





Dossier

CREATE A PERFECT SUMMER

PHOTOGRAPHS SARA WILSON/FOLIO ID

There is something liberating about summer – longer days gift us the illusion of time, warm weather lifts our spirits, and there is a chance to escape our everyday lives. It is a time to reboot before that ‘back to school’ feeling; a respite; an opportunity to reconnect with ourselves.

We have a proposition for you: what if you could find a way to enhance this glorious time of year by giving your mind and imagination a holiday, too? Get out your watercolours, calligraphy ink and clay, open your mind, be inspired (we’ll help you find your muse), and embark on a four-week journey of creativity with us, to help you truly switch off and slow down...

**“And so with the sunshine and the great bursts
of leaves growing on the trees, just as things grow
in fast movies, I had that familiar conviction that life
was beginning over again with the summer”**

F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Great Gatsby'

AUGUST 2016 PSYCHOLOGIES MAGAZINE 57



WEEK

I ESCAPING

This week is all about making the most of longer evenings, lighter mornings and the more laid-back vibe of summer; to get out of the workday mindset and experiment with tiny ways to step on to a new path.

Establish an early-morning walking ritual

So many creative people, from Charles Dickens to Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, have mused upon the joys of embedding a daily, or weekly, walking practice, claiming it stimulates creative juices. Even if you live in a city, you can go on mini walking adventures, exploring parks or commons, new streets and unseen places.

When you walk, you stretch your imagination and go into 'automatic' thinking due to the rhythm of your footsteps. You might start off thinking of your to-do list or calling your mother but, eventually, the mind relaxes. It is a signal to the imagination to percolate all the ideas that have been sitting underneath your rational thoughts. It is a signal for those creative ideas to rise to the surface.

Visit a butterfly sanctuary

Or, failing that, a botanical garden or plant nursery. I regularly visit the one at Blenheim Palace. As well as being a wonderful escape, there is nothing like it for connecting to the true meaning of transformation and the process you go through when expanding creativity. Immersing yourself in beautiful colours is a great way to stimulate your creative muscles. Name as many colours as you can.

Seek the sea

Everyone equates summer with the seaside and it is a great source of comfort and joy. It is also a place to be re-energised and get back in touch with your true self. Spend time absorbing the colour, listening to the sound, feeling the rhythm and smelling the spray... and don't be surprised if you 'catch' a wave of creative ideas. Plus, the sea is plentiful and cheap to visit, a reminder that creativity is abundant and freely available. No wonder so many artists, poets and photographers have made it their muse.

See a film outdoors

The benefits of 'cinematherapy' to help you change your mindset and open up to new ideas are well documented. Many local parks and community arts organisations run summer film seasons outdoors. They offer two types

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of escape: the pleasure of losing yourself in a film, hopefully choosing a genre that you might not normally go for, and the benefit of being outside under the stars at night.

WEEK

2 NOTICING

When skies are grey and we are wrapped up against the elements, it is easy to scurry through our days with eyes fixed on the pavement. This week is the time to recalibrate your powers of observation.

Go on a daily photo safari

This could be on your commute, getting off a couple of stops earlier to walk and observe. You could also use a lunch hour or coffee break. Set yourself a daily or weekly theme of objects, colours, sizes or shapes to record.

I set myself the challenge of photographing only red things one week: red doors, red flowers, red cars... But you could also do textures, buildings or prompts from nature like water, leaves or flowers.

Why is this powerful? It slows us down and sharpens our senses so we are more 'in the moment'. Creativity is often ignited through seeing forms in detail. The objects may not even be directly related to your creative project but it doesn't matter. My writing always seems to flow after I have immersed myself in some creative pursuit that is not writing or reading. I might be writing, but the beautiful flowers that I saw earlier stimulated my creativity.

Listen, first to others and then to yourself

As you go about your day, practise capturing snippets of conversation that you overhear and use them in a story, comedy sketch or poem. You could note them down on your phone so no one would guess what you are doing. It is interesting to notice the different ways people express



themselves. The more you listen to what is going on around you, the easier you will find it to listen to your own creative voice and ideas.

Create an illustrated journal

Remember when you had a scrapbook as a child; a place where you could stick the ticket stub from a rock concert, magazine cut-outs, a postcard, a feather or a pressed flower? An illustrated journal is the grown-up version of a scrapbook. There are many guides available, but all you need is a journal with unlined pages and some art supplies. Treat every new place you go as a scavenger hunt for cards, fabrics, leaves and other items to stick in a journal that will capture the summer. Don't forget a stick of glue.

