mean, that's pretty scary. Protestant belief had it that, as long as you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, you'd be in the saved camp; so go to church and pray, and you're good. But the Puritans took it up a notch—belief in Jesus wasn't enough; only a select few believers would be admitted into Heaven. God made the choice of whether to save you or not before your birth, so your life on Earth involved a rather anxious wait to find out if you'd made the cut.

As a result of this anxiety, the Puritans spent a lot of time looking for “signs” that they were one of the chosen ones. It was believed that a life of austere piety and religious dedication was a sign that you were one of the holy ones destined for Heaven, and, since life on Earth was considered to be an arduous pilgrimage on the way to the ultimate goal of eternity in Heaven, Puritans were pretty keen to show their devotion to God and prove they were worthy of salvation.

Work, then, became the ultimate “pick me” activity.

It’s important to recognise, as well, that this attitude was in no small way influenced by the rise of slavery. As more and more Europeans abducted and enslaved African people, they used religion as a justification for working them to death. These “godless” humans could be saved by being shown the love of God... and, via some mental gymnastics using the above philosophy around work, they convinced themselves that being flogged in a cornfield was a sign of God’s love. Or convinced themselves enough that it felt like a reasonable excuse, anyway.

Once the Puritans set off for America, they really dug in with that approach, showing this particular brand of love to the enslaved people they brought to the “new world” and the indigenous people they found there. America, which was colonised by Puritans in pursuit of absolute purity of their views without any other belief systems being allowed to get in the way, is the place where this veneration of work as holy seems to have flourished most strongly. The United States is the only country in the world without a paid annual leave policy, and, even when employers choose to offer paid time off, more than half of American workers don’t dare use all of it.<sup>1</sup> Around a quarter of workers don’t take any time off *ever*.<sup>2</sup>

This blows my little European mind.

It's not just the Puritans that are to blame, though. Our old friend Industrial Capitalism is back. Once factory work appeared in the 18th Century, constant output became an economic imperative. The bosses needed people working around the clock. Most of what we now consider to be “normal” society was invented during this period of industrialisation:

The **eight-hour workday** was created for no other reason than that 24 divides into three sets of eight, meaning that workers could be split into shifts and their time rotated evenly through working, going out and buying the stuff that was being produced, and sleeping, on a continuous cycle—we think 9 to 5 is optimal, it isn't; it was just convenient for Victorian-era bosses.

The modern **school system** then evolved because all these workers needed somewhere to put their kids for the eight hours they were in the factory, particularly once child labour began to fall out of favour at the start of the 19th Century. School curriculums were devised that would teach these workers' children to be good future factory workers, and, somewhat terrifyingly, we're still using pretty much the same curriculums and teaching philosophies to this day. Still churning out obedient little worker bees, still programming our babies to value conformity and productivity.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, work was done on a task-oriented basis—if there was something that needed doing, you did it, and when the tasks were done, you stopped. Factory work shifted us to an **hourly work mindset**. You clock in at a set time, and you do as much as you can until it's clocking out time. Rinse and repeat. We no longer work because there's something that

needs doing; we work because it's work time, and you'd better *find* something to do, or else. Keep busy, always, whether there's a point to it or not.

Up until the 18th Century, most people's work was connected with their home. They would grow crops or tend animals or make clothing... Some items would be taken to markets to sell, but they'd be made or tended at home. Work and life were intertwined, and you were connected to every part of the process. You understood how it all fit together, your place in it, and how the end result mattered to you. Factories **took workers away from their homes** and made them, quite literally, cogs in a machine that they didn't often have full sight of. They were working on one small element of an end product they might not have anything to do with. The sense of meaning and purpose faded, and you were no longer serving yourself and your family—you were working for the Boss Man.

All this stuff being made needed to be bought—so **consumerism** was born. Instead of making what was needed, factories were churning out mass quantities of stuff (more than anyone truly *needed*), which they wanted people to buy. So they set about convincing people it was good to own stuff you didn't actually require. Which gave rise to the obsession we now have with owning tonnes and tonnes of *stuff*. Draining the planet dry just so we can produce things to make money by getting people to buy them when they don't even want them. *This* is the altar on which we're being asked to sacrifice our wellbeing.

There's loads more that changed with industrialisation: the breakdown of community networks and multi-generational

family support systems, the solidifying of more defined gender roles, urbanisation, the concept of a “weekend” ... but this is all outside my remit, and I sense I’m losing you.

*Come on, Allegra, I thought I was reading a fun book about creativity, not a history textbook...*

Ok, ok, but I tell you all this to show that this stuff *isn’t* the way it’s always been, and there’s certainly no evidence that it’s the way it’s *supposed* to be.

Productivity isn’t a virtue, it’s just necessary for lining the pockets of billionaire capitalists. And it’s killing us and the planet in the process.

Maybe it’s time we said no?

## Unlearning productivity

Stepping back from worshipping productivity is a pretty big deal, though. Raised in the Church of Patriarchal Colonialist Capitalism, we’re all fairly heavily indoctrinated. Even when we manage to overcome our own internal programming and step outside the productivity paradigm, those around us respond as if we have committed the most heinous act of blasphemy.

It’s tricky. But not impossible.

Let’s start with a new story to reprogramme our minds.

## The story of wellness

This constant consumption and production with the goal of disposal is destroying the planet that we depend on for our survival. Resisting capitalist productivity culture isn’t just a wellness choice, it’s an imperative for humanity.

If the planet doesn’t break first, our bodies will. The obsession

with productivity is pushing us way beyond our limits. Right now, 82% of workers are burnt out,<sup>3</sup> and workplace sickness is at an all-time high in the UK,<sup>4</sup> US,<sup>5</sup> and many other countries. Chronic stress is linked to every major health problem, including the four main causes of death in the UK: heart disease, cancer, diabetes and dementia.

Yet companies make significantly more money when staff are happy and well. Happy workers are 13% more productive,<sup>6</sup> and flexible working increases revenue by 43%.<sup>7</sup> Why are bosses so obsessed with working us to death when all the evidence shows that's bad for business?!

We've been taught to see institutions as above us, but it's time to remember that they were created by humans *for* humans. And they can be taken down again by humans, if we so choose. These systems don't exist to force us to justify ourselves, they should exist to take care of us.

The goal of a society should be to lift up and care for each of its members. Freedom, health, happiness and joy should be the measures of our success—not GDP. The fact that we have people without homes, without healthcare, the fact that charities exist to fill gaps... that's a failure that our governments should be ashamed of. But until we see it as their failure instead of our own, they won't care.

Studies show that Universal Basic Income (or UBI, where *all* people are given a regular payment, regardless of employment status, to ensure their needs are met) reduces poverty while improving mental and physical health. Critics have claimed it would disincentivise people to work, but trials have found that's not the case—once their basic needs are covered, people still want to work, but they are free to choose work that has more meaning and is a better fit for them. In fact, some trials

suggest UBI actually *increases* employment levels, possibly in part because when people are struggling less with their physical and mental health due to poverty, they're more able to work.<sup>8</sup> Not only that, but UBI actually *saves* governments money—trials show that it vastly reduces the administrative costs of the benefits system, reduces spending on healthcare, crime and emergency services, increases tax revenues and increases economic participation, all of which outweighs the cost of the UBI itself.

Ok, I said earlier that UBI was outside of my remit, but the fact is that prioritising people over corporations makes economic sense. All that's missing is the will.

## Valuing wellness

You don't need to earn your value.

You were born into this world being intrinsically valuable. There are more than 8.3 billion people currently on this planet, and 117 billion humans have come into existence over the last 200,000 years, yet not one of them is or was the same as you. The odds of the exact combination of DNA evolving and surviving through the generations in order to come together at the specific moment that would make **you** are 1 in 400 trillion... yet here you are.

You are a miracle.

The incredible event of your creation did not take place so that you could serve a corporate machine with your every breath until you drop dead. It is not our job to keep businesses alive. It is not our job to sustain capitalism. If the billionaires can't make money without crushing all of us, that's their problem, not ours. We certainly don't need to *help* them.

Every other human on this planet is also a miracle, just like you. They deserve to be looked after and supported, but some of them have been badly let down. Most of us are hanging by a thread. Imagine a world where we ensured that everyone had the food and shelter and care they needed to live a comfortable life, regardless of how much of themselves they gave to rich people.

So start expecting more. Start questioning the narratives about benefit scroungers and homeless drunks and evil migrants and unemployed wasters. Start seeing these people as victims of a system that treats humans as a resource to be exploited. Use those creative powers of yours to imagine how it could be different.

We need to remind ourselves that people matter for who they are, not what they contribute. And that includes you. You matter. Just as you are.

You deserve joy. Just because.

You've got a finite amount of time on this planet—maybe as many as 100 years, if you're lucky. That time flies by so fast; we owe it to the great miracle of our arrival on this planet to squeeze as much pleasure and happiness from the experience as we can. Tough times will come along, of course, but that's all the more reason for us to take our joy where we can.

## Choosing joy

I speak to a *lot* of creatives who are feeling stuck, and one of the major blockers they talk to me about is feeling that they're not allowed to make art just for fun.

We've been so conditioned to be productive, to do *worthwhile* things with our time, and, at the same time, taught that art isn't

worthwhile. Women, in particular, are also often programmed to believe that we must be doing things for *other people* at all times, and that it's selfish to do anything just for ourselves.

It's therefore quite a rebellious act to spend time doing things just for the sheer hell of it. To play and experiment and doodle and scribble and just enjoy yourself.

Taking time out to do something you enjoy purely *because* you enjoy it isn't frivolous or silly or indulgent—it is a radical form of resistance.

## Do you have to monetise your hobbies?

I see a lot of people shouting on the internet about how you can make a fortune from your tiny kitchen table hobby, and they've usually got a five-step guide that will show you exactly how to make six-figure sums that you can buy for just \$39.

I also see a lot of *other* people shouting on the internet about how you don't have to monetise your hobbies. *Stop trying to make everything into a business! Not everything has to be sold!*

My main feeling about this topic is that I wish everyone would stop shouting.

No, you don't *have* to monetise your hobbies. It's a perfectly valid choice to do something purely for fun. We *need* more joy and just-for-fun in the world.

However, some people are struggling to survive in the world, and monetising something they're already doing anyway might help them to buy food. On the other hand, a lot of people are making a decent living by doing jobs they absolutely hate, and if they want to monetise their hobby so that they can switch to making a living in a way that doesn't drain the very soul out of them, then I'm totally in favour.

If you want to sell your art and try to make some money—be it a bit of pocket change or your main source of income—from being creative, go for it. And don't let anyone shame you out of it. If you *don't* want to monetise it, then don't; just enjoy doing it on your own terms. And don't let anyone tell you it's not worthwhile for its own sake.

## Your art is valuable

Whether you exchange the energy you have put into your work for money, or you gift it to others, or you display it on your own wall, or you keep it in a cupboard, or you burn the work as soon as you're done with it, your art has value.

As I've banged on about a lot already, making art is good for your physical health and your mental health. That's already worthwhile enough by itself. Then, anyone who does see your work will benefit from the emotions it will stir, the sense of connection they'll feel, and the insights they'll gain. Maybe they'll be inspired to make some art of their own. Maybe the world will just be a little bit more beautiful when you're done.

You'll be happier for having had your moment of joy, so maybe you'll smile at a stranger you pass in the street. That will lift their mood and they'll smile at another stranger, who'll go home and hug their partner that little bit tighter. They're tiny ripples of gentle light, but they matter. More than you could ever know.

And once again, for the people at the back: the world gains so much from hearing your voice, from seeing your perspective on the world.

You are unique—no one else can see what you can see, unless you show us.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

Taking back your joy.

**Take:**

Five minutes each day. (If daily feels too much to start with, try weekly at first and build up.)

Do something just for the sheer joy of it.

It doesn't have to be anything big—especially if your health or energy are unpredictable, small might be best.

It can be as simple as:

- Drinking a cup of tea slowly while you listen to the birds outside your window
- Doing a guided meditation (you can find a few at [YourCreativeFix.substack.com](http://YourCreativeFix.substack.com))
- Going for a walk
- Doodling in a sketchbook
- Journaling
- Lying down and listening to music
- Chatting to a friend
- Walking around an art gallery
- Lighting a candle and watching the flame

- Relaxing in a warm bath

Literally anything that feels good and has no particular purpose.

It can take longer than five minutes, but aim for a *minimum* of five minutes.

If you find yourself resisting this, sit with that feeling for a moment and ask yourself why. What story is coming up that says you shouldn't or can't do one small thing, just for five minutes, for yourself? Is that story true? What story can you replace it with?

## 12

### Back In Your Body

In this chapter:

- How society has distanced us from our physical bodies
- Why we need to reconnect with our bodies
- How creativity can help

\* \* \*

While we're changing the world, there's another key shift that needs to be made—we need to reinhabit our physical bodies.

At some point (the so-called Enlightenment had a lot to do with it; I'll come on to that in a minute), we started viewing our brains as the centre of everything. We began to see our sense of self as dwelling within our heads, and our bodies were just these rather inconvenient and embarrassing meat sacks that carried them around.

We were taught to be ashamed of our bodies, to try to suppress

and overcome our physical needs, and to ignore the messages and guidance our systems gave us.

How's that working out for us?

Not so great. 41% of men and 60% of women are self-conscious about their bodies, and 70% of adult women report withdrawing from activities because of negative feelings about their bodies.<sup>1</sup> In a UK study, 80% of respondents of a variety of genders said that their body image had a negative impact on their mental health, and 61% said it had a negative impact on their physical health.<sup>2</sup>

I've not always had the easiest relationship with my body. It hasn't always done what I wanted it to do, it seems like it lets me down more often than I'd like. When I was young, my body seemed to make me a target for harassment and assault; now I'm entering mid-life, it seems to be a target for ridicule. As a woman, I've been conditioned to see my body as something a bit disgusting, a bit dangerous, that needs to be controlled, contorted and hidden.

Even when our bodies create entire human beings out of almost nothing, we're told to view the process as gross, and something to be "recovered from" as quickly as possible, rather than as miraculous and worthy of respect.

And yet our bodies are magical creative systems. They're designed for creativity. Not just for making other people—humans have been making art since we arrived on the planet, and the earliest surviving piece of human art is a handprint. Our bodies both created and drove us to create tools, fire, shelter, clothing... and onwards to an entire civilisation.

The idea that our brain alone is where our logical thought and our sense of self resides is completely false. Western philosophers and the Christian Church all had their own reasons

for wanting us to distance ourselves from the physical and focus only on the esoteric, and their agenda is still driving a harmful dualist approach to our identity.

## How did we learn to hate our bodies?

So where did this all start?

The Ancient Greek philosopher Plato was among the first to document the idea of a body–soul dualism, describing the body as a container, or prison, for the soul. His student, Aristotle, ran with the idea, framing the logical thinking part of our brains as the most important part of us—the part that is divine and immortal, and which separates us from animals. Certain branches of early Christianity latched on to this concept, considering the soul as the “good” part, made by God, and the body as “sinful”, liable to run off disobeying God’s law if not kept under control.

The early Christian Church was divided on this issue, with many arguing that, since the body had been created by God and would be resurrected after death, it must be inherently good. But the Gnostic movement insisted that all elements of the material world were evil. Then Augustine of Hippo introduced the phrase “original sin” at the turn of the 5th century to describe how all humans were innately corrupt, and that this sinful nature was transmitted via the sexual act that conceived each of us. This idea really took off, and that was kind of it for Christians and body shaming.

All natural desires—hunger, lust, tiredness—were framed as evil, and most of our primal feelings became not merely sins, but the big ones: the Seven Deadly Sins. The ones you’d be in *big* trouble for. Monks started self-harming in order to punish

and control those natural impulses, and being a “good” person was now conditional on how much you could, essentially, not express your physical self.

Interestingly, this mentality took root in the Western Church, but Eastern Christianity has questioned a lot of these ideas, particularly the concept of inherited sin.

Then came the Enlightenment.

From the late 17th Century up until the early part of the 19th Century, philosophers became a bit obsessed with this mind–body dualism thing. René Descartes, in particular, has a lot to answer for here. Descartes, of “I think, therefore I am” fame, believed that the mind and body were two separate substances. His view of the body as an unthinking, gross machine that needed to be controlled by the, far more sophisticated, thinking mind was deeply influential. I’m not completely sure why we put so much stock in the ideas of a man who produced these theories by shutting himself up in a tiny room and talking to himself, but we did.

The Enlightenment was a period of great advances in science and technology, and a time where rational thought began to be deeply celebrated. Therefore the idea that the mind, the bit that supposedly did all the thinking, was more important than the sinful and fairly disgusting body (even more disgusting back then, in the times before sanitation, running water and dermatology) became highly fashionable.

## The rise of “body taming”

A few hundred years later, despite huge developments in our understanding of the body that prove that there is no separation, this idea of the mind as a distinct entity lingers in our collective

consciousness.

Today's Cartesians are the Dude Bro influencers who create social media content about how to "hack" your brain as if it were a computer, and overcome your inconvenient physical wiring.

A lot of our modern ideas about productivity optimisation have roots in this belief that bodies are shameful and messy, and should be hidden and overcome. Meeting our physical needs slows us down and distracts us, and we must do everything in our power not to be diverted from the path to success. Which usually means hustling to make money. Producing *stuff*, generating content, garnering attention.

If we are successful in this culture, then we are busy and we are looked at. Being looked at also requires that we tame our bodies so as to contort them into a pleasing shape, one that society will deem worthy of looking at. How can we possibly be taken seriously if we don't look good?!

To be seen as a success, then, we must minimise food and sleep, we must ignore pain or tiredness, we must push through our natural cycles, and we must never, ever *stop*. We've even got to optimise our fucking *rest* these days.

## Rest as reward

Any kind of pleasure is now deemed a "treat". We get to enjoy something if, and only if, we've worked really, really hard like good children first. You can only have some cake if you eat all your vegetables. You can only sit down with a good book at the *end* of a hard day of work, provided you've ticked off everything on your to do list. (Does anyone ever tick off everything on that sodding list?!)

Satisfying your most basic needs, and your desires, has

become something indulgent. Which is bonkers, when you think about it.

The most insane part of this is the fact that rest is now seen as a reward. It is acceptable in our society to take a break and let yourself recharge *only* after you have completely exhausted yourself. We are constantly seeking to justify our rest time. Capitalism has convinced us that rest comes at the end of a hard day, and that we have to give to the system first before we can claim some leisure.

This is absurd. But it's so ingrained in our culture that we don't question it. We push our minds and bodies beyond the point of exhaustion, and still feel bad about taking any time to ourselves to recover.

Rest is the root, not the reward. Our system—the whole connected human that combines our brain *and* body—cannot function without rest. We need to be well-rested to operate effectively. Even if productivity is the ultimate goal (which it shouldn't be), study after study has shown that people are more productive and effective when they are rested and comfortable and happy. Regular breaks sustain focus and increase output, as well as reducing stress (and stressed brains do not perform well). Rest is vital for memory, problem-solving and, you guessed it, creativity.

Then what if we let go of productivity as the holiest of virtues for a second? I know, that's blasphemous these days, but hear me out for a second. What if the most important thing in life *wasn't* feeding the corporate machine, but was instead to be healthy and happy and to fully *live* your life? Suddenly, meeting your needs doesn't look like an indulgence; it becomes absolutely critical.

## When your body is “different”

All of this is so heavily compounded when you live in a body that doesn't fit society's boxes.

If you are disabled, or live with a chronic illness, or are trans, or don't meet established beauty standards, or don't conform to expectations in one of a hundred other ways, then you have probably been shamed about your body. And I'm sorry for that, because it's not right. So many people are made to feel embarrassed or awkward or even unsafe about their physical selves, and we should not accept that in our society.

Those of us whose bodies need more rest, or who need accommodations to access certain environments, are made to feel that we're lazy, difficult, getting special treatment, asking for more than our fair share. When all we really want is to be able to exist in the world and participate in it the same way everyone else is enabled to.

There's so much negativity in the media, demonisation from politicians, and resentment from business leaders about anyone who needs support because their way of existing isn't currently supported in the way that other people's are, and that is not fair.

