

#62: The Relationship Between Creativity, Stress, and Rest



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With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

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Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Well, hello everyone. So happy you're here. I am really excited for this episode. I love all the episodes I put out but this one in particular I'm so excited to finally share with you all. I've been thinking about this for months, probably six, seven, eight months, really thinking about it, learning about it. And I finally have put it down on paper to now say out loud to you all so you can learn what I've been learning. And I, I don't know, I'm just excited about this episode.

But before we get into it I do have a favor to ask, and I don't ask this lightly. I know this is a big ask. And I really don't take that for granted. So those of you who have been listening for a while, maybe a couple of months, maybe a whole year, maybe since the very beginning, I have an ask for you. Now, if you're new here, welcome, I am so happy you're here. You of course can participate in this as well. But this is, you know, I know folks who have been around for a while listening to various episodes, you might have seen a lot of changes in your experience as an outcome of the podcast or maybe not.

Maybe it's just challenged you and challenged your mind and got you thinking in different ways. And what I would love if you can do, if you have the capacity, if you have the time, if you feel available to rate and review the podcast wherever you listen. I really am on a mission to get this podcast out to as many folks in public health as possible. One-on-one coaching is great, paid coaching is great but for many reasons that might not be accessible to everyone. As well as where folks are in their life right now it might not be the best format.

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But everyone can get something out of this podcast and listen to it or read the transcripts. And I really want to make sure that everyone who can benefit from it in public health who are stressed out and not getting enough rest have the opportunity to learn about this podcast, and the resources, and the tools.

And one of the best ways to do that is to have the ratings and reviews so that when folks search on Apple Podcasts for example, for public health, or stress, or burnout, or rest, this podcast pops up in the first six, eight, much easier for folks to access where they don't have to search through a bunch of podcasts. And much more likely they will find it. And so, if you have the capacity, if you have the ability I would love and so appreciate if you took a few minutes to rate and review. And I know that's not necessarily a simple or easy task.

For some of you that might mean remembering to do it when you get home, or stopping on your walk to do it. For some of you that might be writing your thoughts out in a public forum and that might not be something you do often. So, if you're not comfortable, if it's not your thing, of course, you don't have to. I still love you and I still want you to be listening every week. But if you feel like you can or you want to try, I would so greatly appreciate it.

You can just write one sentence, you can just say things like, I've been listening for a while, it's been helpful, or it's been thought provoking, or you can provide more detail of maybe episodes you've really enjoyed or ways your brain has shifted, or your experience. Whatever you have the capacity, I would really appreciate it, take a few minutes out, rate and review it so we can get this to more folks.

So, in advance for those of you who are able to do that, thank you so, so, so much. I really appreciate it. And I appreciate you taking the time, and the

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effort, and the thoughtfulness. It means a lot and I'm really hoping we can get this to more people.

Okay, with that kind of to top off the episode we're going to jump into the topic of creativity as it relates to stress and rest. So recently I actually – let's see, last Saturday was the first part and this Saturday is the second part of a ceramics workshop I signed up for. I had been feeling a couple of months ago that I wanted to get out of the house more and do something more creative and artsy. And I searched for various classes I could take because I knew for me I could do it at home. And I do creative stuff at home. But I really wanted to get out of the house.

And I actually found ceramics might be the best fit for me. They have more adult classes, there is a bunch of studios where I live. And I finally was able to get into one of their workshops. And I went last weekend. I loved it. It was very – I was so tired when I got home, unexpectedly, mentally, and physically but I loved it. I felt so good and so energized. I had such a good time. I'm really looking forward to go back this Saturday. So, recording this came at the perfect time because I'm actually in the thick of this, and living this, and having this experience.

But first let's define creativity. So, I think in kind of our lay language, everyday language in society, when we hear the word 'creativity' we often think about anything related to art, or even crafts. But there's various forms and definitions of creativity. So, when we are talking about the link between creativity, stress and rest, the research that exists, what I can tell is there's kind of two different paths. And both of these paths don't really clearly define creativity.

