

A place of ease

Where creativity's concerned, it's common to brush aside lightness and enjoyment as frivolous, in favour of something weightier and more serious. But it doesn't have to be that way

Think of a time when creativity came naturally to you. Whether it was decorating a cake for a friend's birthday, doodling in your diary or moving your body to a beat, in that moment, a force flowed from your being and you were probably without a worry in the world.

These moments are far from the prevalent idea that artists must delve into their inner torment to produce creative works. As Caris Pepper, registered art psychotherapist and visual artist, says: 'It's a common belief that if an artist were to let go of their inner pain, their artistic identities would vanish.' In other words, in the pursuit of creative genius, ease and enjoyment are often regarded as trivial, even shallow.

Many artists are challenging this belief, however, and proving that creative endeavours can come from a place of lightness and simplicity, too. 'While it's true that profound beauty can come from painful lessons, the same can be said about leaning into ease. There is magic to be found in what comes naturally to you,' says Pascale Côté, a Canadian artist and writer who coaches other creatives to find focus and flow through her business Dear Creative Mind.

What could you create if you embraced the things that felt too easy? And what would it feel like to create from this space?

Art and pain

Art clearly is a therapeutic outlet for myriad thoughts and feelings, but the idea that pain is the only fuel for creativity is open to question. 'By buying into the belief that the creative path should feel like a struggle, inevitably it will [be],' says Pascale. She finds that in areas where it's suggested that the arts aren't valuable – or that they are only worthwhile when they come from a place of self-sacrifice – it's tempting to overcompensate, overwork and overthink creativity. 'When my clients come to me, they have a heart full of creative ideas and a mind full of self-doubt,' she says. 'My role is to help them

break free of the beliefs that are keeping them stuck in a cycle of hustle and burnout.'

Those beliefs are often tied to a controversial stereotype of 'the tortured artist', a creative genius living in constant torment. The image is born out of a long history of writers and artists known for their personal traumas, such as Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar*, and painter Vincent van Gogh.

For some artists, suffering is a core part of their experience – and their work draws on it. However, to celebrate suffering as the sole route to a greater, more worthy kind of creativity presents concerns. As Caris says: 'The idea that pain is a necessary component of artistic genius can maintain harmful ideas about mental illnesses and contribute to the stigma of getting help and healing.' Although suffering might be expressed in someone's artwork, the pain itself doesn't make the artist more interesting, complex or talented.

Embracing an alternative

'Emotions allow us to have something potent to express in art, whether they are charged negatively or positively,' says Caris. Is it possible, then, to take care of your wellbeing and find creativity in a place of simplicity, rather than struggle? This is the creative path that bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert chooses to take. In her book, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*, she pushes back against the tormented-artist stereotype, writing: 'My desire to work – my desire to engage with my creativity as intimately and as freely as possible – is my strongest personal incentive to fight back against pain, by any means necessary, and to fashion a life for myself that is as sane and healthy and stable as it possibly can be.' For Elizabeth, the alternative route to creativity is to focus on the value of the process rather than the product.

Caris agrees with this sentiment, emphasising that the connection between art and wellbeing is nuanced and





multifaceted. 'Creativity can inspire positive mental health, and positive mental health can inspire creativity,' she says. There's a growing body of research to show that creative activities have positive effects on mental health, such as reducing stress and increasing self-esteem. The World Health Organization published a report on the topic in 2019, and national frameworks have been developed in recent years, such as Arts for Health and Wellbeing in the UK and the National Arts and Health Framework in Australia.

Welcome the ease

On the flipside, by taking care of your mental health and wellbeing, you may be better able to engage in creative activities and channel your energy in a positive way. For example, Caris has found that when her clients are in a positive state of mind, they're often more open to trying new things and taking risks in their creative pursuits.

In her art therapy sessions, she encourages people to engage in deep shadow work (working with your unconscious mind to uncover the parts of yourself that you repress) and to take part in playful activities and 'create as a child would'. Similarly, where her personal creative practice was previously driven solely by intense feelings, she's expanded to embrace a clear and open headspace and abandon fear of the outcome. With this mindset, there are many new ways to create.

'Choosing the path of least resistance can lead us to wonderful places,' says Pascale. Through her work with others and her own experience as an artist, she's come to realise how powerful, healing and purposeful art can be when you dare

to create from a place of ease. When a skill comes naturally, you may automatically undervalue it. But when friendships or relationships feel effortless, when you click with a person, it's a clear sign that you're with the right people. Consider what creative pursuit makes you click. Instead of brushing it off as too easy, approach it with curiosity and trust that this is exactly what you're meant to be doing. Pascale is keen on making time for self-discovery creative sessions, where you explore various media, themes and tools, and observe what feels the most natural for you. She suggests the following prompts to find your own version of easy and enjoyable creativity during this process:

What art would you create if no one was watching?

What art would you create if your inner child was the one holding the brushes?

What might you learn if you dared to lean into this moment of ease?

Detangling creativity from struggle can be liberating, as you're free to tap into what feels good and carve your creative path from there. Who knows, maybe you could join creatives like Pascale and Caris, and those proving that taking care of yourself, embracing enjoyment and leaning into ease can all be part of a creative life.

Words: Heather Grant

For information about Caris's work, visit carispepper.com. To learn more about Pascale and view her work, visit dearcreativemind.com

ARTISTS' REFLECTIONS

Some are challenging the idea that worthy work must come from a place of struggle. Take inspiration from these artists and their reflections

Cass Deller

(Top right) 'For me, inspiration comes alive in the summertime, when it's beautiful and warm outside and the energy is high. I'm always drawn to the ocean and tropical surroundings; it's where I feel the most "me", and when I'm in that state, creativity just flows!'

Cass is a watercolour artist and surface designer based in Noosa, in Queensland, Australia. See her work at Cassdeller.com.au or @Cassdellerdesign on Instagram

Meredith Mason

(Bottom right) 'In our (Pottymouth) workshops, I've found creativity flows best when people are bouncing off each other's positive energy. It's inspiring to me to see how the little community we've created can bring out a creative side to people they've long forgotten or never believed they had.'

Meredith is a ceramicist and one half of Pottymouth pop-up pottery workshops in Bristol and the south-west of England. You can follow her work at @meredithmasonmaker on Instagram and @pottymouth.workshop on Facebook

Sophie Timms

'My creativity feels most natural and easy to me when I let go of perfectionism and simply create. I love doodling from my imagination or using photographs I've taken of florals and botanicals as references. That's when my creativity really flows.'

Sophie's business, Mindful Mantra Embroidery, celebrates embroidery. See her work at mindfulmantraembroidery.com or @mindfulmantra_embroidery on Instagram



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