It is not you that is the problem. It's very much them.

## Why we need to re-embrace our bodies

Having studied philosophy as an undergraduate, I'm thrilled to tell you that Plato and Descartes were talking out of their arses. (Seriously, they are two of the most pompous and self-satisfied men I have come across and, as someone with a BA in English and Philosophy, that is saying something!) Our minds and bodies are not separate, they are inexorably interlinked.

There is a great deal of knowledge within our bodies. The second largest concentration of neurons is located within our gastrointestinal tract—so, when people talk about knowing something in their gut, they're not wrong.

This sort of instinctual understanding, that we call intuition and frame as a bit “woo woo”, has been vital for our species' survival. The human brain is faced with approximately 11 million pieces of information per second, but it can consciously process around 40. That's something of a shortfall. Therefore, we evolved the ability to process information much faster at a subconscious level, through things like pattern recognition, physical senses and assessing body language, which enabled us to detect threats, recognise opportunities and make decisions rapidly in dangerous or complex environments.

We still rely on this instinctive thinking a great deal more than we realise. Research shows that many of the decisions that we believe we have taken logically and consciously have actually been made on instinct, and then our rational mind has come up with a justification afterwards.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst our brain is the processor that spits out thought in a conscious narrative that we can share with others, the processing is done using inputs from all around our bodies. All our senses (and we have far more than five) transmit information from within and without, and feed that into our brain for it to make sense of.

We've bought into the idea that we need to overcome the messages from our bodies because they're holding us back from our goals, but once we see that these “goals” are ideals we've been sold by a capitalist system that wants our service, we can start to remember that we have these physical needs *for a reason*.

Our bodies tell us they're hungry or tired because they need

fuel. They show us when we're angry or anxious or comfortable because this is important information about our situation and our safety. Treating the ability to ignore these vital messages as a virtue is insane. Take menstrual periods as an example. As young girls, we're taught to be deeply ashamed of using tampons or pads—we must keep them hidden. We are taught to view our blood as disgusting, and our inevitable physical discomfort, cramps and tiredness as a weakness we should push through. Yet if there weren't any women menstruating then humanity would end. Our entire species would die out. How did we become convinced to feel ashamed of something so very important?! But we did.

So we have some work to do in relearning to trust our bodies. And, relatedly, in learning to better care for and support them. We've been taught to punish and starve and restrict our bodies, not to nurture them. But we can't be our best selves or do our best work if we don't show them some love.

Creativity, in particular, thrives when our bodies are rested, soothed and comfortable. When our senses are engaged, and we're alert and present in the world. We need to connect with our environment in order to create, not disengage and retreat into our brains.

If we're trying to deny any parts of ourselves—any needs, any aspect of our identity—then it's impossible to create from a place of truth and authenticity. Which means it's impossible to create anything meaningful or powerful.

This is a big reason why burnout is such a huge problem right now. We're all trying to push past our limits and to deny the very essence of who we are, especially women and those with female-labelled bodies, who often carry the brunt of the pressure. We're trying to suppress our true nature, and it's killing us.

The good news is, just as our bodies can bring us closer to our art, art can bring us into closer relationship with our bodies.

## The role of creativity in embodiment

In this society that tries to convince us our bodies are shameful and in need of correction (so that they can sell us stuff to make those corrections), and that tries to distance us from a planet that it wants to use as a resource rather than respect as our home, it is a powerful act of rebellion to come back into ourselves. To be fully present in our bodies, to respect their natural states, and to honour their connection to the wider natural world.

Creativity is a wonderful way to heal that relationship with our bodies, if we allow it to be. The sensory nature of creativity, the act of making something from scratch, the connection it brings to ourselves and the world around us, can bring us back to the core of who we are.

We already know that creativity is an act of resistance, so if we allow ourselves to create from this space of rebellious embodiment, what a world we might be able to bring into being!

Here are some of the ways that a creative habit encourages embodiment.

### *Physicality*

Creativity is a physical activity. Writing, painting, drawing, crafting, etc. involve the use of your body and your senses. You are making something with your physical self, whether you're moving a pen across the paper, moving paint across a canvas, or weaving threads together. It's one of the few times in our modern world that we engage our bodies and our brains

in harmony.

### *Mindfulness*

Many creative activities involve repetitive, almost meditative, movements and sounds—the tapping of the keys, the scratching of the pen, the clicking of the knitting needles... This repetitive nature helps to bring us into a mindful state where we're fully in the present, and immersed in what we're doing.

### *Sensory experience*

The feel of pen on paper, the smell of paint, the sound of pastels on canvas, the taste of the banana bread, the colours, the light... creativity is a highly sensory experience.

Not only are we engaging our *own* senses, however, we're often trying to convey sensory detail to others. We want our audience to smell the flowers in our painting, to hear the music the character in our novel is dancing to, to taste the cookies from our grandmother's kitchen that we sing about... Our work is rooted in sensory detail, and sensory exchange.

### *Self-care*

Creativity is a true self-care practice—not the commercialised bubble baths and expensive skin treatments variety. Engaging in creativity soothes your nervous system, reduces anxiety and depression, lowers high blood pressure, boosts the immune system, increases self-esteem... I could go on and on, but basically, it's really good for you. It nurtures both your body and mind, at the same time and in relationship with one another.

## Recovering from shame

Many of us, as artists, are in recovery from creative shame—from feeling that we're not worthy, or that our art isn't worthy, or that art in general isn't worthy. From feeling that we don't have the right to create or share our voices.

As we've seen, as a species we're also in recovery from physical shame. And the two issues are deeply linked, for women especially.

The fact that the miraculous creative power of the female body is largely treated as a bit yucky and a drain on resources just goes to show how terrified the patriarchy is by our ability to make people; the system always tries to minimise what it is most afraid of.

Women, along with queer and trans people, have been particularly shamed for their sexual desires and associated reproductive happenings (periods, menopause, all that jazz). Mostly because all of this was very dangerous for the idea that men should be in ultimate control (dude, you can't even make new people) with ownership over women (lol, what if we don't even *need* men for sexy funtimes? What if people were off enjoying themselves sexually without reproducing within the sanctioned paradigm?). Sex and love are dangerous to any system, because people get much less obedient when another person matters to them more than their position within the group. Plus, you can't have a patriarchy without established gender roles, so subverting those opened up a whole can of worms.

Meanwhile, women and minoritised groups have also been historically silenced creatively and culturally. They've been blocked from art and literature, and are still underrepresented in these spheres. They've been denied voting rights, economic

freedoms, business opportunities and so on and on.

Even as I type, politicians around the world are trying to legislate male control over female or gender non-conforming bodies. Women and minoritised people are often shut down, attacked or dismissed if they share their voice—and heaven forbid they should dare speak *against* the system.

Women and minoritised people rarely get to control their narratives. The system is always ready to speak for them.

Our liberation physically, socially and creatively, then, is intertwined.

Telling your own story, sharing your own viewpoint, especially in a way that engages your body, is a radical act.

Not coincidentally, women have traditionally been linked with intuition and less “rational” ways of knowing, so tapping into this wisdom held by the body and sharing our physical knowledge is also an act of reclamation.

A regular creative practice allows you to connect to that deeper knowing, to listen to that voice inside you and to express—and therefore understand—more of yourself. That’s how you learn who you are and what you need, so you can step into your full self.

## An embodied practice

Ok, so what does it *mean* to create in an embodied way? Here are a few suggestions for bringing embodiment into your creative practice.

## Rest

We've been taught to see rest as a reward for hard work, because capitalism doesn't really like us to take a break, but rest is the fuel that enables us to do anything. Rest is the starting point. You need to be fully rested before you begin, and take plenty of breaks throughout.

## Listen to your needs

When you come to create, ask yourself what your body needs in this moment. Perhaps it's comfortable sitting at a desk, or perhaps it needs to move. Maybe you'd be better off making voice notes as you walk, or you need to stretch before you start painting. Maybe better ideas will come to you if you sit in the fresh air for a while.

## Support your body

Prepare drinks and snacks to sustain you through your creative work, give yourself somewhere comfortable to sit or stand, make sure you have what you need to enable your body to work in a way that feels good.

## Bring in sensory enjoyment

You might prefer to work in silence, or with music playing, or to the soundtrack of nature. You might benefit from incense or essential oil scents. You might prefer to write by hand, or to use a certain kind of paper. You might like to colour-code your work. You might benefit from fidget toys or something that feels

pleasant to hold (like a smooth stone) as you work. Stimulating your senses in a way that feels good will bring out the best in your creativity.

### Use your body as the medium

One playful approach is to make your actual creativity more physical. Paint with your hands (or other body parts!) instead of a paint brush. Write with your non-dominant hand. Draw with your eyes closed. Put music on and move around, drawing as a form of dance. Act out your writing as if it were a performance. Explore what's possible when you integrate the physical with your creative ideas.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

Connecting your creativity with your senses.

**Take:**

Your feelings right now.

Sit for a moment somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed, breathe slowly and deeply, and ask yourself, "What am I feeling right now?"

Whatever dominant emotion(s) you detect ask yourself:

- What colour is it?
- What shape is it?
- What texture is it?
- Is it hot or cold?
- What sound does it make?
- What does it taste like?
- What does it smell like?
- What movements would it make?

When you've given yourself some time to think about these questions, respond creatively in some way. For example:

- Represent your emotion(s) using only colour and/or texture
- Write a description of your emotion(s) using only sensory detail
- Express your emotion(s) through dance or music
- Design a meal that conveys your emotion(s) (you could make it if you want to, or just describe it)
- Create anything else you want to that is inspired by your answers to the above questions

## 13

### What Can We Do?

In this chapter:

- The small actions we can take to contribute towards a paradigm shift

\* \* \*

There's a whole lot of ways that society needs to change in order to make space for Divergent Creatives.

Sometimes that can feel totally overwhelming. Each of us is only one little person—how can we possibly take on the forces of capitalist, colonialist patriarchy that have stood for centuries?

If you have power or influence within an educational, business, technological, care or political setting, please use it. But even if you don't, there are still ways that we can build change.

Each of us on our own may be just one little person, but together we are quite a force. Each of us can only take small

individual actions, but when you add all of those actions together...

## Connection

There are more of us than there are of them. If all those of us who believe in a better world come together, we outnumber the ones who want to maintain the status quo at all costs. So the first step is finding each other.

If we can build communities and networks of connection, then we can support one another. We give each other permission, we cheer each other on, we buy each other's work, thereby enabling more of it.

Most importantly, we spread the new stories. When we talk to each other about how the myths we were raised on are, frankly, bullshit, and we discuss new ways of seeing the world, we help to reinforce the idea for everyone. It's hard to believe in a whole new world order by yourself, but there's strength in numbers.

## Creation

The major way that most of us contribute to the rebellion is with our art.

For all the reasons I've already stated, creativity is an act of resistance in itself. We keep making our art. We make things instead of mindlessly consuming, we imagine other possibilities, we look from different perspectives.

We don't allow them to control our narrative. We use our craft to explore our feelings, to interrogate our assumptions and to process the world around us. We use it to *engage* with the world around us on a deeper level.

## Consumption

Being an artist doesn't just involve making art, it means consuming art. It means immersing yourself in art, as much as possible.

Read books, look at paintings, go to craft fairs, watch movies, listen to music... get as much art into your senses as you can manage.

Make an effort to consume art from creatives who are not like you—different gender identities, different ethnic backgrounds, different nationalities, different sexualities, different lifestyles, different time periods... see the world from as many different perspectives as you can find.

Where possible, *support* the work of as many diverse artists as you can.

## Conscious choices

I know I rail against capitalism and consumerism a fair bit, but it is still nice to buy things sometimes. However, as creative rebels, we can aim to make conscious choices about what we buy.

We could make it ourselves. We could buy from an independent creator to support their art, rather than from a big, soulless corporate entity. We could buy sustainable products that are made to last. We could buy second-hand (I love a charity shop outfit—you get proper bargains, you're saving clothes from landfill, and the money goes to charity; wins all round!).

In a bid to protect creatives, we should also endeavour to buy ethically. Avoid companies that use AI tools to steal from artists, or who simply plagiarise the work of creatives. Support

businesses that fund good causes and pay creators properly.

Often, the ethical choice will be the more expensive. But if we buy less in general, then we can afford to be more choosy with the purchases we do make.

We can't always do the morally best thing, but we can aim to make more choices that we feel good about than ones we feel dubious about.

## Critical commentary

Our critical thinking skills have been blunted by our education system and our media, so we've got some work to do to sharpen them up again.

We need to start questioning more. When someone tells us something, whether our immediate response is to agree or disagree, we need to ask ourselves *why*.

When we see people in authority or with platforms putting forward a particular view of the world, selling us a particular myth, we need to be able to interrogate it. What's in it for them? What if the opposite was true? Where did they get their evidence? What is another way of looking at this?

If we feel able, we could also speak up about this critical reflection. Challenging common assumptions and dominant narratives in front of others helps them to question, too. It gives permission to the people hearing you to think outside the box.

I don't mean shouting and screaming at people on social media. I mean gently and respectfully asking, why do you think that? What about this? What if something else were true?

We can also amplify the stories of those who are silenced. Sharing posts on social media from minoritised groups, reading books from marginalised voices and sharing them with friends,

watching films and TV shows that offer different perspectives. Giving those works good reviews (if you feel they deserve them) so that more people get to hear about them.

We can help everyone to imagine a different world. We can share different stories.

## Celebration

Joy truly is powerful—the system hates to see people being *happy* outside of its sanctioned structures. It completely undermines the narrative they want to build that the only good life is a life they control.

When you make art for the sake of it, when you rest because you want to, when you make a conscious choice that goes against the grain, celebrate that fact.

If you feel brave enough, celebrate publicly so others can witness your joy and be inspired by it. And so others making those same choices can connect with you and feel less alone.

Celebrate the alternative choices of others, too. Like their posts, comment on their blogs, buy their books, share their newsletters...

None of us can change the world alone. But together, we are a mighty army that can burn it all to the ground and rebuild it anew.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

When you doubt the power of creativity, or you just need a creative boost.

### **Take:**

Yourself to some art.

Go to a library, a bookshop, a gallery, a cinema, a craft fair, or just open your computer or turn on your TV.

Look at the work you find. If possible, look at work from a broad range of different people from varied backgrounds.

Ask yourself:

- How do I feel when I engage with this?
- What surprised me about the work?
- What do I relate to about it?
- What did it teach me or show me that was new?
- What did I like about it?
- What didn't I like about it?
- Will I share it with someone else?
- What could I say about it to someone else?

### III

## Reclamation

*Ok, let's get down to practicalities.*

*In this part, we'll look at techniques and tools to better understand your personal needs, and to create in a way that works for you.*

*Some of these activities you might want to try straight away, others you might come back to when you feel more ready. You can return to and repeat activities as often as you like.*

*Do not try to do everything at once. Pace yourself.*

*It's time to step into your creative power.*



## Regaining Creative Confidence

In this chapter:

- Understanding your fears around creativity
- Supporting your creativity through your fear
- Ways to build your creative confidence

\* \* \*

The first stage to standing in your power as a creative is to rebuild the confidence that society and your previous experiences have torn down.

There is a creative soul inside you that desperately wants to come out and play, but is terrified of being rejected, mocked, criticised, misunderstood or otherwise hurt. Maybe you've been telling them to stay quiet and keep hidden, and there's no blame or shame attached to that. I mean, given everything we've talked about so far, it's no fucking wonder. But we need to find a way

to help your inner creative, and you, feel comfortable with them stepping out of the cave and into the light.

So, firstly, we need to understand exactly what your creative soul is afraid of, and where you need support.

## Getting to know fear

Let me introduce you to a technique called Externalisation. In narrative therapy, this is the process of detaching yourself from an emotion and giving it a character that you can respond to and interact with. The emotion is not you, it is separate and distinct, and you can then deal with it as such.

To explain what I mean, let me introduce you to Velma.

Velma is my rage monster. Rather than beating myself up for getting angry when I'm frustrated, overstimulated and over-tired, I accept that, in these circumstances, Velma will often sweep in.

In my mind, she looks rather like Velma Kelly from the musical Chicago. She has thick, curly, luscious dark hair, big, sensual brown eyes, and full lips painted blood-red. She wears a sparkly, figure-hugging dress, and is usually seen clutching a cut-crystal tumbler of whiskey in one hand and waving a cigarette between the fingers of the other. Her voice is husky, her demeanour is sexy, but she probably has a small gun secreted in the garter of her stockings. Do not mess with Velma.

When I feel angry, I imagine her lobbing her glass at the wall and reaching for her gun. Everyone in the room freezes, waiting to see what she will do next. It is my job to softly convince her to put down the gun and turn on her heel and walk out.

Instead of getting annoyed with myself for feeling angry—which is, obviously, a self-defeating spiral—I have chats with

Velma (not out loud, and not in front of people) about just what the fuck is going on and how we could maybe arrange for her to *not* get on one every time someone pisses her off.

The thing is, though, Velma's not trying to be a bitch. Having got to know her over the years, I now recognise that she just hates to see me taken advantage of. She gets infuriated that people keep pushing my buttons, that they (and I) override my needs, and she doesn't understand why the world can't just back the hell off. So we have little chats about why things happen the way they do, and what we can do about it. Together.

If that sounds batshit mental, well, maybe it is. But making people up and then making them seem real is a big part of what we do as creatives, so it shouldn't be that much of a stretch.

And trust me, it really helps.

If your fear was a person...

So let's sit with your fear for a moment.

I get it, no one likes to hang out with Fear. They're a bit, well, scary. They're intimidating and uncomfortable, and often they're hiding a lot of truths that we don't really want to look at.

But, like Velma, they're trying to keep you safe. Every emotion you have is there to serve you and take care of you. However, the way this one is going about it is not helping. It may have done in the past, but it's not now. So we need to get to the bottom of it.

**A word of caution:** Don't do this work if you're feeling particularly vulnerable or you've got heavy stuff going on right now. Feel free to skip this and come back to it later. (But please do come back to it later, it's important.) If you know there are traumas that are likely to surface as a result of this work, please get proper support (like a therapist and other care provisions)

in place first. You'll also want to give yourself space so that after you've confronted this stuff you can go and curl up under a blanket with a good book or trash TV and some cake, or whatever floats your boat from a comfort point of view. If nothing else, tell someone who loves you to be prepared to give you a hug (or your preferred demonstration of affection) afterwards.

You can do this as a journaling activity and write your answers down, or you can speak it out loud as if it were a conversation (you probably want to make sure you're fully alone for that). If it feels right to answer any of the questions with drawings, paintings or other visual media instead, go for it.

Think about the fear, hesitation, worries and general sense of "oh no, I can't do that" that you feel around creativity...

### 1) If it were a person, what would it look like?

- Is it male, female, other?
- How old is it?
- How do they dress?
- What are their hair, eyes, lips, jaw, etc. like?
- Do they have accessories? (Make-up, jewellery, bag, are their nails done, do they wear a hat...?)
- What other features do you notice?

### 2) What does their voice sound like?

- What sort of things do they say?
- Are they loud, quiet, in between?
- Are they forthright, sarcastic, shy, subtle...?
- Do they have an accent?
- Do they speak quickly or slowly?

### 3) How do they behave?

- What are their mannerisms like?
- How do they act?
- What sort of behaviour do they display and how does it change in different situations?

### 4) How do they spend their time?

- What hobbies do they have (apart from telling you to be afraid)?
- What do they do when they're with you?
- What do they do when they're *not* with you?

### 5) What is their name?

(You can choose an actual name, like Velma, you could make up a name, or you could give a more descriptive title, like the Fear Fairy.)

You might want to draw or paint a picture of the character, or find some images online that you can print out and put into a collage to depict your character.

Now that you have your fear persona, you can ask them some questions.

You don't have to do this all in one go—you can take a break after creating them and do this part another time. At least grab yourself a snack before you move on to part two.

Then, when you're ready, ask your character the following questions (again, you can journal the answers, speak them out loud as if you were speaking for the persona, or capture them in any way that feels right):

- What do you most want for me?
- What is your biggest concern for me?
- How are you trying to help me?
- Is there a person (or people) or experience(s) in my past that you are connected with or representative of?
- What provokes you?
- What comforts or reassures you?
- How can we work together?

