

Unlock Your Inner Creative Genius

A quick guide to getting unstuck, generating better ideas, and thinking creatively under pressure

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You are more creative than you think.

After more than 30 years of performing and teaching improv, I believe that every person has a creative genius inside of them. The problem isn't that we've lost our creativity. We've lost access to it.

As children, we imagine, experiment, make things up, and play without worrying much about whether our ideas are good, practical, or even make sense. Then we grow up and learn to evaluate everything: Will this work? Is this appropriate? What will people think? Has someone already tried this? Will leadership go for it? What if I'm wrong?

That filter is useful. It keeps us from acting on every ridiculous idea that enters our heads. But when we need to be creative - especially when we're under pressure - that same filter can shut down ideas before we ever get a chance to explore them. The solution isn't to get rid of the filter. It's to learn how to temporarily bypass it.

THE POND AND THE PEBBLE

Imagine your mind is a pond. A challenge, question, or idea is a pebble dropped into the water, and the connections, associations, and ideas that emerge are the ripples.

CALM POND

You notice the ripples.
Ideas and associations have room to emerge.

CHOPPY POND

The ripples disappear into the noise.
Pressure and overthinking crowd out creative thought.

When someone puts you on the spot, when you're staring at a problem you don't know how to solve, when circumstances suddenly change, or when an executive asks you a question you weren't expecting, your mind can start racing: What's the right answer? What should I say? What if I get this wrong?

Ironically, the harder you consciously try to come up with the perfect response, the harder it can become to access your creativity.

Technique 1: Quiet the Pond

When pressure makes your mind race, don't immediately force yourself to produce the answer. Pause. Listen. Ask another question. Take a moment to process. Let the pond settle enough to notice the ideas that are already starting to emerge.

In a high-pressure conversation, Dig Deeper.

A good question doesn't just help you understand the other person. It gives your creative mind room to work.

Technique 2: Outrun the Filter

Sometimes the best way to bypass your filter is the exact opposite: go fast. In improv, one of my highly sophisticated creative techniques is: Open your mouth and start talking. Instead of waiting until I have the perfect funny answer, I start with the first idea that appears and build from there.

For business problems, I recommend a slightly safer variation: Never let the pen stop moving. Give yourself a problem or question. Set a timer for five minutes. Then start writing ideas - and do not stop until the timer goes off. Don't evaluate. Don't edit. Don't explain why something won't work. And don't reject an idea because it's stupid, expensive, unrealistic, impractical, or impossible.

You are generating, not implementing.

One idea becomes the pebble that creates the next ripple. That ripple becomes another pebble, which creates another ripple. Eventually, you start getting beyond the ideas you already knew you had and into genuinely new territory.

THE 5-MINUTE CREATIVE GENIUS CHALLENGE

Pick one real challenge you're facing right now. At the top of a blank page, turn it into a question:

How might we _____?

1. Set a timer for five minutes.
2. Start writing possibilities.
3. Do not let your pen - or keyboard - stop moving.
4. Do not evaluate anything yet.
5. When you get stuck, get crazier.

When you get stuck, try questions like:

- What's the dumbest idea I could come up with?
- What would I try if I knew I couldn't fail?
- What would we do if our normal approach were no longer available?
- What could be possible that we're not considering?
- Are we actually innovating - or merely tweaking?

TURN IDEAS INTO ACTION

Evaluate Second

When the five minutes are over, then turn your filter back on. Review what you've generated and look for an idea, possibility, combination, or even a small thread that deserves further exploration.

You don't need to find the brilliant answer. You need to find something new to build on.

Put Your Creative Genius to Work

WHEN YOU'RE STUCK ON A PROBLEM

Stop searching for the answer and rapidly generate possibilities. The goal is quantity first; judgment comes later.

WHEN YOU'RE FACING UNEXPECTED CHANGE

Our natural instinct is often to ask, "How can we keep doing what we've always done despite everything that's changing?" Try asking: "What becomes possible now?"

WHEN YOU'RE PREPARING A PRESENTATION, REPORT, EMAIL, OR STRATEGY

Get the raw thinking out first. Edit and polish second. Your initial messy thinking may contain ideas you'd never reach if you tried to make every sentence perfect as you created it.

WHEN YOU'RE BRAINSTORMING WITH A TEAM

Separate idea generation from idea evaluation. Give unusual ideas room to breathe before someone explains why they won't work.

WHEN YOU'RE PUT ON THE SPOT

Dig Deeper. Ask a question. Listen. Give your creative mind the time and space it needs to catch up before you commit yourself to a response.

Your Creative Genius Is Already There

Creativity isn't reserved for artists, writers, entrepreneurs, or improv comedians. You already have it. The goal isn't to magically become more creative; it's to get better at accessing the creativity you already possess - especially when you need it most.

So the next time you're stuck, resist the temptation to stare harder at the problem while waiting for the perfect answer. Quiet the pond - or start moving so fast your filter can't keep up. Then follow the ripples and see where they lead.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

Watch the accompanying 20-minute video, "Access and Apply Your Inner Creative Genius," where I demonstrate these principles through improv and show you more ways to put them into practice.

Avish Parashar is a professional speaker, author, and longtime improviser who helps leaders and teams use the principles of improv to respond to change, think more creatively, and move forward through uncertainty.