Some research really looks at creativity in the sense of problem solving and creative cognition and thinking. And others look at it from a creative activity or expression like painting or dancing. So here is how I am defining

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creativity for the purpose of this episode and this work, this coaching, this thought work perspective. Creativity is both a form of thinking and a form of expression. Creative cognition, so that's the creative thinking and creative emoting, creative emotion.

Thinking or the cognition of our problems or solutions in a novel, or innovative, or unique way, thinking about life experiences, or your emotions, or complex issues in a different or new way. The emoting, the expression of ideas, thoughts, and perspectives, of feelings, connections and relating. So, let's talk about the brain and creativity. There is this narrative in our society that there are 'creative' people and then there are not creative people.

And you might have categorized yourself, I'm creative, or I'm not creative, or they're creative, or they're not creative. And we kind of believe that there is a 'creative' part of your brain and a 'analytic' part of your brain. And you've probably heard this left brain, right brain analogy where we believe that the left brain is analytical and methodical, and the right brain is then creative and artistic. And yeah, the different parts of the brain have different purposes and functions.

But this left brain, right brain, I don't know where this came from but there's just this narrative. I remember growing up with this. I don't know if we were taught formally that you are either one or the other. That you're either a left brain person who is really analytical and you're really not creative, or you're a right brain person, you're really creative but you're not really analytical. And more and more science and research is showing that that is a myth and not true. Neuroscience has shown that creativity is not driven by one part of the brain and that people are not divided into you're creative or not.

In fact, there are many scientists that are artists and many artists that are scientists. And by artists, musicians, painters, whatever it may be. I'm going

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to give a few examples here. You may or may not know these individuals. And I will say, some of them have names that I am not as familiar with. And I looked up the pronunciation and I listened to interviews and audio of the pronunciation, and I might still get it wrong. So, I do apologize in advance.

But the first one I want to point out is Myra Aroyo who's in the band, Ladytron. They are also a molecular geneticist. Maria Sibylla Merian, so probably you might not recognize that name but if you saw their art you probably would recognize it. They were a 17th century naturalist and botanist. And one of the first European scientists to directly observe insects. And her art depicting insects and flowers are displayed in museums, and you've probably seen in textbooks, they're beautiful.

And then Mayim Bialik, she's known for acting, she's in Blossom and Big Bang Theory. And some of you might know she has a doctorate in neuroscience. And George Washington Carver, an agricultural scientist who discovered new ways to use peanuts, very famous, was actually an avid painter and painted more than 70 paintings.

And then Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya. She's a neuroscientist. Has a degree in design, went and got a degree in design after being a neuroscientist and has founded The Leading Strand. It's a company that communicates STEM through design and storytelling. And she's doing so many other amazing art and science intersection things, just a really fascinating, admirable, amazing person. I would go look her up. She's great.

And when you think about this in the context of human centered design practice and engineering, and we're seeing it more and more in public health, still need to integrate it way more in public health. It makes sense, the same with architecture, the same with other forms of engineering and plenty of other science or STEM fields. Through different parts of the brain

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that are either on the right or left side serve different functions, yeah. But the narrative of you either are left brained or right brained is not true.

And self-categorizing into that right brain or left brain narrative is probably not serving you because when you discount yourself as not being a creative person you're missing out on so many ways to engage in your creativity. Yes, you have it, you are creative, and get the benefits of that. And I'm focusing on this today because I find so many people in public health discount their own creativity, even if you work in public health and you can sing, or dance, or play piano, or self-define as creative, you'll probably struggle with prioritizing it and making it a core part of your life.

And you too are missing out on the benefits of that. And there's more research coming out that shows engaging in both kind of creative thinking and expression, and more analytical or scientific helps connectivity between the different parts of your brain. So, before we dive into more details I want to define stress and how we're talking about it today because today we're talking about the relationship between creativity, stress, and rest. But let's get clear on stress itself.