Come up with a phrase that you can say (out loud or just in your mind) when you feel this character sneaking in and causing problems. Make it yours, but here's a template you can use as a starting point:

*Ah, [Name], you're back. Thank you for trying to keep me safe, but I'm all good right now. I've got this, you can go.*

When they pop up, take a few deep breaths, say or think your phrase, then visualise them retreating.

That was a lot. Go and have some snacks and a lie down.

If your creativity was a person...

On the lighter side (maybe), let's do a similar thing with your creativity.

Again, you can design a character for the creative side of you. What are they like? What do they look, sound, act like? Do they have a name?

Just as Beyoncé has an alter ego, Sasha Fierce, that she inhabits in order to feel confident on stage, you can design your own super confident, powerful creative who is fully in their flow and makes the art that calls to them without two shits for anyone else's opinion. Sometimes, you gotta fake it 'til you make it.

Now, ask your creative persona some questions (again, respond to these in whatever way feels best to you):

- What do you want?
- What is holding you back?
- What is your biggest dream?
- What is your biggest fear?
- How can I support you?
- What do you need in order to flourish?
- What would you do if there were no restrictions?

Once you've got your answers, think about what you can put in place to give your creative self opportunities to step forward.

You can go back to your creative self any time that you feel blocked or restricted and ask:

- What do you need right now?
- What do you want to say?

Ok, you know the deal by now—time for more snacks and a rest.

When have you dealt with fear before?

However hesitant and afraid you feel, I guarantee you have dealt with the Fear Fairy (or whatever you're calling it) before, and come out on top. You just need to remind yourself that you *do* have it in you to be brave and to do the tough thing.

Make a list of all the times you have done something scary—that time you gave a presentation in a big meeting, the time you gave birth, or looked after a child alone for the first time (nothing scarier than that!), the time you asked for a pay rise, the

time you told someone not to push in front of you in the queue, the time you recited Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star in front of the whole class... However small, however long ago, write it down.

Remember that “brave” is relative—going to the shop down the road to buy a newspaper alone is brave if you’re highly introverted and struggle with social anxiety. It doesn’t matter if it wouldn’t seem brave to other people, only that it was tough *for you* and you managed to do it anyway.

Read that list and remember that you are, at least a little bit, a badass.

Don’t panic if your list is small. If it has *one* thing on it, that’s still proof that you’ve dealt with fear before, so you can do it again.

When you do more brave things (like submitting a story to a literary journal or posting a picture of your artwork on Instagram), add them to the list.

Keep referring back to that list to remind yourself that you *can* do scary things, and that it feels good afterwards (even if it feels excruciating in the moment).

Before you know where you are, you might even start pushing yourself out of your comfort zone more regularly just to have things to add to your list...

## Creating confidence

I’ll let you into a secret: most confident people aren’t *really* that confident. It’s an act. They’re all Sasha Fierce-ing us. Approximately 82% of people struggle with imposter syndrome, and 85% have low self-esteem,<sup>1</sup> whilst 57% of British people<sup>2</sup> and 40–50% of Americans<sup>3</sup> consider themselves to be shy. So next time you’re feeling unsure of yourself, remember that

you're very far from being alone.

However, the more you *act* confident, and the more you do the thing you're nervous about, the less your brain will fear it. Over time, you start to *believe* that you actually are confident.

So let's start building up your creative confidence.

## Start small

If you've been struggling with fears and insecurities around your creativity for a long time, it's best not to throw yourself in at the deep end. You probably don't want to start this journey by submitting a piece to *The Paris Review* or planning your first gallery show. (Not that there's anything stopping you if you want to do that and you think you can handle the emotional and practical challenges!)

My recommendation is to start small. Keep the bar so low you could trip over it. Just ask yourself to start doodling more regularly, or jotting down story ideas, or taking photographs of things you find interesting. Maybe you could start noting interesting news articles, overheard conversations, unusual people or places you come across, or anything else that might be useful later.

Don't immediately commit to writing a novel or recording an album; your only commitment to begin with is to play around and explore your creativity and see what comes up.

## Messy Books

I made my first Messy Book for my daughter, because she was really struggling with making mistakes. If she spelled a word wrong or drew a line in a way she didn't want it, she'd become

distraught. No amount of reassuring her that everyone makes mistakes and that it's OK to still be learning, especially at five years old, did anything to help. So we made a Messy Book to get her comfortable with the whole idea of mistakes. Now I make them for me too, because I also wrestle a lot with perfectionism!

To make a Messy Book, you can either take an existing notebook, or you can create your own. To make your own, take 10–20 A4 pieces of paper (any more than that will be difficult to work with) and fold them in half on the landscape orientation. Do the same with a single piece of card (this is your cover). Put the pieces of paper inside the card and either stitch the centre fold of the pages to the centre of the card, using a thick needle and cotton thread (so that the thread goes through all the pages and the card, holding them all together, like old-school binding), or just staple the whole lot together. Then decorate your cover however you like. You can also just buy a super cheap notebook that's already done for you!

Then, mess up your notebook. Rip bits off the edge of the pages, use scissors to make the corners of the cover tatty, doodle on the cover and around the edges of some of the pages, spill stuff on the pages, drop the book in some mud, get it a bit wet then dry it off, splatter little bits of paint on some of the pages... do whatever you like to make it messy. Go crazy. Unsurprisingly, my then-five-year-old loved this process.

Now your notebook is a mess, you don't have to worry about what you put in it. If your doodles aren't as stunningly beautiful as you'd like or your prose isn't singing off the page to you, who cares? It's a Messy Book, we're just messing around here.

## Bad on purpose

Taking this approach a step up, a great way to overcome creative fear is to make bad art on purpose.

Draw a person totally out of proportion. Paint a haphazard still life. Write a cringey sex scene or laughable ghost story or a ridiculously pretentious poem. Take photos with your finger covering part of the lens.

You could try taking an existing famous artwork and recreating it in the worst way you can imagine.

Have fun with it. If you're feeling brave, share it with loved ones and all laugh together (explain first that it's *meant* to be bad, otherwise it might get awkward). If you have friends who are artists, you could set a group challenge to see who could write the most over-the-top, nauseating love poem, and cry with laughter reading them out to each other.

The point is to get over the fear of “bad”, while knocking art off its pedestal. It's all just a bit of fun!

## Trusted audience

When you're just getting your confidence up, you need to be careful about who you show your work to. The wrong person could completely crush you with a careless word, and send you running back into hiding without them even realising.

Choose people you trust. At first, this will probably only be one or two people. They might not be the people who are closest to you—sometimes it's easier to show work to someone you barely know at all (a lot of writers' forums give you opportunities to pair up with complete strangers and swap work, and sometimes the distance and anonymity makes it much easier—I do a lot of

work with Writers' HQ, and I know this is something you can find on their forum).

If someone you love asks to see your work and you don't feel they're the right person to show, you have the right to say no. Blame me if you like—say, *I'm working on this programme and she says not to show work to people close to us so I can't, sorry.* Or just say, *I'm not ready to share yet.* If they really care about you, they'll understand. If they get pouty, you know they're not someone to be trusted with your work.

Make sure you're clear with anyone you share with on what kind of feedback you need. Especially if they're not artists themselves. Otherwise they won't know, they'll panic, and you'll end up with something that wasn't helpful and was maybe even damaging. It's perfectly acceptable to say, *I'm just building my confidence up with my art, and I need you to tell me that this is decent / not shit.* Then they know you just need reassurance rather than a full critique.

Different people will be useful for different things. I have one friend who is brutally honest about my writing, and I love her for that, because I know she won't let me put stuff out there that isn't up to scratch and she'll help me fix issues. But if I'm feeling vulnerable emotionally, I won't show something I'm working on to her because I know I'm not in the right headspace to hear criticism.

Get to know which people you need to approach for what type of feedback, and be clear with them on what you want from them.

## Rejection Bingo

Once you're ready to start sending your work out more widely, you need to be ready for the inevitable rejection that this involves for *everybody*. Rejections are not a sign that you're not good enough, they're a sign you're in the game. Every creative who puts work out there gets rejected, it's all part of the process. Remember, you can't please all of the people all of the time.

In my Substack community, we play The Rejection Game. This is a way to make rejection fun and playful, and therefore less scary. By associating a positive reward with the rejection, we take away the intimidation, and encourage ourselves to go for it.

Rejection, after all, shows that you're putting yourself out there. You're giving it a go, and you're working on your craft. You're not going to be right for everyone, but the more approaches you make, the greater your chance of finding the person who'll say yes. Plus every bit of feedback helps you evolve as an artist. So rejection IS something to celebrate!

The idea of the game is, you earn different amounts of points for different kinds of rejection, and when you get to a certain level of points, you give yourself a treat.

*Creative Fix*

## Rejection Scorecard

10 points = small treat

50 points = big treat

100 points = get yourself something special!

| Submission type                          | Points | Submission type                    | Points |
|------------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------|--------|
| Article / collaboration / speaking pitch | 1      | Chapbook                           | 10     |
| Poem or flash fiction                    | 3      | Grant / residency application      | 10     |
| Short story                              | 5      | Poetry or short fiction collection | 15     |
| Essay / creative non-fiction             | 5      | Funding application                | 20     |
| Non-fiction book proposal                | 7      | Novel or full-length memoir        | 25     |

*This scorecard is designed for writing projects, but you can tailor yours to any type of art.*

Rejection Bingo is similar, but instead of counting numbers of rejections, you're scoring on *types* of rejection. Sometimes we put the gatekeepers making these calls on an imaginary throne, giving them almost superhuman powers in our minds. But they're just normal people. They might have been too hungry to concentrate on your piece when they read it. They might have just had a fight with their partner. Or they might have been really behind with their submission pile so they just skimmed over yours without looking properly—come on, we can ALL relate to being behind on our reading!

*Creative Fix*

## Rejection Bingo

Rejections are proof you're putting yourself out there. Mark them off with pride!

|                                   |                                                |                         |                                     |                                            |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Ghosted                           | Copy and paste template rejection              | Vague feedback          | Try us again another time           | Rejection came after MONTHS of waiting     |
| Ghosted after initial interest    | Rejection consists of three sentences or fewer | Useful feedback         | "Too personal / impersonal"         | "Too similar to something else"            |
| "Needs more editing"              | "Great voice, but..."                          | "Thanks, but no thanks" | "We've filled our slots"            | "Not right for our audience"               |
| "Nice, but not compelling enough" | "Too experimental"                             | "Best of luck!"         | "Too niche"                         | Spelling / grammar errors in the rejection |
| Same-day rejection                | Made it to the final round                     | Enjoyed it, but no      | "Loved the idea, not the execution" | They didn't get it                         |

Playing Rejection Bingo allows you to take a more light-hearted view of their response to you.

Head to [CreativeFix.net/readers](https://CreativeFix.net/readers) to access the scorecards.

## Consume art critically

We have a habit of comparing our messy first drafts to other artists' published works, and of course we're going to come up short. If I pull the novel I'm working on, which is very much still in the foundational stages, out of its drawer and hold it up next to *The Handmaid's Tale* (my favourite novel of all time!), then *obviously* mine is going to look considerably less impressive.

But Margaret Atwood didn't just sit down one day and spit that novel onto the page. She crafted it carefully, drafting and redrafting, over a period of two years, and only after she had given up on the previous novel she had spent ages working on.<sup>4</sup>

You cannot compare your raw work in progress to someone else's painstakingly polished diamonds.

However, it does help to notice that even the great masters of your craft are not perfect.

When you read books, look around art galleries, watch movies, listen to music, and so on, start to think like a critic. What could have made this piece *better*? What doesn't quite work about it? What doesn't fully resonate or strike the right note? How could it have been done differently?

Imagine you're a teacher, and your job is to find *something*, anything, to tell the artist they could improve.

Please don't start *telling* the creatives in question, should you be in a position to, all the ways you think they went wrong (unless they have specifically asked you to), because we all know that's not fun. But feel free to make notes on your observations to remind you that even the big names don't always completely nail it.

Also, if you ever need a reminder that no one is unassailable, do an internet search for "one star reviews of classic books". I have some sympathy for the person who described *Pride and Prejudice* as "Just a bunch of people going to each other's houses."<sup>5</sup> I mean, he does have a point...

## Create!

Ultimately, the best way to build your creative confidence is to get busy creating.

The first few pieces you produce will probably feel awkward and uncomfortable and a bit less good than you were imagining. But the next one will be easier, and you'll learn a bit more about what works, and then the next one will feel even easier and be a

bit closer to what you were aiming for.

Every piece you work on teaches you something—about your craft, and about yourself.

When I was learning to ride a horse at the age of eight, inevitably a time came when I fell off. The woman teaching me was brilliant—rather than trying to rush me to “get back on the horse” (which is really important, because a fall can drastically knock your confidence and there’s a chance you might just never ride again, but, at the same time, pushing someone after a shock can intensify the panic), she celebrated it as a right of passage. “You’re on your way!” she told me triumphantly. “Once you’ve fallen off ten times, you’re a proper rider.” Rather than feeling that I’d messed up or that this was a terrible thing to be afraid of, I suddenly saw it as an important step forward. I was now on the path to being a “proper rider”. Every fall after that felt like a milestone, not a failure.

You need to make at least 100 shit pieces of art before you have a true command of your craft.

So you’d better get going.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

Letting go of perfectionism.

### **Take:**

A piece of paper and a selection of coloured pencils, pastels or anything else you’d like to draw with.

You can also do this with paints, but make sure you cover yourself and the surface you're working on as you, and it, will get messy!

Start off by drawing or painting with your non-dominant hand (so if you normally draw with your right hand, use your left, and vice versa). Try not to draw anything in particular: you might want to draw patterns or shapes, or just let your hand move however it wants to.

Set a timer for three minutes, and commit to keeping your hand moving for that time. Change colours whenever you feel an urge.

It will feel weird and uncomfortable—just notice that and lean into it. *Obviously* you're not going to be able to draw anything brilliantly with your non-dominant hand, so you don't need to worry.

Do not stop to rub anything out or "correct" anything, just allow your hand to move across the page.

When the timer goes off, set another timer for five minutes. Now, go back to drawing, but this time close your eyes.

Feel for the edges of the paper and try to fill as much of it as you can. Don't worry about what you're drawing, just keep your hand moving.

Switch between your dominant and non-dominant hands and see how it feels different.

Change colours whenever you like, but try not to look at which colour you're picking up—just feel for the next pencil/pastel/w whatever you're using.

If you're using paints, you might want to abandon the brush altogether and use a sponge or your fingers to get fully immersed in the experience of moving the paint on the page. (Like I said, it will get messy.)

Try not to peek, but, if you do, no big deal; just close your eyes and go back to it.

When the timer goes off, take a look at what you've created.

Probably, a massive mess. Well, obviously—you had your eyes closed, what else was going to happen?!

But you might also find that you can see something in the picture: an emotion, an abstract image, an idea, or just a general vibe that conveys *something* to you. You might find you kind of like it.

Above all else, this will get you used to creating for the sake of it, just to enjoy the pure process, without any expectation or judgement around the outcome.

You cannot judge a picture you made with your eyes fucking closed, so don't even think about criticising it!

# 15

## Mindset Reframes

In this chapter:

- Challenges to internalised conditioning
- Affirmations to reprogramme your brain

\* \* \*

We've seen how thoroughly and intensively programmed we've all been by our dominant culture. That kind of conditioning isn't going to be undone overnight. So in this chapter, I want to give you some new messages and affirmations that you can go back to when that internalised voice gets loud.

The messages we've internalised have been taught via repetition and reinforced through stories. By repeating *new* messages and sharing different stories, we can reprogramme our minds to have belief in our creativity, and in the inherent worth of our voice.

By the way, if you'd like to get your own printable versions of these affirmations, or a set of printed cards, so that you can keep them as reminders, head to [CreativeFix.net/shop](https://CreativeFix.net/shop).

## Your way is the right way

There is no right way to create.

Most creatives have systems and habits that they've developed (or fallen into) over the years, and these are the processes that work for them. Sometimes, they might share their process publicly. If you come across another creative's process, you might give it a try to see if any bits of it work for you.

If these elements do not suit you, simply discard them, and move on.

Just because it worked for that person, doesn't mean it has to work for you.

It is not a failure to not be able to work in the same way as someone else. It is an inevitable consequence of you being totally unique on this planet of 8 billion people, and therefore not being the same as that other person who happened to write a book before you.

If you don't get along with a program or a practice or an approach, that doesn't say anything about your worth or talent. It simply tells you that that program or practice or approach isn't right for you.

The only "right way" is the way that works for you.

Keep experimenting and trying different approaches until you find one that feels good and gets you the results you want.

## You're not broken, the system is

If you feel like it's all too hard, too much, too weighted against you... that's because it is.

It's not a sign of failure or weakness to be struggling in this environment. It's a sign that the environment is an utter shitshow.

We have humans dying because they can't afford adequate healthcare or housing, while other humans buy islands and rent out entire cities. As a society, we are drowning in wealth, but we choose to allow some people to hoard it for themselves and leave others out in the cold.

We have more knowledge about the world than any civilisation before us could have dreamed of, yet we ignore that wisdom if it gets in the way of our own selfish goals. We are poisoning the planet that we rely on for our very existence so we can generate short-term profits.

We choose leaders who sow division and pit us against one another, rather than building communities that can support all of us. We have chosen lives of slavery to machines we created, rather than asking those machines to serve us. We claim to be a culture of individuality—where it's every man for himself—yet we don't let anyone express their individuality or *be* their full self.

We've lived through a global pandemic that we were never given space to process, we seem to be perpetually on the verge of World War III, fundamental human rights are under attack, and we're facing the possible annihilation of our entire species because we broke our planet.

I'll level with you, it's a mess around here.

So if you're struggling in all of that, I don't fucking blame you.

If you're also existing as a woman, or a gender non-conforming person, or an LGBTQIA+ person, a refugee or asylum seeker, a person of global majority ethnicity, or a neurodivergent, disabled, chronically ill or otherwise marginalised person, in a system that seems to actively hate you, then of course it's going to be even tougher.

Of course you're exhausted. Of course it's hard to do all the things. Of course it's hard to be creative and let your imagination play.

It's bound to be hard to exist and create and flourish within systems that were designed to exclude you.

But you're still doing it. And I'm so fucking in awe of you for showing up and giving it your all.

You should be proud of yourself.

You're not the problem, the system is. And you have no idea how much you're kicking its arse, even when it doesn't feel like it.

## Rest is the root, not the reward

Flashback to Chapter 12.

You don't have to earn your rest, you're not being lazy if you rest, you don't have to justify your rest.

You cannot function if you're not rested. You certainly can't make art if you're not rested.

Your brain also comes up with its best creative ideas and solutions to problems when it's operating in what's called the Default Mode Network—basically, when it's on autopilot. This state is accessed when you're doing totally mundane things that don't require conscious thought (which is why flashes of inspiration come to us all in the shower) or when you are, you

guessed it, *resting*.

Take time to rest and look after your needs. Nurture your body and your mind.

Your creativity needs it.

## Value is not measured in output

In the same spirit, I need you to stop judging yourself on how much you produce.

We're so conditioned to think our worth is based on our activity and our output. But it just is not.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again in case it didn't sink in the first time (I know all that conditioning is blocking your ears to some of the more radical ideas about your self-worth): **you are intrinsically valuable just as you are.**

You don't have to justify your place on this Earth. You don't have to earn your existence. It was gifted to you with no expectations. Your only job is to be fully *you*.

Sure, your value to billionaires and dictators might be contingent on what you can produce and consume for them, but who cares what they think? You're not here to serve them.

The universe didn't create the 1-in-400-trillion conditions necessary for you to be born for the benefit of some rich white dude in an office. Or so that you could try to be like the other 8 billion people already out there.

Your utterly miraculous nature makes you worthy and valuable all by yourself.

What you do with that one wild and precious life is entirely your own concern.