Learn a poem off by heart

There is something life-affirming about learning a poem and reciting it out loud; to have the words embodied in your voice and your self. Notice in close detail the beauty of the poet's words, the patterns and the pauses, and it will spark your creativity. I recently did this with *I Go Among Trees And Sit Still* by Wendell Berry and saying it aloud always slows me down and grounds me.

WEEK

3

SAVOURING

Once you have honed your observation, the next step is learning to revel in the tiny miracles all around you. This will help you reconnect with your sense of fun and play, essential tools in the creative process.

A table for one

When you come home from work, instead of just grabbing something to eat in front of the TV, set the table ceremoniously, using your best china and perhaps flowers or candles. Do this even if you're dining alone.

Arrange the food on the plate as artistically as you can. Then close your eyes while you eat. It's a wonderful way to taste everything more appreciatively. An even better way to experience this is when weather and space permit dining *al fresco*. The sensory experience of eating outside is far more intense and your taste buds will come alive.

Try a mindfulness experiment

There is a well-known practice in mindfulness that involves meditating on a raisin for up to 20 minutes before finally eating it. By paying minute attention to the texture, appearance, smell and, yes, even the sound of the fruit, by the time you eat it, the experience will be a sensory explosion. Do it with a fresh summery strawberry.

Be a tourist in your own neighbourhood

Looking at familiar surroundings through new eyes can be a wonderful way to spark creativity. Choose either the area where you live or work and then consult a guidebook or the local tourist information office. Draw up a list of five places that are listed as local highlights and which you have never seen, or perhaps didn't even know existed.

By playing at being an explorer, you are reconnecting with your most creative, playful self, and it is a chance to view the world around you differently. If you really want to savour the experience, buy postcards and send them. Treat yourself to a local delicacy while you are at it.

Buy a sketchbook and pencils

Pick a location near your home or work. It could be anywhere: a church, a river view, a fountain... Armed with your sketchbook, aim to visit at different times of the day during the week: early morning, daytime and in the evening, and sketch your impressions.

When you draw things, you see so much more. If you >>>



How to keep it going beyond the summer

● COMMIT TO 15 MINUTES OF SILENCE EVERY DAY. Silence feeds creative thoughts so more ideas will flow.

● PLAY. Research shows that there is a huge connection between creativity and playfulness. Get back in touch with the games you used to play as a child and find a way to reconnect with them,

either with your own children or by having a games night for your friends.

● KEEP A NOTEBOOK IN YOUR BATHROOM. Research indicates that most of us have our best ideas in the shower. Prime yourself to 'catch' them by having somewhere to scribble them down as soon as you are able.

>>> do get hooked, sign up for one of the many Instagram drawing challenges or the *Daily Drawing Challenge* by Lisa Congdon on website Creativebug.

WEEK

4

CREATING

This final week is about celebrating everything you have learned and, if you are feeling confident, sharing your creative breakthrough with family and friends or on social media.

Write a letter to your creative self

In it, thank your creative self for everything it has learned and invented. People disconnect from their creative selves, so this is a way of honouring and affirming that part of you. Reflect on the things you have gained from this four-week journey of playing, exploring and experimenting. Maybe post the letter to yourself in a beautiful envelope decorated with drawings and images.

Frame it

Pick one creative fragment from the past month, frame it and hang it in your home. I always do this at my writing retreats. It is a totem people can take away with them. You could frame anything; a few lines of poetry, a drawing

or a photo, a favourite word or an object. When you frame something, you are saying it has value – and by placing it somewhere prominent, you will be reminded of it. You could also take a photo of your framed item, so you can carry it with you on your phone to remind yourself of your creative achievement.

Review the month

Gather all your photographs, sketchbooks, collages, notebooks and journals. Go through everything that you have created, no matter how small. Scribbled words on napkins, doodles on beer mats, half-formed ideas emailed to yourself in the dead of night, they all count.

Which one is your favourite? Which one feels as if it has the most energy? For the next month, commit to devoting five minutes at the same time every day to the micro-project that you have chosen.

Stage an exhibition

Find a space in your home to exhibit your creativity however you feel best. Your 'exhibition' could last a day, a week or a month, or it may even be a permanent collection. Have a launch party, even if the only guests are your family invited over for tea and cake. You could also have a virtual exhibition, using an online photo-sharing space like Flickr, or print your favourite photos and send them as postcards to friends.