Often when we say we are stressed we really mean we're experiencing an emotion, like overwhelm, or anxiety, or something else. Because stress isn't an emotion, it's a physiological response but we often refer to it as an emotion. Stress happens in your body. When your brain perceives a threat and responds to it, stress cycle begins. Now, this is a simplified version, but this happens when your brain sends off signals across your body to respond to a threat. And I'm putting 'threat' in quotes.

Sometimes the threat is an aggressive dog coming at you and so you may see that as a true threat to your physical safety. Sometimes your brain thinks a threat is the potential of losing your job because you're hearing rumors that there are budget cuts. Sometimes it's just seeing an email in

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your inbox that your brain is like, oh, no, something's gone wrong. So, while our brain thinks a lot of things are 'threats' that may not be, that may not put us in any physical danger or mental and emotional danger. But our brain still has this response.

It's a survival response and we all have it. And it's an important response. It keeps us alive. But it's important to discern, for us to discern when something is truly a threat or when it's just an email and we're not going to die if we open it. So, there are external stressors, external things that happen that may trigger a stress response. The may trigger is really important because just because there is an external stressor does not mean it causes your stress. What is an external stressor that triggers a stress response to one person may not be to another.

One person's brain may interpret their boss's email as a threat and their body goes into the stress response. And another person's brain who's on the same exact email may not. External stressors do not necessarily cause your stress. The way your brain interprets or responds to them does trigger the stress cycle.

So, you read an email and whatever you read on that email, your brain responds to it by telling you, oh my gosh, you're going to lose your job. And then your body goes into the stress cycle, not because of the email but because of your brain's reactions or thoughts in relation to that email. Even if the email said, "Hey, the company will be laying off 10% of our staff this quarter." Your brain might see that and think I'm going to lose my job. And someone else's brain may see that and not have that thought and not go into the stress cycle.

Maybe they're thinking, that's okay, I wanted to leave anyways. Or I'm interviewing for a new job right now anyways, or I probably won't be one of the people cut. Or if I am cut I'll figure it out. So, it's important to recognize

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that just because there's an external stressor it does not necessarily mean it causes your stress, it's your response to it. So, then there is what we call acute stress. This simply means that you experience the onset of stress, this acute stress quickly and the stress cycle completes, or closes relatively quickly as well.

And then there's chronic stress, when you are stuck in the stress cycle, and it doesn't complete. And your brain is reacting to a lot of different external stressors all the time and your body or brain doesn't have the capacity, or the space, or the opportunity to process it all and close the stress cycle. So, keep those definitions in mind as we go through the rest of the content today.

So acute stress actually can increase creativity cognition and expression. Research has shown that depending on the stressor and the level of stress, acute stress actually can increase your creativity. And I'm going to give a very simple example that I think many of us have experienced or can at least imagine. Let's say you're cooking for a party, you're having some friends come over. And you only have an hour before the guests get there. And you realize you're out of a few ingredients that you thought you had but you didn't.

And you can't really go to the store. You could ask someone to bring it over but then the party would start late. So, your brain's already starting to think about problem solving. And then your brain helps you get creative about what to do and maybe get creative about okay, what other ingredients, do I have? What can I try out? What can I make something new? The external potential stressor is maybe time, or when other people are coming and the lack of ingredient. And your brain's first thought might be oh no, this is a problem, I have to fix this.

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And that might start an acute stress response. But from there it can fuel creativity thinking about creative problem solving or creative expression. On the other hand, chronic stress can inhibit creative cognition and expression. If you are experiencing chronic or intense stress then your creative thinking will not be as active. And believing creative expression is valuable won't be at the forefront. Of course, because your brain is focused on survival.

If you're caring for your ill parent full-time, maybe just moved in with them, maybe went through a breakup. That level of stress may be limiting your creative ideas. So of course, your brain is just focused on you getting through the day and not as much focused on how you can be out of the box creative about how you want to make your research proposal more exciting and innovative. Of course, your brain is telling you, you can't take time to go to a dance class because it believes that it's not going to serve you immediately to get through the stressful experience.