## Consistency is a capitalist plot

On that note, the idea of “consistency” is something the capitalist colonialist patriarchy cooked up to keep us all obediently working away on their behalf.

Yes, there is value in maintaining habits and showing up with regularity, but, as we’ll see in the next two chapters, “regular” is a fluid concept.

It’s OK to take time off. It’s OK to take space to dream and vision and process and absorb. It’s OK to play and experiment and explore without producing tangible outputs. It’s OK to abandon a project because you’ve learned all you needed to from it and it’s no longer serving you—sometimes we need to try out techniques or see where an idea takes us, and that is fuel for our craft and our imaginations, even if it doesn’t become *a thing*.

You don’t have to be producing “art” regularly to be an artist. Your process is your own to define, and your output will come on its own timetable.

## You’re not behind, you’re on your own path

I’m constantly seeing people on social media worrying that they’ve left it too late to write a book, or become an artist, or learn to make films.

There’s no such thing as too late. Unless you’re dead. Then, yes, you are out of time. But if you’re still alive, you’re good.

Sure, you get the odd bright young thing who makes us all feel bad about ourselves. Like R.F. Kuang, who published her first book, *The Poppy War*, at the age of just 21, and then had huge international success with *Yellowface* aged 27.

But other artists need time to live and breathe in the world

before they can step into their creative power. J.R.R. Tolkien didn't write *The Hobbit* until he was 45. Raymond Chandler didn't get going until he was 51, Annie Proulx was 57. Bram Stoker published *Dracula* at the age of 50, Richard Adams wrote *Watership Down* at 52, Anna Sewell wrote *Black Beauty* at 57, and Laura Ingalls Wilder was 65 when she started the *Little House* series.

You can't compare your journey to someone else's. You're different people, living different lives and making different art. You're being shaped by different life experiences, and, in turn, sharing different perspectives with the world.

Your art will come when it's ready. And it will mature and blossom on its own schedule.

If you're feeling the call, maybe now is the time to start.

## Slow progress is still progress

I remember, as a child, hearing the story of "The Tortoise and the Hare" and thinking it was ridiculous. Of course a hare would win against a tortoise, even if it stopped for a quick nap. And why *would* it stop for a nap mid-race?! (Honestly, I don't know how it took us all so long to figure out I was autistic...)

As an adult, having hit burnout more than once before I learned its lessons, I finally understand the point. Life is *not* a quick race, and we can't just push through it at full speed.

The hare goes tearing off, burns himself out, and then has nothing left in the tank to pursue his ambitions. The tortoise, on the other hand, knows herself. She understands and respects her pace, her limits, and her needs. She sets off slowly and steadily, approaching life in the way that suits her. And so she never crashes, never runs out of fuel. She is resourced enough

to keep on going, slowly and steadily, until she reaches her goal.

I'm learning, as a recovering productivity addict, to be more tortoise.

Sometimes small actions are all we can take, and it's easy to feel like that's not enough. We'll talk about micro goals in a bit, and you might think that this method of setting teeny tiny aspirations for yourself is laughable—how are you ever going to make progress that way?! But you do.

If you try to write 2,000 words a day, become exhausted after four days, and get so discouraged that you don't write again for six months, you will have written a grand total of 8,000 words in six months. However, if you write 100 words a day solidly for six months, you'll have around 18,000 words. You could write just 50 words a day for six months and still beat your burnout total.

It's the old adage about eating an elephant—one bite at a time.

You're not racing anyone else, you don't need to prove anything to anyone else, you're just applying yourself—gently, nourishingly—to your craft, one bite at a time.

## What makes you different makes you powerful

Since we're all deconditioning from the cult of conformity and obedience, this might be one of the biggest reframes we need, and one of the hardest to take in.

We're so used to being told we're “weird” or difficult or problematic, and we've spent our lives desperately trying to hide our differences so that we'll be accepted.

But your difference is your power.

Don't worry, this is still a “neurodivergence is a superpower”-free zone. Neurodivergent people aren't superhuman, and we're

not inherently deficient, we're just people. We have strengths and weaknesses, like all other people. But *everyone* on this planet is different, everyone is unique, and that means everyone's perspective on the world and experience of life is unique. And that's where the magic lies.

Being different is what enables you to tell a story and show a view that no one else can. Your unique viewpoint is what makes you an artist.

As I mentioned earlier, I have synaesthesia, which means that, in my head, words and sounds have colours. The word "happy" is yellow (and, funnily enough, my name, Allegra, which means "happy" or "joyful" in Italian, is also yellow). I once persuaded my husband to take a family holiday to a town in the UK because I liked the soft lavender colour of the name (we had a lovely time, so clearly this is the way we should plan all trips from now on). Some words, and therefore concepts, clearly go together (in my mind) because of the colours, whereas others clash.

No one else sees the world in the same way I do—even other people with synaesthesia will see different words as different colours (I remember quite a heated debate on social media a while ago about what colour Tuesday is... I mean, it's clearly cobalt blue). That makes my artistic response to the world unique. It makes my voice unique.

And that makes it powerful.

No one else can *you* like you can. And we want to see you *you-ing* to your fullest.

## The process is the point

Whether you're reading this book with a dream to become a full-time professional creative, or whether you just want to build up the confidence to start painting watercolours for yourself on the weekends, it doesn't matter.

In my last book, *Creativity Is Your Self-Care*, I wrote a lot about the wellbeing benefits of making art. I've already paraphrased them in this book, so I won't do it yet again, but you are now fully aware that your creative practice is great for your physical and mental health. And for your sense of connection, with other humans and the world itself.

The great thing is, you get all those amazing benefits no matter what you do with your work. You could share it with the world, only show it to a couple of trusted people, or burn it all the second you've finished it. It doesn't matter if you finish pieces or if you just experiment with techniques.

The process is the point.

Being creative is good for you. No matter how you do it or what you do with it.

Even if you do want to make a career out of it, the process will always be the most important part. You will have to finish pieces if you want to get paid for them, but, as we've discussed, money and fame and awards and five-star reviews mean nothing if you don't fully believe in and appreciate yourself. So you really need to be doing this work for the love of it. The other rewards are simply not enough on their own if you don't enjoy the process.

As with so many things in life, if you're not enjoying it, what the hell is the point?

The process is where the benefits lie, and the process is where true happiness lies. So lean into that.

Then the outputs will come much more naturally.  
Plus, you'll have a lot more fun along the way.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

Learning new conditioning.

### **Take:**

An affirmation.

You could use one from this chapter, or create your own.

Write it on a piece of paper. Make it big so that it fills the majority of the paper (it doesn't matter how big the paper is, work with whatever size feels good).

Decorate the words in any way you like—go over them in paint, draw around them with colours, doodle images or shapes around them, sprinkle them with glitter... whatever feels good.

If you like, draw or collage images or quotes around the affirmation that represent and reinforce the meaning for you.

Add any other decorations or embellishments that feel good and celebrate the central idea.

Display your affirmation somewhere you'll see it often, and try to repeat it to yourself so that it really sticks in your mind.

## Following Your Rhythm

In this chapter:

- Factors that influence your natural rhythms
- Issues that might disrupt your rhythm
- How to prepare for disruptions

\* \* \*

We've talked about the importance of rest and responding to your needs, so now, in this chapter and the next one, we're going to begin to understand what your needs actually are.

Firstly, we'll start with recognising the natural rhythms of your energy and motivation.

As human beings, we are part of nature. We have rather lost sight of that fact in our modern world that tries to distance us from the natural world as much as possible. Having invented electric lights and central heating and air conditioning and all

sorts of other ways to insulate ourselves from the elements, we've lost some of the intricate relationship we once had with the cycles of our planet. We can avoid interacting with "nature" altogether for days on end if we try, and we kid ourselves that this makes us masters of our environment.

I can't help but wonder if this has been deliberately orchestrated by a capitalist machine that wants us to view the planet as resources to be consumed, rather than the vital and mutually dependent part of our ecosystem that it truly is.

The fact that it's completely fucking up our sleep, our mental health and our physical wellbeing is something we are hellbent on ignoring. We're also turning a blind eye to the harm it's doing to our non-human neighbours. Electric lights, for example, massively screw with the migratory instincts and direction-finding abilities of birds and insects, and the bud and bloom cycles of plants and trees, endangering a whole range of species. But hey, as long as we can keep working and shopping after 5pm, it's all good, eh?!

I despair of humanity sometimes.

Anyway, ranting aside, and despite our best attempts to turn ourselves into a race of cyborgs, we are still natural beings, tied irrevocably to the cycles of the Earth.

We're not designed to be "on" all the time. Just like a tree loses its leaves in autumn so new ones can unfurl in spring, we also go through periods of growth, blooming, retreat and rest. We cycle through them a bit faster than a tree, though... we've got less time to kill.

All of us have our own personal rhythms, and these are further complicated if we also live with chronic illnesses or other fluctuating factors. But our baseline will mostly be impacted by:

- Time of day
- Seasons
- Hormonal cycles (we *all* have them, regardless of gender identity and reproductive organs, but they tend to announce themselves most loudly for people who menstruate)
- Lunar phases (some people are more susceptible than others, but there is evidence to suggest that our bodies do respond subtly to the movement of the moon)

That baseline can be disrupted by all sorts of things, but the main ones to watch out for are:

- Health
- Pain levels
- Sleep
- Diet and hydration
- Exercise
- Mood
- Types of activity

In the Divergent Creatives course, we spend some time tracking these different elements, so if you want to go deep into this, visit [CreativeFix.net/DC-readers](https://CreativeFix.net/DC-readers) to get involved. But for now, just start to notice how these different elements affect you.

## Time of day

It's super trendy right now to get up at 5am and write. All the cool writers are doing it. At least, as I mentioned in Chapter 4, that's what it felt like to me while I was writing my first book. I came across post after post on social media and what felt like a

million blogs and email newsletters about how amazing it was to get up and write first thing in the morning before everyone else was awake.

I have never been a morning person. Not ever. My mother will attest to the fact that I was a night owl from the day of my birth. I have always wanted to stay up late, I have all my energy later on in the day, and the mornings are always a struggle.

But I also have two young kids. And, at the time, I had a day job. So getting time in normal daylight hours was tricky. So I figured I'd try this 5am slot that everyone was raving about.

For the first few days, it worked fairly well. It was early summer, so the sky was inky blue when I first got up and gradually lightened to reveal a whole world outside my window while I wrote at my kitchen table with a mug of coffee and a candle. It was an enjoyable ritual, and I felt good about myself for having got a decent number of words in the bag before the day even began. At the end of the day, I had a real sense of achievement.

By Day 5, the tiredness was setting in. Having started my day at 5am and done a full day of my actual job, I was a wreck by the time my kids got home from school, and I had nothing left in the tank to give them. I also had no energy to spend time with my husband after the children went to bed—as soon as they fell asleep, I simply crawled into my own bed and passed out.

Words were getting written, certainly, but I was not having a good time, and I wasn't living the kind of life I wanted to live—one that actually involved interacting with the people I love.

Then my son, who was three at the time, decided not to sleep for two weeks, which meant no sleep for me either. Getting up at 5am ceased to be any kind of an option.

After that episode, I had to have a rethink. I remembered that

one of the most fundamental things about me is that I am not a morning person. Evenings didn't really work, either, because putting the kids to bed sent me into a sleepy, heavy state from which I found it almost impossible to fully recover.

I actually have the most energy for work in the early afternoon—around 2pm–4pm. Which, helpfully, is the time I need to pick my kids up from school. Sigh. However, whilst my true sweet spot might not be available for writing, that does show me that I do my best work when I've had time to do my ADHD faffing for the morning, get a bit of sunlight into my eyeballs, and cross a few minor things off my to do list.

Lunchtime writing sprints were born. I struggled to give myself time in the middle of the day to write because *I was supposed to be working*. But then I remembered that I work for myself, that writing a book is also work, and that everyone is entitled to a lunch break (and that we all work better if we've taken a proper break and allowed our brains to do something different for a while). Also, if I gave myself short sprints in which to write (say, 20 minutes of writing, followed by a 5 minute break; repeat once or twice), then it didn't feel so pressuring. It was just a 20 minute burst.

Now that writing is my full-time job, I still do most of my actual writing in the afternoons. The mornings are for more admin-type work, pitching, marketing, all the *business* stuff, and for self-care activities like exercise and meditation. Then I get a couple of writing sprints in after lunch before I have to go and collect the children.

Every so often, someone will pop up in actual real life or in a social media post to tell me that I should write before everyone's awake, or that I should write first thing in the morning, for *reasons*, and I will resist the urge to punch them in the face.

If you're an early bird, 5am is lovely, go for it. Get some nice candles and a cosy blanket and sit somewhere you can watch the sun come up while you work. If you're not an early bird, turn off the alarm and go the fuck back to sleep. You're only going to tire yourself out.

Try to notice when *you* have the most energy, and whether that varies across the seasons, the week, your hormonal cycle, etc. That boost you feel when you're in flow and just want to run with what you're working on for hours, *that's* the vibe you want to harness; not the irritable resentment you feel when you're yawning your way through the hour that that overly chipper yoga mum on Instagram said was going to be the most magical of the day. Fuck her. Hit the snooze button.

## Seasons

All the *love and light* influencers on Instagram talk a lot about how we are meant to slow down and retreat in winter, and come into full bloom in summer, and I don't necessarily disagree. I love nothing more than holing up at home in winter, lighting all the candles, making a fire and living under a blanket on the sofa.

*But* I also get most of my writing done in the winter. Probably because I'm not wanting to be out and about, seeing people and doing things, and because I'm happy to go to bed with a notebook at 7pm (when it's dark and I can light all the candles, I think this might actually be my favourite thing).

Something about the dreaminess of candlelight and firelight and fairy lights, and being able to see the stars and the moon overhead for a decent portion of the day encourages me in playing with ideas. So I tend to spend the autumn and winter

months hatching a lot of plans and doing a lot of scribbling.

Then, in spring and summer, I'm usually rushing around finishing and promoting whatever I started while it was dark and cold, and trying not to get distracted by other shiny ideas.

It doesn't always work out quite that straightforwardly, though. Commissions and deadlines land all through the year, and I've just spent a winter juggling loads of radio interviews (about newspaper articles I'd written) and podcast interviews (about this book). To a certain extent, you have to roll with it. But when I know that my natural inclination is to shut myself away and write through the winter, I can give myself grace when I'm finding the promotional side hard. And I can lower my "output" expectations of myself during the summer. Because if it's sunny, I'm going to be spending all my time at the beach.

## Hormones

This is more of a tricky one, and will vary greatly depending on the particular circumstances of your reproductive organs.

Broadly speaking, men have a 24-hour hormonal cycle, with testosterone levels peaking around 7am–9am and dropping in the evening. There have been studies that suggest seasonal fluctuations, and changes throughout the month, but there's less clear evidence on that.

Hormone levels for both men and women change as we age, which can severely impact mood and energy. As a perimenopausal woman, I can tell you that this particular phase of hormonal change is a whole other headfuck that you need a whole other book to guide you through. But if you're female, over 35 and struggling with any weird new symptom that's impacting your mind or your body in some way, yes, it could well

be perimenopause. (Please see your doctor to check, though.)

The menstruators amongst us are probably the most used to observing their hormonal cycles, since two or three days out of every month are pretty much a write-off. I have been bleeding from my uterus for more than 30 years, yet I still haven't worked out that when I'm feeling like life is utterly pointless, that I am utterly worthless, and that I might as well just give up on everything, it probably means I'm about to start a period. Every month I experience these thoughts as if they're brand new and absolutely valid. Then I start bleeding and realise, actually, everything's not so bad.

Everyone's cycle is different, but broadly speaking, most people find their energy levels fluctuate as follows:

- Menstrual phase (days 1–7): tired, hate everyone, want to curl up in a cocoon and eat chocolate
- Follicular phase (days 8–14): life is good again, so many things to do and see, everyone is suddenly sexy
- Ovulation (c. day 14–16): goddess energy, ready to take on the world, filled with lust at all times
- Luteal phase (days 16–25): trundling along nicely, slowing down a bit, losing interest in the lust stuff
- Late luteal phase (days 26–28): back hurts, stomach bloated, feel like a worthless failure, have nothing to wear

Theoretically, the follicular phase is the best time to come up with big ideas and start projects; you'll steadily plough through work in your luteal phase; and you want to go easy on yourself during the late luteal phase and into the menstrual phase. If you're able to plan your schedule around your period (honestly, who the hell manages that?!), then your follicular phase and

ovulation are the best times to be doing promotional talks or interviews.

However, not everyone feels the same at the same points in the cycle. Many people don't have neat 28-day cycles. Many people's cycles aren't regular. If you're a trans person or a perimenopausal person taking hormones, those will shake things up. If you have endometriosis, or PCOS, or any number of other issues in that area, that will change things again.

The best way to approach it is to start tracking your personal cycle, and make notes on how you feel at different times.

If nothing else, it will help you recognise that you're not a total failure at life and you don't need a whole new wardrobe because all your clothes look shit; you're just about to start a period.

## Lunar phases

Right, this is the least scientific part of this whole chapter (probably the whole book), but I know many people who *swear* by tracking lunar cycles, so I'm going to include it anyway.

When you think about it, the moon controls the tides, and we are around 60% water, so it's not that far-fetched to think it might have some impact on us. The changes in lunar phases affect plants and animals, so why not humans too? There are studies to suggest that human sleep, mood and even fertility are affected by the moon, and I know people who work in the emergency services who insist that they're busier on a full moon. So I'm not going to dismiss it.

The theory goes like this:

- New Moon: low energy, time for introspection, reflection

and planning

- Waxing Moon: increasing energy, time for putting plans into action
- Full Moon: peak energy, often associated with emotional intensity and restlessness, time for finalising projects and self-promotion
- Waning Moon: decreasing energy, time for tying up loose ends, letting go and resting

I would say it's worth tracking your mood and energy across the lunar cycle and seeing if you do notice any patterns from month to month.

I love working with the lunar phases—not necessarily because I think they impact me in any measurable way, but because they are a good reminder to me that I, too, am a cyclical being.

The moon is always there, right above our heads, and she flows through her cycle every single month. It's a constant, easy-to-spot reminder that we are part of nature, and that we need time to be in action and time to be at rest. We shouldn't expect to be the same all the time. We have to allow ourselves to go with the flow.

## Disruptors

It's tough to be totally clear on your natural rhythms because so many things can barge in and fuck it all right up.

I, for example, am incapable of doing any meaningful work if I'm hungry, or if I've eaten too many heavy carbs. I need lots of sleep, and my children will not accept this fact, so some days I'm a total zombie and good for nothing. I have to set alarms to remind me to drink water because otherwise I will hyperfocus,

forget, and suddenly wonder why I have a banging headache. I hate running with the fire of a thousand suns, but if I drag myself to the gym in the morning and force myself onto the treadmill, I will have much more energy and a clearer head with space for many more creative ideas afterwards. (I have seduced myself into a regular gym routine by making that the time I can blast all the heavy metal and emo music at full volume in my ear buds that I love but am not allowed to listen to at home! So now the gym is a little treat. I still hate running, though.)

These are all my personal quirks, you don't need to know them all. The point is that you will have your own gremlins to manage. Some of them will be obvious, some of them will be more subtle. It took me years to properly understand the relationship between the food I ate and my energy levels, partly because I spent years in jobs where I never stopped for proper breaks and just shoved into my face anything I could find at short notice once I started feeling shaky because my blood sugar was crashing. I'd like to say I'm on top of it now, but it's an ongoing journey.

As with the other factors, the best thing you can do is start to track your energy, mood and capacity, and notice what triggers influence you. The more aware you are of how *you* operate, the more you can plan accordingly.

## The emergency kit

Some disruptors, on the other hand, are totally out of your control. If you have health issues, there might be some elements of those issues that are completely predictable. For example, you might know that 30 minutes is the amount of time you can do artwork for, then you need to lie down for an hour. You

can get yourself into a rhythm with that. But other elements might be unpredictable. Chronic pain, for example, can flare up unexpectedly, and a flare-up might last for anywhere between a few hours and a few months. You can't plan for those sorts of cycles. You just have to ride them.

