



STEP FIVE

Creativity

Being absorbed in a hobby or task can invite spontaneity into your life, says Samantha Davis.



Samantha Davis is an internationally trained art psychotherapist based in Johannesburg.

We are an ambitious society, and often it is difficult for us to cultivate creative forms of activity that serve us and our career goals. When we think about creativity, it is all too easy to think 'Art' with a capital 'A'. But by simply re-examining the word, we can involve hobbies and necessary everyday tasks that are also creatively useful. It begins with enjoying the moment. Gardening, for example, is a hobby that can quite literally ground you in the moment and give you a sense of expansion.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial), studied photos of artists painting, taken every three minutes as they worked. He said he was struck by 'how deeply they were involved in their work, forgetting everything else'. That state seemed so intriguing that he started looking for it in rock climbers, chess players, dancers and musicians. In all these different activities, Csikszentmihalyi found that people reported similar accounts of how they felt. They forgot themselves, the time, and their problems. Becoming at one with the present is achieved when we don't become distracted by, for example, dogs barking, alarms going off or phones ringing.

When you are completely absorbed in a task or activity, you have no 'mind space' left to worry about the future or ruminate about past

mistakes and tasks to accomplish. By being involved in a hobby, we are freed from our ego's demands, thoughts and judgements. We are able to merge with a greater 'source', i.e. the present moment. In doing so, we open up a space for perspectives needed to solve our personal and professional problems. Importantly, being creative doesn't have to mean painting a masterpiece. It can be as simple as rearranging furniture in a room to create a sense of newness, or experimenting with a different table setting.

In her book *Painting from the Source* (Harper Perennial), British psychologist Aviva Gold describes this as a deep, unselfconscious involvement in the universal creative process. 'You can write, cook, devise a business plan from the source,' she continues. 'Whenever you are completely involved and absorbed in your creative process, you are in your source flow.'



COLBERT MASHILE, 36, ARTIST

I don't use a sketchbook or refer to anything – I just start working straight on the canvas, without knowing what the finished image is going to look like. I think it's a reflection of something that's deep inside me, that's somehow mysterious. It starts as a dreamlike journey and the end result always surprises me. I have to lay down the basics of my composition in one go. If I don't, I might not connect with it the next day. The energy has to be there in me – I can't work day in and day out; I can't just produce automatically. I need to connect spiritually with what I'm doing. I'm totally focused on the moment; I can stand in front of the canvas for hours and hours, without getting hungry or tired, until the moment I sit down and I can feel my legs aching.

Do not worry about making mistakes. Too often we try to push, pull, outline and control our ideas and lives instead of letting things develop organically. For example, the perfectionist who creates something with one eye on her audience will constantly be grading the results and the outcome. Criticism, judgement and perfectionism can sabotage our creativity and prevent us from being in the moment. Csikszentmihalyi has warned that 'you can't make flow happen. All you can do is learn to remove obstacles in the way'. He also said that trying to recapture the high of a previous experience will rarely succeed, because 'you're splitting your attention from what's happening now'.

Thinking shuts down creative experience. Paradoxically, we must work at learning to play; we need to get serious about taking ourselves lightly. UK psychologist Marion

Milner described play as 'something halfway between daydreaming and purposeful action'. In her book, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (1989), Milner writes, 'Art provides a method in adult life for reproducing states that are part of everyday experience in healthy infancy. The withdrawal from the external world and the temporary loss of self, as conscious control by the ego, is given up.' Milner sees this as essential for healthy growth.

'In order to let the spontaneous ordering forces work, a mixture of conscious attention is needed with a certain absentmindedness – dreams, but with action,' wrote British art critic Peter Fuller. As we lose our awareness of ourself, our values, our life situation, we become available to the moment. It is there that we contact our creative self. And until we experience such freedom, we cannot truly connect with our authentic being. ●

HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

1 Challenge yourself. Try something new (such as snorkelling or ballroom dancing) that pushes you out of your comfort zone.

2 Make a point of embracing the mistakes you make. This isn't a contest. It's an opportunity to lose yourself in the moment and engage fully with the present.