Yet here is the irony, creativity actually helps reduce your chronic stress. Creativity, especially creative expression helps you complete your stress cycle and slow your stress. Studies have shown, studies have looked at folks of all skill levels making art and seeing that it reduces and slows the release of stress hormones. Because creative expression like painting your nails, or singing in your car, or doodling creates space for you to process your emotions. It also tells your brain you're safe, that you're not in danger, that you don't need to run.

Creative expression, whether you're making beaded earrings or watching a play, whether you're actively doing it or you're visually taking it in helps you move through your stress cycle and process your emotions. I want you to think about the very beginning of the pandemic, true full lockdown and everyone was making what? Everyone was making sourdough bread. People who had made sourdough bread before and people who had never

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baked before. And now it's kind of a joke or it became a joke at some point. Everyone's just making sourdough bread.

But it actually makes sense, it was a creative expression that helped people process the stress and their emotions of a very scary, and unknown, and unfamiliar time. So, let's talk a little bit more about creativity and rest because creative expression which helps you process, and express emotions allows you to rest because you are no longer stuck in your emotions. You aren't resisting them or fighting them. You get that mental and emotional space of freedom to feel rested.

And creative cognition helps you think about your experience in a new, and innovative, and more helpful way. It helps you rest because you aren't getting stuck in unhelpful thought patterns. You are empowering yourself to find a solution. You are deciding to figure it out. It allows you to slow or complete your stress cycle and use that mental and emotional energy for something else, or just to reserve it and enjoy the space that you get.

Now, it's really important to understand that we have been told through society that creative cognition, i.e., creative thinking is more valuable than creative expression. That problem solving and creative thinking is valuable because it means you're smart and you can make money, and you can use it to get a job. But creative expression is not, doesn't mean anything about your intellect. And you can't make money from it. We've been told these messages. And there's historical messages too.

So, I'm going to just give two examples but let's think about the patriarchy and creativity from a historical context for one second. For hundreds of years prior to the 20th century in largely white aristocratic families, women were told growing up by their governors and then there was a terminology for it, prepping to be a wife basically or find a husband. To learn how to paint, and play piano, and cross stitch, I believe, and there's probably a few

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other things. Not because it was a valued way to express yourself, or because it had anything to do with your intellect.

But because it was believed that's how a woman can get a man to desire her in order to get married. And here's some white supremacy and capitalism, and creative history for you, and actually present day experience as well, both presently and historically. There are big corporations and designers profiting off stealing art, stealing design from communities of color. And specifically, one I want to highlight is indigenous communities, their ideas, their prints.

While native artists often told their beadwork and their handmade blankets, and other products are too expensive, or not valuable. So, I point out these two examples to say the messages we receive, we receive them today, but they also have been communicated over hundreds of years in different ways. And we interpret those messages, and we believe them to be true. The messages about the value of creative expression are heavily influenced by society and systems of oppression.

The same with the messages about the value in creative cognition. Both forms of creativity are valuable and useful in some similar and some distinct ways and not because it has anything to do with making money, or your intellect, or anything else other than it helps you process your emotions. It helps you think creatively. It helps you problem solve. It helps you support yourself. They both serve you and your personal evolution and help you manage and be with your experience as a human in an imperfect, sometimes harmful complex messy world.

Creative thinking and cognition helps you think differently about something. Creative expression and emoting helps you process your emotions. The fact that creative expression and emoting is devalued I also think is tied directly to our society's belief that emotions are weak, that they don't matter

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and they're not professional. Processing your emotions is one of the most fundamental parts of being a human.

And having the tool of creative expression to engage in that, to help you do that and allow you to do that is one of the gifts of being human, and of the human brain that no other animal to my knowledge at least, has in that same way. Now, we also get a lot of messages from socialization around creative expression activities specifically. For example, I love baking. I enjoy doing it. It definitely helps me process my emotions, I feel rested. And lately I've been noticing my brain saying to me, whispering, "Don't bake too much, you'll gain weight."