What you can do, though, is know what works when they *do* strike. You might not know *when* a pain flare-up will come, but you know that you *will* get them from time to time. So you can make notes (ahead of time or afterwards—don't put pressure on yourself to do additional work when you're in the midst of it) on what helps in that situation.

Think about the different challenges you anticipate might crop up (it could be pain flare-ups, episodes of depression, periods of being less mobile, dizziness, migraines... or it could be related to other people, like times when a child isn't sleeping well, elderly relatives that sometimes need more help, etc.).

For each challenge, ask yourself:

*What would help me?*

(Different things help in different situations. Sometimes creativity is great for reducing symptoms, processing emotions or just helping you through it; sometimes you need a break altogether. A different activity or form of self-care might be more beneficial in certain circumstances.)

*What, if anything, can I do?*

(For example, there might be simpler elements of your practice that are still manageable, like doodling in bed when you're ill instead of getting up and painting. Or certain parts of the

process might be possible when others aren't—maybe writing feels tough when you're depressed, but editing is OK. Maybe you can't write at all because your kids have kept you up all night, but playing around with paints in the evening feels therapeutic. For some situations, you won't be able to do anything except rest and recover, and that is completely fine.)

### *What will I need most?*

(More time to yourself, less sensory stimulation, frozen meals so you don't have to cook, someone to help around the house, a massive bar of chocolate stashed away... What are your needs going to look like when this situation occurs?)

Make a list for all the different situations you expect to face, and have as much as you can ready. For example, you could have a box by your bed that includes a sketchbook and pencil, for the days when the pain is so bad you can't get up, but you still want to doodle and explore ideas. Hide a bar of chocolate at the back of a cupboard for when Day 26 of your cycle rolls around...

It's easy to feel that these challenges are overwhelming, particularly when they're on top of you. But rather than focusing on what they've taken away from you and the problems they cause, focus on what you *can* do. It might not be all that much, but it's still something. It keeps you in touch with your creative practice even on tough days—which will keep you moving towards your goals *and* probably help your emotional wellbeing at a time when you need it most—and it will give you back some power in this situation.

Remember, if rest is what this particular challenge calls for, then that is part of the creative process too. You're still an artist

when you're resting, and it's a good artist who truly understands themselves and their practice who knows when they *need* to rest.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

Staying connected to your art on tough days.

### **Take:**

A box, a jar, or any container you like.

A piece of paper and a pen.

Tear the paper into strips, and, on each strip, write down one creative activity you can do when you feel like shit.

Feel free to add whatever makes sense and sounds enjoyable to you, but some potential options could be:

- Make notes, sketch, or take photos of things you can see from your window, or from where you're sitting / lying.
- Write a list poem by listing (on paper or via voice-note) items in a category of your choice. (Things that are blue. Things that float. Things that remind you of childhood. Things that taste good. Places you'd like to go. Places you have kissed a lover...)
- Lie down with a pencil in your hand and a notebook next to you. Doodle in the notebook without looking at the paper.
- Use colour and shapes to represent how you're feeling right now.

- Voice-note some ideas for your current work in progress.
- Read through something you've written recently and note (on paper or via voice-note) any ideas for changes or developments.
- Listen to some music and draw any shapes or colours that come to mind.
- Colour in a colouring sheet.

Fold up the slips of paper and put them in your container.

When you have a rough day, pull a slip out at random so you can still engage with your creativity without having to come up with an idea.

You could keep a notebook / sketchbook, pens, pencils or any other materials you require in your container so that they're also ready for you when you need them.

If you like, decorate your container in a way that will lift your spirits and/or comfort you when you're feeling low.

## Understanding YOUR Way

In this chapter:

- Questioning the “shoulds” we internalise about creativity
- Getting to know your unique needs
- Finding approaches that work for you

\* \* \*

I’ve banged on a fair bit about how there is no “right” way, but there’s a surprising amount of assumptions about how creativity “should” be done that we internalise so deep within our psyches that we believe they are fundamentals. That this is just *how it is*.

I want to point some of these out so that you can begin to understand that they are not, in fact, key parts of the creative process. There are, actually, very few key, foundational elements to this business—you truly can do things however the fuck you want.

Once you realise how many things you have been telling yourself you *need* to do even when they don't work for you, you start to free yourself to think about what *does* work for you, and how you can do things in a way that truly meets your needs.

## Questioning the fundamentals

We all have our own unspoken “rules” in the backs of our minds, and sometimes we don't even realise we think of them as rules until we find it difficult or uncomfortable to follow one, and we immediately experience guilt or shame that we're not doing it right, or our internal voice whispers, *you **have** to do it that way*.

Start to notice when these internal messages pop up for you, and question them. Does it *really* have to be done that way? Why do you think that is? Is it just because other people do it that way? Did someone tell you that was the right way? What would happen if you did it differently? It's unlikely the world would end, so you might as well give it a go...

These are some of the most common “shoulds” I see fucking up people's creativity.

## I should have a plan

There's a lot of discussion in the fiction-writing community about “planning vs pantsing”; plotting out and structuring a novel vs just sitting down with a blank page and winging it by the seat of your pants. Even the most committed “pantsers”, however, seem to feel that some kind of a plan is necessary. It is sort of accepted wisdom that one must have some kind of plot outline before one begins writing.

I'm not so sure, though.

I did plot out my novel before I started writing it, and now it's about something totally different to what it was about when I wrote that outline. So the outline has gone in the bin. Sometimes you do need to start writing (or drawing, or painting, or weaving, or sculpting, or...) to see what wants to come through. Michelangelo reportedly said, "Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." Some of us just need to hack away at that stone until we find the statue.

Some brains respond well to careful preparation, which allows them to be productive with their creative time. If you like structure, it can be incredibly helpful to set out a clear plan for your piece of work that will guide you through, step by step. You might also like to end a creative session by writing detailed notes on what you'll do *next* session, so that your brain doesn't have to work too hard when you first sit down; you can just *go*.

For other people, though, planning can actually be destructive. Some brains simply hate planning. For many neurodivergent people, for example, plotting a story in advance provides the same dopamine release as actually writing it. Then they feel like they've already done the task, so the idea of having to do it *again* (or what feels like again) in order to actually write the damn thing seems unbearably painful. Which means the carefully plotted story never gets written. For some, the magic is in exploring an idea and seeing where it takes them.

If you're not sure which you are, try experimenting with both approaches, and see which one feels most enjoyable and produces the best results.

## I should have a routine

As we saw previously, consistency is a capitalist plot.

Some people need a regular routine. They need to sit in the same chair at the same time on the same days each week and work for the same amount of time each day. This helps them to create regular habits, and to feel comfortable with the flow of life. If that's you, set a timetable and stick to it.

Other people hate routine. It makes life feel too prescriptive, and sucks the joy from the task. They find themselves not wanting to do it, because they feel they have to, or they turn up to the practice feeling irritable or resentful. Which is not conducive to great work. If your daily planner is making you feel claustrophobic, chuck it in the bin.

Then there are the people who would prefer a routine, but their lives won't allow for one. It's important to recognise whether you're someone who truly works best without a routine, or whether you would benefit from a routine but implementing one is hard right now because of circumstances. If it's the latter, there may be ways to create a routine that you can be flexible with.

## I should work on a computer

This might seem incredibly specific, but it is a surprisingly common issue that I find people beating themselves up about.

It's mostly a problem for writers. Because the finished piece will need to be in a digital format for submission or sharing, they feel they must *create it* in a digital format. I run writing retreats where people tell me, quietly and apologetically, that they'll be writing on paper, even though they "know that's not the right

way to do it”. Pardon me? That’s the way it has been done for centuries, how are we labelling it as wrong?!

There are so many fancy apps and gadgets now to support you with your art (especially writing), that it does feel a little like you’re behind the times if you’re still using something as archaic as a pen. But I don’t care. The great thing about PDA is that I am immune to peer pressure, so I still don’t have Scrivener, no matter how many people tell me it is *vital*. It can’t be that vital, or no books would have been written prior to 2007. And I’m fairly sure we had books before then. It is, undoubtedly, useful for a lot of people, but I feel like the time it would take me to learn to use the damn thing is probably equivalent to the time it would take me to just write my damn book. So I’m going to do that instead.

This is just my personal preference—don’t send me hate mail if you love Scrivener. Or Evernote, another one I hear people rave about. I know many a neurodivergent person who loves the fact that a digital tool allows them to keep track of everything, because otherwise key elements would become invisible and thus disappear from their awareness. But I personally prefer the old-fashioned approach of covering my walls in post-it notes, like the Murder Board out of *Only Murders in the Building*. As is the theme of this chapter—and, indeed, this whole book—you do you. Each to their own.

I love writing with pen and paper. I love the sensory feel of it. Especially for fiction. My laptop does not inspire me. My pen is the magic wand that will conjure up characters and worlds from the ether. However old hat it may seem, all my first drafts are written in a notebook. I then type them up onto my computer, and that is my first round of edits—transferring my scribbles onto the keys gives me a chance to reread and review what I’ve

written. I also read “out loud in my head” (as in, I hear my voice, in my mind, reading the words when I read off the page, which I didn’t realise was a neurodivergent thing until recently, and I still don’t understand how people read *without* doing that, but there you go), and that’s very helpful for appraising the flow and impact of sentences. Reading your work aloud is a great way to see where you need to make changes. So the paper first draft is an important part of my process.

At the other end of the scale, let me tell you about one coaching client I worked with. She had been trying to write her second book, but came to me because she was feeling blocked. The first one had flowed easily, so she couldn’t understand why she was stuck with this project. When we dug into it, it turned out she had written her first book in the Notes app on her phone—her circumstances at the time left her no other choice. When that book did well, and she decided to write another, she bought herself a nice new laptop. And promptly stopped being able to write.

My client felt she *had* to use the laptop—that’s what “proper” writers do, after all, and she’d spent all this money on it now. But, for whatever reason, she wasn’t vibing with it. We did some work on her internalised beliefs, and I encouraged her to give her Notes app another go. She did, and the words started flowing again.

Personally, I would hate writing on a phone; the tiny little screen gives me a headache. But it’s the perfect method for her. Everyone is different, and so everyone needs different tools.

My rule with any fancy apps or tools or technologies is this: if they help you, they’re great; if they don’t support your particular process, sack them off. Regardless of what all the cool kids say. You’re an artist, sweetheart, you’re not supposed to be one of

the cool kids. We are the weirdos and the outcasts. (And yes, that's another "should" that you can feel free to challenge.)

I need to do my research first

This is an interesting one. I hear a *lot* of people telling me that they need to thoroughly research a topic before they can explore it in their work.

Sometimes, this is true. Sometimes, it's an avoidance tactic.

Figuring out which it is isn't always easy. If research helps you to feel inspired, and a bit of study sparks ideas that move you to your canvas (or your notebook, or your laptop, or whatever), then maybe you're research motivated. If, however, you've amassed stacks and stacks of research, spent a fortune on online courses and filled notebook after notebook with other people's ideas, but still haven't managed to create anything yourself, maybe you're hiding behind the research because you're afraid to start. In which case, head back to the fear chapter and have a chat with your Fear Fairy about that.

Whether your work involves real people / settings or not, it can be helpful to inform that work with research that will help you bring details to life. But you don't necessarily have to do that research up front. Some people find their ideas *within* the research. But others create their first draft fuelled purely by their own imagination, and then go looking for research to inform details later.

If you've never worked with research before, you might want to try finding similar real life stories, people or settings to those you're exploring in a piece to see what it can bring to your work. But don't use that as an excuse not to start your own piece.

It's a similar situation when it comes to "learning the craft".

You can spend years (and a great deal of money) on classes and courses and books and mentors, and some of it might be really helpful. But it's easy to use all that study as a reason to avoid getting started. And sometimes trying out techniques and exploring ideas is your best teacher. It's great to keep looking for opportunities to learn, but you can never learn everything, so don't wait until you've "completed" your studies to get going. You'll wait forever. Start playing around with what you know now, and you can always make changes later when you know more.

## Getting to know your brain

Finding out that I was autistic and ADHD felt like such a huge relief.

I finally understood why I am the way I am. I had a name for my challenges and my strengths and my tendency to end up with eight half-drunk glasses of water all around the house. All those little habits and quirks suddenly made sense, like this knowledge pulled all the messy, scribbly lines of me into a defined shape—everything added up to a coherent whole. Most significantly, I could see that it wasn't my fault that certain things had been harder for me than for other people: I wasn't lazy, or broken, or not trying hard enough; I was wired this way.

And once I understood my wiring, I could work with it instead of against it. Which made life a hell of a lot easier.

Don't get me wrong, there was a lot of grief and stress that came with the claiming of this identity. A lot of, *how different would my life have been if I'd known sooner?* That hurts like hell.

There was also a whole load of internalised ableism that I'm still working to let go of, which makes me wary of being fully

open about my long list of labels. When I say I'm autistic and ADHD and disabled *and* live with depression and anxiety, I immediately think I'm making myself sound like a right hopeless case. I know that's just because of how society frames those things—I'm also happily married, I'm making a name for myself as a writer, I've won awards for entrepreneurship and had a very successful career, I have two awesome children, I own a lovely house by the sea, I do a lot of work for charity, I have great friends... honestly, I have a pretty awesome life. But somehow that all seems to be eclipsed by words like "disability" and "mental illness".

Once you recognise that our society works hard to demonise people that it suspects might not be sufficiently profitable for the system—which has (not accidentally) made us want to try to hide any health or wellbeing issues, or any challenges we experience fitting in with the status quo, and try to be as productive, and therefore profitable, as possible to appear "acceptable"—then you can reframe your conception of your own disability. You begin to understand that being disabled, or neurodivergent, or living with any kind of health issue (mental or physical) is *not* a deficiency; it's a normal part of the ups and downs of life. It's just that the capitalist machine does not make space for challenges, does not wish to allow for rest or care or mutual support, because those things undermine its control over us.

Knowing that is all well and good, but these messages are pretty deeply ingrained in our brains, and I still haven't weeded them out altogether.

If you're still going through the process of accepting your diagnosis (or self-diagnosis), working through the grief for the person you thought you were and the person you could have

been, and dealing with your own internalised ableism (and the rest of the world's outward ableism), then I see you. It's not a quick or easy process, and sometimes you think you're over it and then more emotions surface for you to work through. Go gently with yourself.

I find community really helpful—connecting (in real life or online) with other neurodivergent people and sharing experiences makes you feel less alone, and shows you that you're not so weird: loads of other people rehearse conversations in their head that they might never actually have in real life, too. You're always welcome in the Creative Fix community—we can all laugh about our little quirks and rage against the machine together.

Creativity, of course, is also a great tool for processing your thoughts and feelings. But do seek professional help from a therapist or coach if you need more support. It's a lot to hold, and, despite what the world might have told you, it's very much OK to have someone to help you carry it.

But after all that—the pain and the freedom of knowing why you are the way you are—comes the much bigger question. *Who, actually, are you?*

## How to unmask

When you've been masking—pretending to be neurotypical, desperately trying to blend in—for most of your life, it becomes hard to separate yourself from the mask. How much of you is truly this way, and how much is this an act you've been putting on for the benefit of other people?

The process of unmasking, and learning who you are beneath the mask, is an incredibly long and complex one, and not one

that I can really cover in a small section of a book about creativity. Check out the Further Reading section for some great books that might be helpful in this area.

What I can do, though, is give you a few ways to think about who your *artist self* is, at their core, when no one is telling you how you *should* be doing life.

### *What feels uncomfortable?*

As neurodivergent people (especially women and people of marginalised gender identities), we've been taught not to listen to our bodies and to override our own discomfort. Slowly, we need to relearn how to listen to our physical signals again.

Notice when something feels wrong. Is there a tightness in your chest? A twisting in your stomach? A knot in your throat? Your body has its own way to signal to you that you're not in a zone that feels safe.

Keep track of what situations, or environments, or working methods trigger that response from you. If a certain approach feels wrong, it probably is wrong *for you*.

### *What if no one was watching?*

Start to recognise how differently you approach a task or an activity when other people are around (or when you're sharing your process publicly, say on social media) compared to when you're on your own.

If you change your behaviour in front of others, that could well be a masking tactic rather than the way you would prefer to work.

### *Who is telling you to do that?*

Get curious about the different elements of your process. Question why you do something the way you do. Experiment with doing it differently.

If you hear a voice in your head telling you that you *have* to do it that way, approach it with interest rather than judgement. Whose voice is saying that? Where have you heard that before? Is it *really* true? What would happen if you *didn't* do it that way?

Allowing yourself to play with rules and experiment with your process will let you test out what really *does* work for you, and what is actually a self-imposed restriction that is needlessly holding you back.

### *What did you used to love?*

Think back to what you used to passionately enjoy, that you put away because you thought it wasn't a valid interest or it was a waste of time or other people would judge you for it.

You don't necessarily have to take it up again if you've moved on, but what does it tell you about yourself?

As a teenager, I was obsessed with the occult. I read Tarot cards and I had about a million candles and a variety of herbs to make spells with. I put all that away because I thought it wasn't "serious" enough when I was in my 20s. Recently, I've fallen back in love with it all again, and realised there is a significant part of me that is interested in the dark shadows of life and deeply connected to nature, that I had been shutting away. Letting her back out of the closet has taken my creative practice in a new direction that I'm very much enjoying! I've been working with mythology (a topic I was fascinated by as

a child) a lot in my writing and my art, and discovering art techniques that integrate magick practices and nature. So much fun (for me, anyway).

*Who do you feel safe with?*

We usually mask to protect ourselves from criticism or judgement or aggression. Finding people who you feel comfortable enough to be yourself with is important, because you can't unmask if you don't feel safe.

To work creatively as your authentic self, joining a community (in person or online) that understands and supports neurodivergent creatives could be really valuable. Not only will you feel more comfortable to show up as yourself, but you can listen to ways other people work and you might find some tips you can try out in your own practice.

Masking isn't necessarily bad

We talk about unmasking because we want to unlearn behaviours that we've adopted purely for the benefit of other people if they're stifling our true selves. But we don't have to unmask *everything*.

Some masking behaviours can be helpful. We do, all of us, neurodivergent and neurotypical alike, have to get on with other people in a collaborative society, so adapting our natural impulses to suit others isn't always a bad thing. But that should go both ways—others can also, usually, adapt to make space for our authentic behaviours, like stimming, or wearing noise-cancelling headphones, or chatting about our special interests even if it's not someone they're personally that into.

You don't need to beat yourself up for masking, or think that you're being somehow false or inauthentic if you mask in certain ways. You're adapting to your environment in the way that best suits you, and that's entirely sensible.

If, however, masking behaviours are causing you problems and stopping you from living life in a way that feels comfortable (and, in this case, stopping you from making your art in the best way for you), that's when it's a good idea to find ways and spaces that you can safely unmask.

Remember, it's always a good choice to get professional support if you would find that helpful.

## In defence of comfort zones

Just a quick word on comfort zones.

The gurus and online influencers go on a *lot* about pushing you outside your comfort zone. *If you're not living on the edge you're taking up too much room*, and all that bollocks. But comfort zones are there for a reason—that's the zone in which you flourish.

*Sometimes* it's good to push yourself. If you're missing out on experiences or opportunities because you're playing safe, you might want to challenge yourself a little. It is possible that you're using the idea of safety and security as an excuse not to go after your dreams, and it would be sad if you missed out on your life because you were afraid.

But you shouldn't be living permanently outside your comfort zone. I am fully in favour of spending at least 75% of life feeling comfortable. Comfortable is nice. We don't have to be relentlessly challenging and stretching ourselves, we don't have to be growing and improving every second of every day. It's perfectly fine—I would say even aspirational—to spend days,

weeks, even months just smelling the flowers, feeling the sun on your skin (if that's your bag) and feeling perfectly *content*.

When it comes to your needs, meeting them consistently is a good thing. You don't need to push yourself to go without something that regulates you, you don't need to push yourself into environments or activities that overload your system. It's called a "comfort zone" because it's where you feel safe and confident and fulfilled, and that is hardly a state to avoid!