That belief, that thought in my head is socialization straight from fat phobia. Let's imagine if you're in your 50s or 60s, and maybe you want to take a painting class. Your brain might say to you, "Well, you can't because everyone else will be younger." Or, "Look at that instructor, they're the age of your daughter." Or, "You won't be able to do it because of your arthritis." Without finding out if that's actually true or if the instructor can modify it, or if there's things you can do to help you with that.

Those internalized messages are forms of ageism and ableism. Many children of immigrants for example, from Asian, or African communities, or families and others receive messages that focusing on STEM as a learning, and experience, and career, is most important. So, focus on math not art. Become a doctor not a musician. And everyone has been socialized by capitalism to believe that the only time you should engage in creative expression is if you are either (a) good at it or (b) can make money off of it or both.

And that is why our brains are so focused on if we are 'good' at being creative. And if we aren't good at that our brains are like, why do it, it's a waste of time. Or if we are 'good' at it then our brains tell us we should

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make money from it and should be a side hustle which you totally can make it a side hustle. But I just want you to notice the ways in which capitalism tells us it's the only thing you can do rather than just deciding I'm going to engage in this even if I'm 'good' just because I want to.

We are also socialized to believe that forms of creative expression are limited, that it's only painting, or dancing, or singing. That is so not true. creative expression can be nearly anything, can be baking like I said, or cooking. It can be painting your nails. It can be rearranging your furniture, can be doodling, can be doing your makeup and so, so much more. I know there's a lot there today to unpack but I'm going to just give you kind of end summary of what I want you to walk away with.

One, everyone is creative. Everyone has creative cognition and creative thinking, everyone has creative expression and creative emoting. It might be different person to person, but everyone is creative in both those ways. And two, creativity is a tool you have accessible to you to reduce and prevent stress and feel rested. Sometimes this means you have to decide on purpose to engage this tool because your primitive brain, your stress response is a little bit overloaded processing what's going on.

And you can do this by having creative activities in your schedule ahead of time, or building it into your habits. Or choosing to engage in creative activities that you're familiar with rather than something brand new, where then you have to process all the information. So instead of cooking a new recipe when you're really stressed, maybe it's cooking a familiar or family recipe you've made a bunch. Or make it as easy as possible for yourself by getting additional supports.

So, one example right now, a form of expression that I'm working on is through how I dress, my clothes. And instead of going to the store and trying on a bunch of clothes, and figuring out my style and all that, I'm doing

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a clothing rental service right now. I'm creative in my clothing but I don't have to really shop for it. I don't have to think about it. I don't have to go anywhere.

I think that's one of the reasons why the meal kits are really popular, not just the ease and the convenience but people can be creative but not have to do a lot of the intense thinking around how to learn that skill or how to think about it.

Okay, last part I want you to take away with. Part of the reason you don't engage in creative activities, or you struggle engaging with creative activities is because you have been told you can't shun it, or it doesn't matter. And your brain is going to keep offering you these socialized beliefs, but you don't have to believe them. You can detach from these beliefs and engage in creative activities anyways.

So, over this next week I just want you to think about all the ways you are already being creative and engaging in creativity. I know you're already doing it. There's already things you're doing. I want you to spend time thinking about that and acknowledging that. And then from there decide if there's other ways of being creative that you want to try, that you want to learn, that you want to do. And your brain's going to offer you, well, you're not good at it or you don't have time, or you shun it, or you should make money off of this, all that nonsense.

You don't have to listen to it. You can choose to engage in a creative activity because you enjoy it, because you know it helps you process your emotions, because you want to feel rested through it, because it will help prevent stress. You can choose to be creative and practice your creativity no matter who you are, no matter what circumstance you're in, no matter what you're going through.

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It has nothing to do with your intellect, or your skill level or whether you can make money off of it, it is a tool you have accessible to you to help you process your stress, to help you process your emotion, to help you think differently about what you're experiencing, to help you empower yourself, to support yourself. So, with that I'm going to leave you all for the week. I'll talk to you next week, have a great one. Bye everyone.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.