On the occasions that it is worth pushing yourself out of your comfort zone (and sometimes it will have to be done), make sure you have an environment and activities that regulate and re-source you waiting for you to return to. A little challenge does us good sometimes, but then we get a cosy reward to nurture us afterwards.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

When you doubt your personal approach.

### **Take:**

A "rule" about creativity.

Make a list of "rules" that seem utterly fundamental to your craft, *especially* if a little voice whispers to you that you "should" be doing it. Go right down to the basics, even something as simple as, "a writer has to write words".

Choose one of those rules. It could be totally at random, or one that gives you a particularly strong feeling of guilt.

Jot down a few ideas for how you could approach things differently. Maybe a writer doesn't have to write words, at least not all the time. Maybe they can use voice recognition software to dictate their work. Maybe they can make "notes" in the form of doodles, sketches or collages. Maybe they act out scenes from their work in progress (in reality, or in their mind).

Choose one of those rule-breaking different approaches (whichever one most appeals to you), and try it out.

Enjoy breaking a rule, just for the sake of it.

Use this experience as a reminder that *no* rule is sacred when it comes to creativity. You can always find a different path.

## Low-Demand Habits

In this chapter:

- Building a creative habit that suits your needs and lifestyle

\* \* \*

I know I've railed a *lot* against the productivity gurus and influencers, but in this chapter I want to offer you a few productivity approaches that are more likely to work for neurodivergent people, and those who are low on time and energy.

As with any advice I hand out, feel free to give it a go if you like the sound of it, and discard it if you find it doesn't work for you. Your creative process is trial and error. If an approach doesn't work, that tells you something useful about what else might work better.

## Habit stacking

I haven't actually read *Atomic Habits* by James Clear (I know, I must be one of only about 12 people), because I fear there will be a lot of the kind of productivity advice that just makes me depressed about myself. I have considered buying it about 17 times though, because I still yearn for that magical hack that is going to change everything for me. Sigh.

I *have*, however, seen a talk by Clear in which he went through some of the techniques that he shares in the book, and one did jump out at me as potentially useful for neurodivergent people: habit stacking.

Essentially, this involves attaching an activity that you want to *become* a habit to an activity that already *is* a habit. If you eat breakfast every morning, that is so deeply programmed into you by now that you don't have to think about it—you get up, and move immediately to the kitchen. So if you plan to draw for ten minutes after you've finished your breakfast, for example, you're making that part of your normal routine. Your autopilot task (eating breakfast) starts to act as a nudge towards your desired task (drawing). You may need to set a few reminders on your smart device of choice, or put post-it notes on your cereal box for a bit until it sinks in, but after a while you'll be so used to drawing after breakfast that it will seem non-negotiable. Then you beat that little monster that whispers that you should be getting on with something else before you do your drawing.

The key with establishing a habit is to give your brain a strong signal that now is the time to do the thing. In this instance, we need our brain to feel "it's drawing time now", so that it won't try to get us to do something else. That primes you to feel the urge to do the thing, which makes you feel good about yourself,

which makes you want to do it more, so that next time you get that cue, the urge to do it will feel even stronger. That, according to James Clear, anyway, is how you reinforce your drawing habit.

## Rewards

Rewards are a sticky topic in the “productivity” space.

Before I get into the details of the debate, you need to understand the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic rewards.

**Extrinsic** motivation comes from outside you: I’ll work on this project because then I’ll get a pay rise; I’ll do my homework because I’ll get a cookie afterwards.

**Intrinsic** motivation comes from within: I’ll write this novel for the sheer joy of writing; I’ll make this painting for the satisfaction of seeing my idea come to life.

Received wisdom goes that we should nurture intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic, because extrinsic motivation fades pretty damn fast and isn’t likely to be very resilient. This makes logical sense—surely you’re far more likely to be motivated to do something because the outcome is meaningful to you, rather than to get a sticker? Well, you would think.

It doesn’t quite work like that with a lot of neurodivergent people, though. For many of us, intrinsic motivation can feel quite pressuring. When something feels very meaningful, we get overwhelmed at the thought of how big it is, whether we might mess it up, what people will think of us (or it), and so forth. Sometimes intrinsic motivation can paralyze us.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is much lower pressure. It also lacks any of the “you *must* do this” that intrinsic motivation can carry, and which sets off our PDA senses. A lot of neurodivergent people respond really well to stickers and treats.

Intrinsic motivation isn't to be thrown out altogether—it's what will sustain you through long-term projects, and keep you coming back through challenges. But if you find it pressuring (a good sign is that you're avoiding actually working on your project even though you really want to), then it might be better to place it more in the background.

Get yourself a sticker chart (yes, even if you're 57). Or put a sticker or draw a star in your journal or on your calendar every time that you sit down to draw, or write, or whatever you're trying to do. Every time you get to five stickers / stars (or ten, or whatever suits you), give yourself a little treat. You could get yourself a cake, let yourself have a takeaway for dinner, take yourself for a wander around a museum, or buy yourself a new notebook. Whatever works.

Maybe you get an even bigger treat when you get to 20 / 30 / 50 stickers. Make the rules to suit yourself. Get yourself that little dopamine boost that celebrates the fact that you showed up.

If you feel the thrill of that wearing off, that's when you go back to boosting your intrinsic motivation with things like reminding yourself how far you've come and how much you've learned, remembering why you started in the first place and why this work is meaningful to you, and visualising the outcome of finishing the project. But don't dwell on that too often if it seems scary.

## Gamification

Similarly to how rewards programme your brain with dopamine, gamification is a fantastic way to build a habit.

Social media platforms and digital games use this approach

for evil—those leaderboards and checklists and pops of engagement are deeply addictive, and keep you attached to your phone. But we can take back the power and use it to hook us into our creative practice instead.

Making your creative practice into a game makes it feel fun and enjoyable, which is always going to be an easier sell when you're trying to make yourself do it. It also increases your focus and gives you a sense of achievement.

There are lots of ways to gamify your process, which you can tailor to your work and your preferences, but here are some suggestions:

- Write for 10 minutes, then see if you can write more words in the next 10 minutes
- Give yourself 5 points for each finished page, 10 points for each finished chapter—those points could add up to some kind of reward
- Roll a dice to decide what to draw today
- Unlock rewards for streaks (e.g. paint for five days, get to watch that new movie)
- Compete with a friend (if that sort of thing doesn't stress you out)—you each have to produce a poem a week, and if one of you doesn't, that person has to buy the coffees when you meet up!

## Process goals

When we set goals in our creative practice, we usually start with a milestone goal. We're thinking about the end product. Milestone goals are things like, *I want to write a novel*, or *I want to finish writing Section One*, or *I will write 1,000 words*. These goals

focus on the output of your work. They make sense, because you can imagine what it is you want to achieve, and you'll know you've hit your goal when you have the thing you said you wanted.

The trouble is, these goals can feel completely overwhelming. *Write a novel* is a pretty intimidating instruction, so when you issue it to your brain, it freaks out and shuts down. Even if you start out on Day 1 of Project Write a Novel happily tapping away towards this goal, by Day 83, when you still have not, in fact, written a novel, you're likely to start feeling discouraged. You *still* haven't hit your goal and, even though, logically, you knew it would take a long time, your emotional reaction is to feel that you're failing.

I present to you, the process goal.

A process goal is not concerned with what you produce, only with the process itself. A process goal is something like, *I will write for 15 minutes*. It doesn't matter what you write, it doesn't matter if it's any good, it doesn't even matter if it makes sense. If you spend 15 minutes writing *something*, then you've hit your goal. They're much less scary, feel much more manageable for your brain, and can be flexible around your needs.

You might start out with the overall goal of writing a novel, but if you show up to your writing days asking yourself to just write for 15 minutes (or 30 minutes, or an hour), rather than asking yourself to write a certain number of words, it's likely to feel much easier to get going and much easier to get that all-important hit of dopamine for a mission accomplished.

Time limits are helpful because they reduce the pressure to hit a certain output, and they're a manageable container for your brain to comprehend. They don't have to be measured in actual time, though. You could write for the length of three songs, or

draw for the time it takes the kettle to boil. Whatever works for you.

## Tiny goals

If you're still building up your confidence, you're just getting back into your creative practice, or if you're going through a difficult period because of health, wellbeing or life issues, then even process goals can feel intimidating.

That's when we use tiny goals.

Think of the absolutely smallest thing you could ask of yourself:

- Open the document on your computer
- Reread what you wrote last time
- Take out your sketchbook
- Draw one line
- Make one mark of colour
- Write one sentence

Choose something incredibly simple. It might sound pointless, but you're gently building a muscle that's weakened or sore. You're giving yourself a dopamine hit for achieving your goal, and you're showing yourself that you *can* stay connected to your creative practice. Over time, that showing up becomes a dependable habit, and you feel able to stretch the muscle a little further.

Sometimes, momentum will take over. You'll write one sentence, and then 50 more will flow. But sometimes you'll stop at that one sentence. It's really important that you allow that to be enough. If you set your tiny goal with the intention

of actually pushing beyond it, your brain will smell bullshit and won't trust you.

You wrote your one sentence. You showed up, you get a sticker. That can be enough for now.

## Non-linear progress

Despite what you may have been taught at school, you do not have to start at the beginning and work your way through to the end. Creative progress simply doesn't (have to) work that way.

Start wherever you feel called to. Start with the bit that feels most interesting or enjoyable *right now*.

Perhaps you'll write for a few weeks, then take a break from writing to work on some edits, or to storyboard the next section. We tend to think we have to get all the way through one type of task before we can start the next (like, we have to write the book before we can edit it), but that isn't necessarily true.

Work with your energy and your mood, as well. Some days you'll feel like being wildly creative and playing with new ideas, other days you'll want to focus on redrafting and structuring. Go with your own flow.

## Ritual over routine

I've talked already about how trying to force a regular routine can be stressful, overwhelming and a sure-fire way to activate PDA.

If you're the kind of person who thrives on routine, go with it. Give yourself set times and days, go to the same place each time, work with the same tools, have your favourite mug and your favourite snack and do what makes you feel good.

If you're not a routine person, ritual is the way forward.

Rituals are more flexible, but they still give your brain that signal that it is time to create. You don't have to do them at fixed times, it doesn't matter if you skip a whole bunch of days, a ritual is *always* there for you to come back to.

A ritual is simply a way of creating space for your creative time. It eases the transition into your creative activity, and allows you to take a pause and set an intention before you begin.

A ritual can be anything you want it to be, but some of my favourite ingredients include:

- Lighting a candle
- Burning essential oils or incense
- Stretching
- Breathwork
- A short meditation
- Whispering a mantra or affirmation
- Stating an intention

You can also have a closing ritual to help you transition back into normal life, which can simply involve blowing out your candle or oil burner, stretching and stating, "*That is enough for today.*"

## Devotion over dedication

People talk a lot about "dedication" to a practice or habit, but the word dedication sounds a lot like hard work!

If I talk about my *dedication* to the craft of writing, it carries (in my mind, at least) connotations of showing up every day, making strong progress, always making more progress than I did the day before, always pushing, striving... just, generally,

*effort.*

We've talked a lot about how our brains are simply going to rebel if we're asking them to do something that sounds utterly miserable. So I prefer to frame my approach to my craft as *devotion*.

Devotion does not require effort. Devotion is something you carry inside you, even if you're not actively *doing* anything. You can be devoted to writing, and not have written a word for months, because your words are slowly brewing in your soul.

You can show up to a practice you are devoted to in whatever soft, gentle way feels right. You can show up with ritual, and kindness, and grace, because that's how devotion operates.

Devotion comes from the heart, and that will always win over the head.

## Variety is the spice of life

A lot of productivity experts will tell you that, in order to achieve your goals, you have to pick *one* thing, stick with it, and see it through to the end before you move on to the next thing.

In response to this idea, imagine me laughing maniacally in ADHD.

Some of us need to focus on one thing at a time, certainly. But some of us do not, will not, and cannot.

If your brain craves novelty (I'm mostly looking at my ADHD peeps), then sticking with one long-term project exclusively for *ages* is the fastest route to boredom and abandonment. If this sounds like you, it is perfectly acceptable (if not preferable) to have a few projects on the go at once. That way, if your enthusiasm for one just isn't there today, you can work on another one, and come back to the first one when it's regained

its shiny attraction.

Similarly, if you have unpredictable health and/or energy, you might benefit from having different types of projects available to you. On days when you feel well, for example, you might want to spend a few hours writing your novel. But on days when you can't get out of bed, you can add to the mandala you've been drawing. On days when you feel depressed, you can sink into the cosy mindfulness of knitting another square of your blanket. It's all about understanding your needs and what suits you in different situations.

As a side note, at [CreativeFix.net/shop](http://CreativeFix.net/shop), you can download a Project Planner to help you keep track of multiple projects.

## Switch it up

Speaking of the benefits of variety, switching up the media you're using is a great way to get unstuck when you hit a creative block.

Having trouble writing about the details of a character? Try sketching them, or making a collage of things they love.

Not sure what should come next in your story? Create a "soundtrack" for it by curating a playlist of songs that evoke the mood or events for you.

Again, you can adjust to suit ups and downs with your health or life. When writing feels too much, try voice to text. When drawing feels too much, try collage.

Give yourself space to experiment and try different approaches. Just the change alone can unlock brand new ideas or connections in your mind, and it allows you to show up to your practice in a way that feels comfortable, rather than feeling like you've failed because you couldn't stick to the original plan.

Rules (and plans) are made to be broken, after all.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you worry that you're "not doing enough".

**Take:**

A project you've been working on previously (it doesn't matter if you haven't touched it for *ages*), or been wanting to start.

Look at what you've done so far (or think about your vision for it, if it's not yet begun).

What's one *tiny* thing you can add to it right now?

One word, one line, one stitch, one pin, one note to your future self. Add *one tiny thing*. Just one.

That's enough for today.

Congratulations, you made progress.

## Leading With Joy

In this chapter:

- The importance of actually *enjoying* your creative practice
- Why joy is a radical act

\* \* \*

Look, the reality is, you're probably not going to become a millionaire off the back of your art. (Although you might—never say never!) It's definitely not a get-rich-quick kind of situation.

The creative life isn't easy. It's full of rejection and setbacks and frustrations. People will misunderstand your work. You'll spend a lot of time working, alone, on something that may or may not ever see the light of day. Sometimes you'll pour your heart into something and three people will see it. One of them will be your mother, and she'll give you the kind of bland pleasantries that stab you in the soul. (No, Mum, I'm not talking

about you.)

So why the fuck do we do it?

Well, if you're not doing it because you absolutely bloody *love* it, then all of that really won't feel particularly worth it. If you're doing this for the money, or the fame, or because you were told you had natural talent that you should utilise, or to prove Mr Smith from Year 8 art class wrong, then it's going to feel like one long, lonely, miserable slog.

You need to love it. That's the only reward you can count on.

Don't get me wrong, there are loads of great things about a creative life, and a creative career if you choose to pursue one. But the fulfilment, sense of self-expression, emotional regulation, community and feeling of achievement all hinge on you enjoying it in the first place. Even money and recognition feel pretty hollow and soul-destroying if you don't enjoy the way you earn them (as someone who had a highly paid marketing career for years, I beg you to trust me on that one!).

## Find your joy

The first thing we do in the Divergent Creatives course is find the joy in our practice.

Why, then, is this almost the *last* thing I'm talking about in the book?!

You've been on quite a journey with me over the previous 18 chapters, and I think now you're ready for joy.

When people come to the Divergent Creatives course, they're ready to make a change. They've been wrestling with their creative practice for a while, and now they've hit a point where they understand that they need a different approach. They know this matters to them, and they're prepared to do whatever it

takes. They just need some help figuring out what that is!

I wrote this book because I know many people aren't there yet. A lot of people are still questioning whether they're allowed to "indulge" in their creativity, whether art is a worthwhile pursuit, and whether they're simply "not good enough". I know, because I was there not so very long ago. I know it can be hard to invest your time and energy into your creative habit if you don't believe you *deserve* a creative habit, or that no good could come from you having one.

Hopefully, over the course of this book, I've convinced you that you *are* worthy, and so is your art. Not just that you *deserve* a creative practice, but that the world *needs* you to be creative, even if you choose never to share your work with another person.

So now, I think you're ready. Ready to recapture the joy. To reclaim that spark that attracted you to the creative life in the first place.

Joy is radical. The system doesn't want you to be joyful—miserable people are much easier to sell stuff to. How can you be convinced to buy solutions to fix your life and yourself if you're pretty happy with your lot? How can you be coerced into working harder and harder, way beyond your capacity or what is reasonable to ask of you, in order to better your life, if you like the life you have? Joyful people are dangerous.

Joyful people are harder to manipulate. It's fear and anger that allow people to be convinced that a particular marginalised group is responsible for all the world's problems. People who feel lost and unanchored can be drafted into high-control groups, and directed to behave in a way that suits the leadership. People who have found ways to create and sustain joy for themselves aren't seeking something outside themselves, and they're certainly not looking for an enemy. They're open to

connection and *sharing* the joy. Our system hates that.

So your joy isn't only useful for your craft, it's a vital component in the movement to create a better world.

If you're trying to rediscover your joy in creativity, here are a few questions to ask yourself. I recommend journaling, voice-noting or doodling the answers:

- Why did I start writing / making art / [insert creative activity here] in the first place?
- What do I most enjoy about this activity?
- When do I feel most engaged with this activity?
- What's the thing that I feel most proud of or enthusiastic about related to this activity?
- What would life be like if I could focus more of my time on this activity?

Take some time to reflect on what your answers tell you about where you find joy in your creative work, and how you can cultivate more of that.

If something's not bringing you joy, or it's working against your enjoyment of your practice, what can you do to change it?

## When the joy runs out

Sometimes you come to your practice and it just doesn't feel joyful.

It might feel like a chore. Maybe you have to drag yourself to your desk. Maybe you feel physical resistance in your body. Maybe you even feel a sense of dread or panic at the thought of working on your art.

In that case, we need to pause and restrategise. What's going

on here?

Is this a one-off?

Maybe you're tired. You could be coming down with a cold. Perhaps your boss was a dick today and now you're all out of sorts. Maybe Mercury's in retrograde. Some days, you just feel off-kilter.

If this is the first time you've felt like this in a while, maybe you just need a break today. You could rest in a way that still nurtures your creativity (read a book, watch a movie, go for a walk and tell the trees about your story, play with paints, knit in front of the TV, build a Lego house...), or you could just have a nap.

Don't assume there's a major problem just because you don't feel like doing the work today. It's really OK to have a day off!

Is it the project?

Do you really want to be working on this project right now?

If you've been creating something for a while—writing a novel, painting a series, knitting a jumper—it can feel like you have to stick with it and get it done. But you know, by now, that that's not true.

Maybe you need a break from this project. If you've been focusing on this, and only this, for a long time, you might be feeling a little tired of it. And that's OK. Maybe this particular creative work is starting to get repetitive. A change, as they say, is as good as a rest.

Try working on something different for a while. Give yourself a little side hustle. If you're more of a one-at-a-time kind

of person, you might set your main project aside for a while and spend some time focusing on the new piece. Or you could alternate between the two (or between a few projects). Try different options out and see what works. Come back to the original piece when you're ready.

But it's also OK to never come back to it. Sometimes we outgrow pieces, or we reach a point where we've got all we can from them. This one might not need to be finished. You learned new skills, you tried out new ideas, and maybe that's enough. Putting pressure on yourself to finish a project is the surest way to kill it. Allow yourself to let it go, and, if it's meant to be, it'll call you back...

Is it this part of the project?

Maybe you were absolutely loving working on this piece, but now you've hit a tough bit. You don't know how to make the expression of the person in your painting come alive. You're finding editing tedious. Pitching your manuscript makes you feel sick to your stomach.

If a particular stage has become a blocker, how can you get around it?

*Can you skip this bit and come back to it?*

Maybe you're not in the right headspace right now, and you can do something else for the time being. You might find that the penny suddenly drops and you realise next week exactly how to solve the problem that seems insurmountable today. Or it might just feel way more manageable when your mood or health shifts. I cannot tell you how many places in my novel

have **[something happens here]** placeholder text. I had a whole *subplot* that existed purely in the form of placeholder text for more than a year, until an idea suddenly came to me (while on the treadmill at the gym—see, *resting*) that solved the whole issue. Sometimes you just need a bit of space!

### *Do you need support?*

Maybe you need someone to brainstorm an idea with you. Maybe you need to learn a new skill (like taking a short course in watercolour techniques). Maybe you need to pay a professional (like a developmental editor—if you can't afford to pay someone, you might be able to get low-level support in exchange for you providing a skill or service to them). If you're not sure what support you need, talking your problem over in a creative community, forum or social media network might give you some useful ideas, and maybe some contacts who can help.

### *Can you approach it differently?*

When you're stuck, change is often the answer. Sometimes just moving your work to a different location makes all the difference. Using different media might help—if you're stuck plotting this part of your story, try doodling images of the characters' emotional landscape, or collage a mood board of where you're trying to get them to. Finding different ways to work can sometimes make it more interesting—would you enjoy editing more if you were moving your body (sitting on a yoga ball, or walking on a treadmill, for example), or if you were using loads of different coloured pens and highlighters, or if you were playing really loud rock music while you worked? That's how I

get through it...

## Are you treating it like work?

It's easy to fall into the habit of treating your art like your job.

You start asking yourself to show up on set days, and sit still for a certain amount of hours. You expect loads of output from yourself, you give yourself tough deadlines, and then you're really mean to yourself when you don't meet these unrealistic expectations.

Basically, you start behaving like a shitty boss *to yourself*.

We've all been there, so no judgement if this is you. But your inner artist needs to talk to your inner HR department, and you need to figure out a solution. In fact, you need to sack HR and the boss altogether. Because art is not supposed to be work.

If you think you've fallen into the trap of making your creativity feel like work and that's draining the joy from the whole thing, maybe you need a little more freedom.

- Can you vary your schedule more?
- Can you switch up the location in which you create?
- What would make for a fun atmosphere? (Music, snacks, drinks, friends, candles, blankets, fancy stationery...?)

## How can you be more playful?

In much the same vein, injecting some play into your work is a great way to access joy.

You can be playful in the way you work—gamification, rewards, taking a 10-minute dance break after every 30-minute writing stint, doodling around the edges of your work, experi-

menting with different techniques...

You can also be playful with the work itself. Sure you're writing a gritty urban crime thriller, but what would happen if a dragon suddenly burst in? That scene probably isn't going to make the final edit, but it's a fun way to play around with your characters and take you out of the routine for a while. And it will teach you a lot about how they respond to crisis and the unexpected, which will be useful in scenes you *are* going to use.

What if you challenged yourself to write the entire next page without using the letter *s*? What if you introduce another person into this painting, but only their shadow or some other *effect* of their presence is visible, rather than the person themselves? What if, for the next five minutes, you're only allowed to draw with your non-dominant hand?

Play not only keeps your practice fun and exciting, but it pushes you to explore different approaches and ideas, and sometimes that uncovers new inspiration.

## On pushing through

Sometimes, you need to take a break. Sometimes, you need to let a project die. Both of these are totally valid choices, and you shouldn't feel bad about making them when you need to. In fact, you should feel proud of yourself for recognising and responding to your needs in a way that supports the long-term sustainability of your practice.

However, sometimes you're *not* really that tired that you need a break, and sometimes, deep down, you really do want to finish this project, and it will be amazing when you do. Sometimes, you're actually scared.

It can be hard to tell whether we're truly too exhausted to

create, or whether it's fear and insecurity weighing on us. Those fuckers can feel pretty exhausting. If your mood or energy are unpredictable anyway, you might struggle to get a read on what's happening.

Then you take a break because you're tired one day. The next day, fear whispers to you that you need another break. It's easier to take a break today, because you had one yesterday. You're halfway through an episode of *The Traitors*, so maybe you should just finish that off instead... Before you know it, a month's gone by and you've not worked on your art once.

How do you know if it's a genuine need for rest, or if it's fear you need to push through?

It's not easy. We're so used to being told to "just push through" that we can either be super susceptible to pushing ourselves and then burning out, or we go the opposite way and, from a space of legitimate fury at having previously been pushed beyond our limits, we get super sensitive about the *idea* of pushing through and refuse to even try. I'm saying "we" here because I have definitely done both. Many, many, *many* times.

Sometimes we just *know* that we can't do anything today. We feel exhausted in our *bones*, or our bodies are simply not up to it. And that's fine. But if you're not completely sure—if you don't feel great, but there's a *chance* that you might be using that as a bit of a shield against the vulnerability of creativity—then these are a few things I try:

### *Shift your energy*

Stretch, go for a walk round the block, shake your arms and legs, put on a song you like and dance around the room like a nut... Only do what feels comfortable for you, but sometimes

moving your body is enough to get the blood flowing and lift your energy levels enough to create.

### *Get some fresh air*

I don't know if it's the product of being raised by a very outdoorsy part-Italian, part-Welsh family, but I'm very much of the opinion that there's not a lot that fresh air can't fix. Sometimes just opening a window for a bit, or standing outside your front door for five minutes, gives you a surprisingly significant boost. I'm lucky to live next to a beach, and a bracing walk along the edge of the English Channel does a lot to lift my spirits and give me a surge of energy, as does a wander through the woods. Nature is an incredible healer. But really any air you can get into your lungs will blow away those cobwebs more often than you might think.

### *Set a micro goal*

If you're not sure if you're up to it or not, ask yourself to do just three minutes. There's not much you can't manage for three minutes. If three minutes (that's just 180 seconds) feels impossible, that's a pretty clear answer for you. But if you feel like you can give it a go for three minutes, then, once you get started, you might get a wave of motivation to do more. Or you won't, but then at least you've achieved three minutes' worth, which is more than you thought you'd do.

Listen to your body, though. If you try and you're struggling, or you just can't try, that's fine. Give yourself a break. Today is not the day. Another day will be the day. Put *The Traitors* on and

put your feet up.

## Art is life

If you're serious about your creativity, then it helps to see it as simply part of your life.

To say art is your life sounds pretty major, but actually it makes it *less* intimidating. It's not something you have to find time to schedule in, it's not something you have to add to your to do list, it's just something that happens. It's like breathing, or getting dressed, or eating. It's a part of the everyday.

I remember, a few weeks after my wedding, someone asked me how it felt to be married. I thought about this and said, "Everything has changed, and nothing has changed." It felt huge, to be *married* to this man, but, at the same time, our lives were exactly the same as they'd always been. He was still sleeping (and snoring) in the bed next to me, he was still leaving his pants on the bedroom floor, we were still messaging each other every evening on the way home from work to try to figure out what to have for dinner. He's my husband, one of the most (if not *the* most) significant relationships of my life, and yet our existence together is so intertwined as to be pretty mundane.

Think of your commitment to your art like a marriage. It is big—it's hugely important to you—but it's so tightly woven into the fabric of your life that you don't really have to think about it. You don't want to take it for granted or ignore it, but it's there for you as much as you're there for it. It understands when you need space or rest, and it nourishes *you* as you care for *it*. Some days might be full of intense passion and/or deep reflection, others will be more of a quietly coexisting sort of situation; and occasionally your art will *really* piss you off, but

the love is always there in the background, no matter what.

I might have stretched this metaphor a bit far, but the point is, you don't need to take your art super seriously. You don't have to schedule breathing, it just happens. You're an artist, you're *going* to make art. Let it happen.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### **For:**

Falling back in love with your creativity.

### **Take:**

Some time to think about what makes you feel joyful.

It can be big things (lying on a beach in the tropical sun) or small things (a cup of tea in your favourite mug).

Spend a day (or a week) collecting items that represent your joy. A photo of the afternoon light on your floor, a leaf from a beautiful flower, a brightly coloured pebble, a tea bag, a thread from your comfy old cardigan, a lock of your loved one's hair, a picture of a holiday resort in a magazine... Whatever says "joy" to you.

Once you've collected a bunch of joyful things, make some art with them.

You could create a collage or a model, you could sketch your items, you could take photos of them, you could write about

them...

Make it messy, make it playful, experiment.

What marks does your teabag make on the page if you dip it in paint? What happens if you try to sew your thread to the leaf? What can you paint on your pebble, or could you use the pebble to paint *with*? What if you wrote a story from the point of view of the pebble? Let your imagination run wild.

Once you're done, you might want to decorate or frame your piece, and hang it somewhere you can be reminded of joy on a regular basis.

## Your Creative Fix

In this chapter:

- Building a gentle creative rhythm

\* \* \*

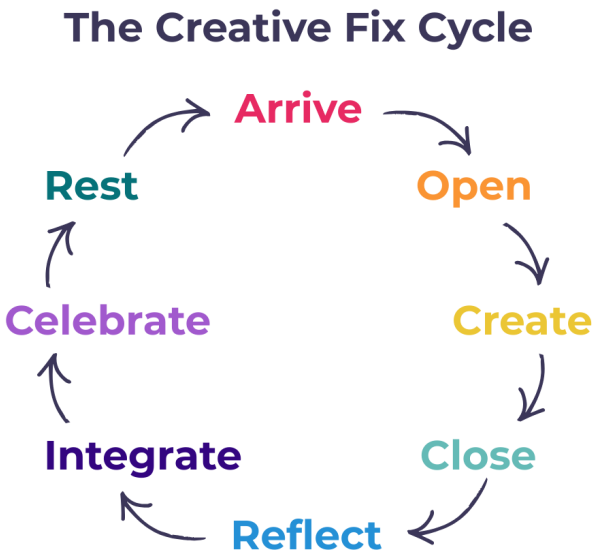
I've made it clear that I'm not a massive fan of prescriptive methodologies, and I hope I've emphasised throughout this book that there is no set template you have to follow—you need to find your own personal approach.

However, there's nothing more daunting than being left on the threshold of a wild new landscape and told, "you'll figure it out". So, before I leave you, I wanted to offer you a compass to help you find your way. Make use of it for as long as you like, discard it when it's no longer needed. As with any other advice, if it doesn't work for you, then it's simply not right for you and you can forget about it.

This is the approach I use in my own creative process, and it underpins a lot of my coaching and creative therapy work. The idea is to set a gentle rhythm that weaves creativity into the fabric of life, without any pressure or expectations, and which can easily flex with your circumstances.

## The Creative Fix Cycle

This is the cycle that I work with:



*Copyright: Allegra Chapman*

Let me talk you through the different stages.

## Arrive

As an ADHD person whose time is extremely limited, it's very tempting to hurtle from task to task, bouncing off the walls of one in order to slam into the next. I regularly tell myself I'm too busy to pause in between activities, but it's a false economy. This ricochet approach to my life only results in me getting frazzled, losing track of where I am with each project, and spending a chunk of my allocated time in a disoriented stupor where I'm trying to remember what it is I'm meant to be doing.

So I've introduced the "arrive" step.

It only takes a moment, and the time it saves in actually knowing where I am and what I'm doing, and the focus it brings me from not being in panic mode, are well worth it.

This stage is all about noticing. How you're feeling, physically, mentally and emotionally. Where your energy is at. What you need right now, and what sort of tasks will most suit your current state.

Once you've got your bearings on your own internal landscape, it's much easier to move forward.

## Open

I've talked about the benefits of ritual already, and I absolutely love this part of the process. Like I said before, having a creative ritual just feels magical, and it makes the whole experience special and exciting.

Consciously opening creative space tells your brain that it's time to make art now. It helps you transition into the right

mindset, and connect to your body and your senses. It calms your nervous system, and guides you towards that sought-after flow state.

My personal favourite ritual includes lighting a candle, diffusing essential oils, and setting an intention for my creative session. I'll often read a poem and maybe do a bit of doodling or draw a Creative Oracle card to inspire me (in fact, I created an entire deck of cards just for this purpose, that are now available on my website—see [CreativeFix.net/shop](https://CreativeFix.net/shop)).

## Create

This step is fairly self-explanatory—this is where we make the art.

Sometimes it might mean picking up a project you've already begun, other times you might need a prompt or a starting point to help you (you can find loads at [YourCreativeFix.substack.com](https://YourCreativeFix.substack.com)).

This stage can last as long as you like—you could set a timer for just three minutes, and then call it a day, or you could work for two hours. You might choose to work in sprints—say, 45 minutes on, then a 15-minute break, then repeat a few times. Whether you show up for a minute or an hour, it all counts.

## Close

It's good to have a closing ritual, even something as simple as closing your notebook and saying out loud, "That is enough for today."

This acknowledges that you're done, and helps you build a belief that you really are doing enough. It also closes the loop

in your brain so you can let go. If a task feels incomplete, your subconscious dwells on it, which can cause anxiety and drain your energy. Marking something as finished reduces mental fatigue and settles your nervous system.

## Reflect

As you move through this journey of learning about your brain and your creative process, it's good to take time to reflect on creative sessions.

What went well, and what felt challenging? What gave you energy, and what drained your energy? What did you discover? What blockers have you encountered and how might you deal with them? It's all part of getting to know your unique needs and building your practice.

This doesn't need to take ages—you can note down your observations in a minute or two if you like. Or, if you're a big journaling fan, you can spend a while with it. As with all of this, you can shape it to suit your needs at any given time.

## Integrate

Once you've identified any learnings or insights, you need to make sure you're going to use them.

Again, this need only take a minute, but note down your next steps (for the project as a whole, for any blockers, for your creative process... whatever you want to take forward).

## Celebrate

A crucial, but too often ignored, stage—celebrate your wins. If you're a rewards person, this might be where you award yourself a gold star or give yourself a treat for showing up. Or it might just be where you quietly acknowledge that you made time for your art today.

If you've hit a particular milestone or a target you set, it's good to make a bigger fuss of yourself than usual. Look how flipping far you've come!!

## Rest

Most methodologies and frameworks ignore rest altogether, but I believe it to be non-negotiable.

As I've said before, rest is the root of your creative practice. You cannot do *anything*, least of all be creative, if you're not rested and nourished.

Proper rest and self-care are what will energise and inspire you to come back to the cycle again.

Rest can be really fucking challenging for some of us. My husband once tried to get me to sit on the sofa and do nothing for a bit in an attempt to help me chill out during a particularly stressful time. I sat there for a few minutes, asking every five seconds what we were supposed to be doing, and, when he repeatedly said, "resting," I eventually lost my shit, screamed at him, and stormed off upstairs.

He has not tried this approach since.

Lying down and chilling out is not for everyone. Resting can still involve doing stuff, you just need to find the thing that feels restful for you. For me, it's knitting, painting, meditating and

wandering the beach. Not, I repeat not, sitting still on the sofa.

## Impossible to fuck up

The whole point of this cycle is to provide a rhythm. It helps you to get into a habit with your creative practice that works in harmony with your nervous system and adapts to your needs.

Only got a five-minute window to be creative today? Fine. Can't get out of bed but still want to stay in touch with your art? That can work. Kids stuck to you like superglue so they need to be involved too? Pass them a paintbrush.

But one of the most important parts of this approach is that it's designed to be easily thrown out of the window when necessary.

Too unwell to create? Need sleep more than writing? Just not feeling it today, or this month? Not a problem. The "rest" phase can last as long as it has to. Because you've built a habit of noticing what you need, you can respond to your system in the moment. And, because you've been identifying the next steps required, you'll know what's waiting to be done when you're ready to come back.

You can't get this system wrong. You can't fall behind. You're simply moving with your personal flow.

## Getting your creative fix

Building this rhythm into your day, giving yourself a creative fix (big or small, as you want and need) as a flexible part of your routine, helps to anchor your creativity as a stable part of your life. It allows you to live a creative life and make sustainable progress on your goals without overloading yourself.

This entire cycle can take less than 10 minutes, if time and

energy are low. A super short version could look something like this:

- **Arrive:** notice your energy and emotional state — 1 minute
- **Open:** light a candle and take a deep breath — 1 minute
- **Create:** write, doodle, splash paint around... — 3 minutes
- **Close:** say, “that’s enough for today” and shut your notebook — 10 seconds
- **Reflect:** note down how that session felt — 1 minute
- **Integrate:** write down a plan for next time — 1 minute
- **Celebrate:** eat a cookie — 1 minute (tbh, I can definitely do that in under 20 seconds)
- **Rest** — we’re done

That’s a pretty simple process to slot in amongst your day, and it doesn’t have to take up a lot of energy. It doesn’t require consistency or continuity—it will flex to suit your life.

Obviously the “Create” stage is the one that can stretch and shrink the most—if you’ve got an hour for that part, great. You could spend a whole day in that stage if you want; although, if you’re going to do that, I highly recommend working in sprints and taking regular breaks so you don’t exhaust yourself.

I wouldn’t recommend spending more than five minutes on the Arrive, Open and Integrate stages. “Reflect”, likewise, shouldn’t usually be more than a five-minute job, but some big milestones or particularly emotional sessions might require a ten or even 15-minute journaling session if you want to go deep.

“Close” should always be short—no more than two minutes—as it’s all about putting the work to bed.

“Celebrate” and “Rest” are whatever you want them to be.

That means the overall outline looks like this:

**Arrive:** 1–5 minutes

**Open:** 1–5 minutes

**Create:** 3 minutes – 6 hours

**Close:** < 2 minutes

**Reflect:** 1–15 minutes

**Integrate:** 1–5 minutes

**Celebrate:** Variable, but usually < 5 minutes

**Rest:** Variable

At most, you're adding around 30 minutes of scaffolding around your creativity time, usually around 10–15 minutes. But it can scale back to as little as 5 minutes if you need it to.

Ultimately, this is all about *being* creative, rather than trying to “do” creativity.

If you want guidance on using the Creative Fix cycle, and support for each stage, there is a toolkit available at [CreativeFix.net/shop](http://CreativeFix.net/shop).

Ultimately, though, this is just the approach that works for me. It's science-based, and it's designed specifically for people whose energy levels are unpredictable and whose brains don't enjoy rules. But that doesn't mean it will work for you.

Try it, see if you like it, take what suits you and leave what doesn't.

The most important thing is that you find a way to create that works for you. Experiment, play around, test out techniques, and keep the ones that feel good.

Above all else, please, for the love of everything you hold sacred, *enjoy it*.

\* \* \*

## Creative Prescription

### For:

When you're struggling to rest.

### Take:

A look at Tamu Thomas' book *Women Who Work Too Much*.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas provides a fantastic summary of Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's theory of the seven types of rest:

1. **Physical rest:** relaxing your body (sleep, stretching, getting a massage, sitting down...)
2. **Mental rest:** giving your mind a break (mindfulness, meditation, creativity...)
3. **Emotional rest:** processing your feelings (journaling, therapy, connecting with friends...)
4. **Social rest:** nurturing connection (spending time with loved ones, finding community...)
5. **Sensory rest:** respite from all the stimulation (time in nature, a relaxing bath, breathwork...)
6. **Creative rest:** allowing free self-expression (making art, experimenting, playing...)
7. **Spiritual rest:** feeling part of something bigger than yourself (prayer, meditation, chanting, appreciating nature...)

Note down ideas for what would work for you for each type of rest.

You could turn it into a visual reminder to put up on your wall.

When you feel the need for rest, ask yourself which type is most calling to you in this moment, and what would answer that call.

## Conclusion

In this chapter:

- A little advice and support for the next stage of your journey

Well, we've been on a ride together, my friend. I really hope you're closing this book feeling seen, supported and empowered to go make the art that's calling your name.

I'm so excited to see it—I hope you'll keep me posted on your journey.

I just want to leave you with some final thoughts about the creative process, and how you go on from here.

These are *my* final thoughts to leave you with:

**This is a marathon not a sprint**—you don't have to do everything today, or even tomorrow. It's OK if certain projects don't get finished this *year*. Unless you're working to a deadline so you can get paid, there is no rush whatsoever.

**If you are working to a paid deadline**, delete your social media apps, set a timer so you can work in sprints, and reward yourself at the end of each sprint. Make coffee, stock up on snacks. And don't panic—it will get done. If you're a last minute kind of a person, that just might be your vibe, and you can lean into that energy. I am writing this chapter on 5th March, knowing full well I need to be putting printed copies of this book into envelopes on 1st May. Nothing like a deadline to get your arse in the chair!

**This is supposed to be fun**—if you're not enjoying it, ask yourself why, and what you can change.

**If something's not working, you are not the problem**—your creative practice is supposed to suit you, not the other way around. You don't have to make yourself be or act a certain way, you can adjust your approach to be what you need. Change the practice, not the person.

**This is a journey of discovery**. You'll be learning about who you are and how you create for the rest of your life. And, just when you think you've got a handle on it, something will shift and your approach will need to adapt. Just roll with it. Don't worry about "nailing it", and let go of any ideas about "hacking" your productivity. Enjoy exploring and experimenting. Play with your creativity.

But I feel like I've gone on at you enough, so I wanted to share some words of wisdom from other amazing neurodivergent creatives that I know.

## Being a Divergent Creative

“Engaging in creative practices allows me to reconnect with long-forgotten parts of me which had to live in the shadows while I was masking. I find it incredibly healing and I enjoy the playfulness and innocence of this way of making sense of my whole neurodivergent self. I can switch off my brain and just let the body speak.”

*Christina Afoke*

“The ritual you invented because you couldn’t work any other way (the specific hour, the particular corner, the exact sequence, the detailed ritual) ... that’s not a quirk. It’s definitely not a flaw. That’s your creative methodology. You figured out your nervous system before anyone gave you the language for it. You were never broken. You were always already solving the challenge.”

*Kathryn Vercillo*

“No matter how good you are, you will always notice something that could be better. It inspires us to keep improving but don’t let it stop you from believing you are good enough. Share your work, get the feedback and start selling.”

*Sarah Morrell*

“I just wish I’d believed in my ideas and went for it more! After (finally) gaining the confidence (at 44) to give things a go again, I realised my quirky / different ideas were what made my creative projects so great! I’ve even cringed there just saying that they’re ‘great’, but I’m gradually learning to accept and embrace the parts of me that got buried for decades... and really enjoying the creative process again. Even managing to actually believe that I

AM indeed ‘good enough’.”

*Eva Lydon*

“You don’t need a special licence or permission from someone else to be creative. No one ever needs to see your work. Make stuff for yourself, experiment and try new things. Let your creativity bring you joy.”

*Ren Riley*

All of these people have Substacks that are well worth checking out, and you’ll find details of Kathryn’s amazing book on the intersection of mental health and creativity in the Further Reading section.

## Further support

One of the most important elements on my personal journey has been finding a community of people who get it.

I joined so many writers’ groups and creative communities, but they were designed for neurotypical people and I felt like a complete outsider. As per usual.

Once I connected with other neurodivergent creatives, and those who also had health issues, or parenting responsibilities, or all of the above, I felt so much more seen and validated. I recognised that I wasn’t weird, or lazy, or doing it wrong, and that my ways of making it all work were completely reasonable.

It was liberating, and helped me unlock a drive to create that I’d been stifling since I began to believe that I wasn’t “cut out” for a writing career.

So I can’t recommend finding your people enough. If you don’t know where to start, you’re so welcome in my Creative Fix

community over at [YourCreativeFix.substack.com](http://YourCreativeFix.substack.com).

If you want to take your creativity further and get into the details of designing a practice that works specifically for your personal needs and life, then I'd love to invite you into the Divergent Creatives programme.

Standard advice is for standard people

If you've tried creativity programmes before and they haven't worked for you, it's probably because they were issuing standard advice for what is considered to be the "standard" person (neurotypical, non-disabled, relatively healthy, and either not looking after children or with a wife to do that for them).

You, though, are not standard.

You are unique. You see the world differently to other people, you express yourself differently to other people, you approach what you do differently to other people.

That's what makes you a powerful artist. And it's why a programme that tells you what to do won't suit you—you need a framework that will help you find your *own* approach.

I created the Divergent Creatives programme to do exactly that. It's not a "10 steps to becoming a famous artist" kind of thing, or a "follow this programme and you'll land an agent within a month" scam. I'm sure I'd make more money if I said, "I can tell you the exact way to make all your dreams come true." I see it all around me, people having huge success off the back of other people's insecurities. I could do that too, but it would be dishonest. No one can tell you the right way to do it, because there is no one right way to do it.

There's only the right way for you.

In Divergent Creatives, I **don't** tell you how to create. I **don't**

give you a blueprint to put into action. I give you options to explore, approaches to try. I give you a roadmap to help you explore your own creativity. Most importantly, I give you tools to help you better understand and support your own mind, and needs, and self. When you know who you are and what works for you, the process becomes a lot easier.

And a lot more joyful.

## The programme

Divergent Creatives is a 12-module course that you can work through in your own time, at your own pace. You get access for 12 months... but you can always renew for another 12 months if you need more time. There's no rush.

The course has been specifically designed for people who are neurodivergent, or who live with challenges to their mental or physical health. It's low-demand, easily accessible, and adaptable to your energy levels.

You will gain an understanding of:

- Any limiting beliefs that are holding you back, and how to overcome them
- Your needs as a creative
- How to tailor creative habits to you as an individual
- Goal-setting approaches that actually work
- Designing an environment that supports your creativity
- The value of joy in your practice
- What you need to do to move forward with your dreams

Previous participants say the programme changed their lives:

## CONCLUSION

- One member of the community says the programme enabled her to complete a project she had been stuck on for 15 years!
- Another gained the confidence and skills to launch a new business venture!
- Another is now making progress on a project they'd been dreaming of, but not daring to start, for a decade!

Imagine how it would feel for you to be able to follow your creative longings with that kind of freedom and joy. I want that for you.

Since you're already on the way, and you've stuck with me through this book, I know you care and you're motivated. I really want to help you take the next step. So I'm offering you **33% off the cost of the programme**. A third off! Instead of £199 (that's about \$266 USD), you'll pay £133 (around \$177 USD). Just head to [CreativeFix.net/DC](https://CreativeFix.net/DC)—readers to sign up.

Here's what Lelie had to say about the course:

“Awesome programme, I highly recommend it. Divergent Creatives offers a very wide range of ideas, options, insights, encouragement to any artist who is looking for ways to free up whatever's in the way of creating the art you want to create.”

I didn't even pay her to say that! It totally warms my heart. As does this comment from Elly:

“You have helped me recreate my new life as a creative—you are awesome.”

It's so amazing to hear this kind of feedback from artists who

are now out there living their dreams and being awesome. I'm not going to lie, this feedback from Susan made me cry a little:

"Because it's done in such a way that it is for neurodivergent brains... there's nothing to compare it to, because I've never experienced that before. So that is amazing to have that space. We're not used to having spaces like this, as neurodivergent people. We're not used to having spaces that work for us. [I've learned] that my process and my way of being creative, there was never anything wrong with it. I was just coming at it from a very stereotypical way. [This course] very much allowed me to start thinking about the whole thing in a completely different way."

If you want that for yourself, visit [CreativeFix.net/DC-readers](https://CreativeFix.net/DC-readers) and get yourself booked in!

Ok, that's all I'm going to say about it now. If you want to continue this journey with me, you'd be so welcome. If you don't, and you're ready to fly solo now, that's awesome and I will be raucously cheering you on in the same way that I totally embarrass my daughter at any sporting event she ever takes part in. If you'd like a bit of enthusiastic cheerleading, feel free to tag me in your work on social media. I promise not to be *too* embarrassing.

I'm also always happy to answer questions, so feel free to reach out to me via social media or my website, [CreativeFix.net](https://CreativeFix.net), if there's anything I can help with.

Now, remember, the world needs your creativity, so get out there and fuck some shit up!

## Creative Prescription

**For:**

When you're low on inspiration, or you just need to get started.

**Take:**

A six-sided dice. Or a random number generator (try [random.org](http://random.org)), set to 1–6.

Roll the dice (or generate a number).

Whatever number you get, work on the activity at that number in the list below.

Set a timer for 10 minutes (or however long you want to spend on this task), and get stuck in.

1. Write a story that includes a bike, a cake and a TV.
2. Create a scene using only the colour blue.
3. Write a poem from the point of view of a public bench.
4. Draw something you can see from the nearest window.
5. Image search “unusual doors” and count along to the 12th image—write a scene or story inspired by that image.
6. Find a book. Open it to page 24. Find line 12. Write that sentence down and then keep writing your own words from there, without stopping until the timer goes off.

## Resources

You can find all the resources mentioned in this book, plus the special offer for the Divergent Creatives programme *and* an exclusive reader freebie at [CreativeFix.net/readers](http://CreativeFix.net/readers).

### Reader Freebie: Productive Procrastination Guide

Do you often find yourself procrastinating instead of doing the task you planned to do? This guide will help you understand why you procrastinate, and channel it so that you can work effectively in a way that suits your needs and nervous system.

This guide usually costs £3.75, but it's yours for free when you visit [CreativeFix.net/readers](http://CreativeFix.net/readers) or scan this QR code:



# References

## Chapter 1: Your Right to Create

1. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Penguin, 2020)
2. Amie McNee, *We Need Your Art* (Ebury Press, 2025)
3. Ibid.

## Chapter 4: The “Right” Way to Create

1. Stephen King, *On Writing* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001)
2. George Plimpton, ‘[Ernest Hemingway](#), The Art of Fiction No. 21’, *The Paris Review*, Issue 18, Spring 1958

## Chapter 5: How They Stole Your Confidence

1. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, “Facts About ADHD in Adults”, 11 October 2024, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/adhd/php/adults/index.html> [Accessed 03 February 2026]
2. Rødgaard et al, “Childhood diagnoses in individuals identified as autistics in adulthood”, National Library of Medicine, July 2021, available at [https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8670291/#:~:text=We%20found%20that%20most%20childhood,after%20the%20age%20of%](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8670291/#:~:text=We%20found%20that%20most%20childhood,after%20the%20age%20of%20)

2012. [Accessed 03 February 2026]
3. O’Nions et al, “Life expectancy and years of life lost for adults with diagnosed ADHD in the UK: matched cohort study”, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 226, Issue 5, May 2025
4. Stewart, G and Happé, F, “Ageing across the Autism Spectrum – A narrative review”, *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 7:461–484, December 2025
5. “1 in 10 HR professionals say their organisation is now focusing on neurodiversity at work”, CIPD, 15 February 2018, available at <https://www.cipd.org/en/about/press-releases-archive/150218-neurodiversity/> [Accessed 06 February 2026]
6. Carolyn Crist, “Majority of US workers say they lack awareness of workplace neurodiversity”, *HR Dive*, 21 March 2024, available at <https://www.hrdive.com/news/workers-lack-awareness-workplace-neurodiversity/710972/> [Accessed 06 February 2026]

## Chapter 6: Deficiency is Cultural

1. “60 Learning Disabilities Statistics & Prevalence”, *The Treetop*, 17 July 2024, available at <https://www.thetreetop.com/statistics/learning-disabilities-statistics> [Accessed 08 February 2026]
2. Yoshifumi Miyazaki, *Walking in the Woods* (Octopus, 2021)
3. Katherine May, *Enchantment*, (Faber & Faber, 2023)
4. Chris Packham, *BBC News*, March 2024, available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=627099922904446>

## Chapter 8: We Need Your Voice

1. Justin McAfee, “Speech and Protest Won’t Work. Here’s What Will”, Collapse Curriculum, available at <https://collapsecurriculum.substack.com/p/speech-and-protest-won-t-work-heres> [Accessed 08 February 2026]

## Chapter 9: What If Society Valued Creativity?

1. “Why writers are at a loss for words”, ALCS, 6 December 2022, available at <https://www.alcs.co.uk/news/why-writers-are-at-a-loss-for-words/> [Accessed 12 February 2026]
2. Lanre Bakare, “Britain faces ‘talent drain’ of visual artists as earnings fall by 40% since 2010”, The Guardian, 25 November 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/nov/25/britain-faces-talent-drain-visual-artists-earnings-fall> [Accessed 12 February 2026]
3. “What is a good average salary in the UK in 2026?”, Raisin, 2026, available at <https://www.raisin.com/en-gb/budgeting/how-much-money-do-you-need-to-live-comfortably-uk/> [Accessed 12 February 2026]
4. “Basic Income for the Arts (BIA)”, Citizens Information, 10 October 2025, available at <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment-and-redundancy/employment-support-schemes/basic-income-arts/> [Accessed 12 February 2026]
5. “Why psychological safety drives successful teams”, Insights, available at <https://blog.insights.com/en-gb/blog/why-psychological-safety-drives-successful-teams#:~:text=The%20impact%20of%20psychological%20safety,a%20psychologically%20safe%20work%20environment.>

[Accessed 12 February 2026]

6. Patricia Albulescu et al, “‘Give me a break!’ A systematic review and meta-analysis on the efficacy of micro-breaks for increasing well-being and performance”, National Library of Medicine, 31 August 2022, available at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9432722> [Accessed 12 February 2026]
7. Allegra Chapman and Mousumi Kanjilal Williams, *The Inclusion Journey* (Kogan Page, 2024)
8. Amy Watts, “17 Statistics Highlighting the Importance of Workplace Diversity and Inclusion”, eduMe, available at <https://www.edume.com/blog/workplace-diversity-statistics> [Accessed 12 February 2026]

## Chapter 10: What If Society Valued Difference?

1. Allegra Chapman and Mousumi Kanjilal Williams, *The Inclusion Journey* (Kogan Page, 2024)

## Chapter 11: Decentring Productivity

1. Tomislav Rucevic, “Paid Vacation – Why is the United States trailing behind the rest of the world?”, Softworks, 6 April 2023, available at <https://www.softworks.com/blog/paid-vacation-why-is-the-united-states-trailing-behind-the-rest-of-the-world> [Accessed 20 February 2026]
2. Sophie Caldwell, “Nearly a quarter of American workers didn’t take any of their vacation days this year, says new survey”, CNBC, 22 October 2025, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/10/22/nearly-a-quarter-of-american-workers-didnt-take-any-of-their-vacation-days-this-year>

- says-new-survey.html [Accessed 20 February 2026]
3. Amrita Ahuja, “82% of workers globally experiencing burnout, survey says”, 21 November 2024, available at <https://www.staffingindustry.com/news/global-daily-news/82-of-workers-globally-experiencing-burnout-survey-says> [Accessed 11 February 2026]
  4. CIPD, “Workplace absence levels soar to nearly two working weeks per employee each year”, 9 September 2025, available at <https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/workplace-absence-soars-nearly-two-working-weeks-each-year/> [Accessed 11 February 2026]
  5. Hayden Goethe, “Absenteeism is on the rise in the workplace. Here’s how leaders can address it”, The News Tribune, 18 December 2025, available at <https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/business/article313805487.html> [Accessed 11 February 2026]
  6. “Happy workers are 13% more productive”, University of Oxford, 24 October 2019, available at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-10-24-happy-workers-are-13-more-productive> [Accessed 20 February 2026]
  7. “Flexible working: The business case”, CIPD, 2023, available at <https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/2023-flexible-working-the-business-case-august.pdf> [Accessed 20 February 2026]
  8. “Is Universal Basic Income a good idea?”, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 27 May 2021, available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/is-universal-basic-income-a-good-idea> [Accessed 20 February 2026]

## Chapter 12: Back In Your Body

1. Dr Jake Linardon, “Body Image Statistics 2024”, Break Binge Eating, 18 May 2024, available at <https://breakbinge-eating.com/body-image-statistics> [Accessed 11 February 2026]
2. Health and Social Care Committee, “The impact of body image on mental and physical health”, UK Parliament, 2 August 2022, available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmhealth/114/report.html> [Accessed 11 February 2026]
3. Toby Macdonald, “How do we really make decisions?”, BBC News, 24 February 2014, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-26258662> [Accessed 19 February 2026]

## Chapter 14: Regaining Creative Confidence

1. “Imposter Syndrome vs. Low Self-Esteem: What’s the Difference?”, Psychology Beverly Hills, 2025, available at <https://psychologybeverlyhills.com/blog/imposter-syndrome-vs-low-self-esteem-whats-the-difference/> [Accessed 24 February 2026]
2. Camilla [Walden](#) and [Milan Dinic](#), “Our personalities: do we like ourselves, are we shy and is ‘British reserve’ a real thing?”, 12 November 2019, available at <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/24229-yougov-personality-study-part-one-British-reserve> [Accessed 24 February 2026]
3. “Shyness”, Psychology Today, available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/shyness> [Accessed 24 February 2026]

4. Margaret Atwood, “Margaret Atwood on How She Came to Write *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, Literary Hub, 25 April 2018, available at <https://lithub.com/margaret-atwood-on-how-she-came-to-write-the-handmaids-tale> [Accessed 25 February 2026]
5. Dan Wilbur, “Everybody’s A Critic – The Best Of The Worst Funny One-Star Reviews On Goodreads”, Better Book Titles, 19 November 2021, available at <https://betterbooktitles.com/2021/11/19/funny-one-star-reviews-on-goodreads/> [Accessed 25 February 2026]

## Chapter 20: Your Creative Fix

1. Tamu Thomas, *Women Who Work Too Much* (Hay House, 2024)

## Further Reading

### Neurodiversity

Brown, Kat, *It's Not A Bloody Trend: Understanding life as an ADHD adult* (Robinson, 2025)

Chapman, Allegra, and Kanjilal Williams, Mousumi, *The Inclusion Journey* (Kogan Page, 2024)

May, Katherine, *The Electricity of Every Living Thing* (Trapeze, 2019)

Middleton, Ellie, *UNMASKED: The ultimate guide to ADHD, autism and neurodivergence* (Penguin, 2023)

Nerenberg, Jenara, *Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You* (HarperOne, 2020)

Wharmby, Pete, *Untypical* (HarperCollins, 2024)

## Creativity

Atwood, Margaret, *Negotiating With The Dead* (Little, Brown, 2003)

Cameron, Julia, *The Artist's Way* (Macmillan, 2016)

Gilbert, Elizabeth, *Big Magic* (Bloomsbury, 2016)

King, Stephen, *On Writing* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001)

Lamott, Anne, *Bird by Bird* (Canongate, 1994)

McNee, Amie, *We Need Your Art* (Ebury Press, 2025)

Rubin, Rick, *The Creative Act: A way of being* (Canongate, 2023)

## Neurodiversity and creativity

Vercillo, Katherine, *The Artist's Mind: The Creative Lives and Mental Health of Famous Artists* (Schiffer Publishing, 2023)

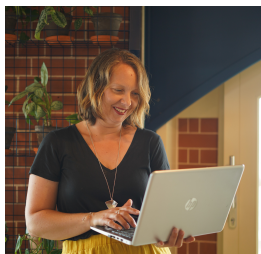
## Wellbeing

Chapman, Allegra, *Creativity Is Your Self-Care* (2024)

Doyle, Glennon, *Untamed* (Penguin Random House, 2020)

Glouberman, Dr. Dina, *The Joy of Burnout* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2003)

Thomas, Tamu, *Women Who Work Too Much* (Hay House, 2024)



## About the Author

Allegra Chapman is an author and columnist, whose words have appeared in *The i Paper*, *The Independent*, *Newsweek*, *Cosmopolitan*, and many more. Allegra is also a creative coach and creative therapy practitioner, who is passionate about empowering neurodivergent and disabled writers and artists to find their voice. She lives on the south coast of England with her husband and two children, and can most often be found at the beach.

You can find resources to support your own creative practice at [CreativeFix.net](https://CreativeFix.net).

**You can connect with me on:**

🌐 <https://creativefix.net>

🔗 <https://yourcreativefix.substack.com>

## Also by Allegra Chapman



### **Creativity Is Your Self-Care**

<https://creativefix.net/creativity-self-care>

**52 creative therapy exercises to support your emotional wellbeing all year round.**

Creativity is a valuable tool for self-care. Whether it's writing, journaling, drawing, painting, collaging, photography or any of the incredibly varied forms of creative activity that you can think of, taking part in creative pursuits has been proven to benefit your emotional, mental and even physical health.

Humans are creative beings on a creative planet - we've been making art and telling stories from the earliest point in our history. You were born to be creative. This book provides you with 52 exercises—one for every week of the year—to enable you to build a regular practice of creative self-care.

