

Episode 5 - Transcript

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome to the fifth episode of this series of *In Ten Years' Time: How to Live a Creative Life*. Thank you so much for being here. I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a creative person. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer and a podcaster. And I'm here with an aim to inspire you to live a creative life. To find a balance of creativity that works for you and to encourage you to make that creative dream a reality.

With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of ten to help us, we will live a more satisfying life. If you'd like to engage with this conversation, please follow me @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook.

I respond to every direct message and if there's a topic or question you'd like me to research and discuss, I would love to hear about it.

[00:01:00] I've spent the last two years trailing ways to live a more creative life and I'm distilling all I have learned in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey.

Today we're going to talk about overcoming creative blocks. The time you just can't get into it, nothing's going right, or you procrastinate and don't even dare to get started. There are a few creatives I know who say that being creatively blocked isn't a real thing.

But the vast majority suffer with this phenomenon in some way at some point. So I think it's worth us having that conversation. I am not immune to this by any means. But I do have some tools that can sometimes help.

Interestingly, what helps me one week may not help the next. So, if you're anything like me, we need a few arrows in our quiver to help us navigate blocks in different ways. And something that shouldn't be underestimated. We need to know when it's simply time to have a rest.

The first thing I want us to look at together is why [00:02:00] we are blocked. I should say I'm using the word 'blocked' as shorthand for all the things that stop us creating. For you, it could feel more like procrastination, like being tired, like an emotional barrier, or like being overwhelmed. Breaking down the cause can sometimes lead you to the solution or perhaps give you permission just to stop for a moment.

Our creativity is so tied to our identity that stopping can feel like giving up part of ourselves. Am I still a songwriter if I'm not writing songs? We talked about creative identity in episode one of this series, so I won't get into that again now, but I would recommend checking out that episode if you haven't already heard it.

Back to this question of why we are blocked. When you feel things aren't working it is worth taking some time to just journal or meditate on what the cause might be as a first step. The reason I would recommend this is because sometimes we might actually be ill, overworked or exhausted and the answer to that type of [00:03:00] block is actually to cut down and rest.

Taking the time to analyse the cause can help you own your decision to rest, if that's the best thing for you at the time. If thinking about this on your own isn't working, then ask a friend, ideally an artist. As you know by now, I research all these things extensively and I have many ways to deal with creative blocks, but that doesn't mean I am immune to them.

When I am blocked, I have a couple of people I can go to. One of them is author and illustrator Kapu Lewis. We've been friends and colleagues for many years and she's an extraordinary writer and someone who knows me very, very well.

She has a different personality to me. Sometimes when we work on a project together, I feel as though we make a whole person between us because she is able to fill the gaps I have and challenge me in a certain way. I will add a link to her website so that you can check out her work. I can remember conversations I've had with her when she has given me

advice that is exactly the sort of advice I would give on this podcast or probed me for an [00:04:00] underlying cause.

For some reason, I hear it better when she says it. We all need a friend like Kapu. As you embrace your creative life, you will no doubt find that person in your community. They may already be there. In the meantime, I am here for you. If you need me, just send me a direct message and I will do anything I can to help.

If you figure out during this thinking that you are unwell or exhausted, please take this as full permission to rest. Resting is a creative act. I genuinely believe that. In fact, I intend to do an entire episode on the power of sleep and napping as an act of creativity in a future series.

For now, look at your diary, look at your deadlines and work out when you can rest. Sleeping, watching TV, spending time with friends, doing nothing, however that rest looks for you: embrace it and relish the fact that you will come back better and more creative as a result. See what emerges.

[00:05:00] I realise as I am writing this it is easier said than done. Deadlines can hang over us in a way that feel difficult to overcome. When we're suffering from even a minor sickness like a cold, it can pile on the emotional pressure. For me, as a singer, it almost always puts me behind schedule if I have vocals to record. It's deeply uncomfortable. can feel like the end of the world in the moment.

Do you remember the book I mentioned earlier in this series, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff, and It's All Small Stuff*? If you have a cold and you're put behind by a few days or even a week, no one, you included, is even going to remember that a year from now. Even a month from now, it will be behind you. Take the permission to rest and slow down and sort it out later.

Okay, sickness and exhaustion aside, the majority of this conversation needs to be about other kinds of block. Now I want to talk about the

type of block that has you trapped in your own thinking. The type that makes [00:06:00] you clean the house top to bottom, or change the sheets, towels, wash the dog bed all before 9am. Because they suddenly seem so urgent and now I feel really productive because I have accomplished so much! Yes, I see you overachieving house cleaner. Then there's the type that sends you into an emotional turmoil of pain, fear, doubting your abilities and completely paralyzes you.

Finally, there's the type that comes when you find the tried and tested creative habits you have cultivated have suddenly stopped working. What do you do? For all of these blockers, I suggest taking a moment to step back from your creativity and really ask yourself, what is causing you to feel this way? I suspect that you will find your resistance is caused by some flavour of discomfort. You might not recognise it as that, it's hard to admit to ourselves that we have fears about our creativity, but your mind is very good at protecting you. So we really should be applauding our brains for these blockers. The parasympathetic [00:07:00] nervous system is there for a very good reason. You've heard about the fight or flight response. This is designed to help us survive when the sabre-toothed tiger was prowling outside our cave.

Now I'm not a neuroscientist or a psychologist, so I will refrain from the amateur science lesson here. The point is that when you are under attack or even just feeling uncomfortable, your thoughts and your responses are there to protect you. To help you survive what seems to be a threat. The fact that you suddenly prioritise the washing, cleaning, et cetera, are a very modern form of survival. It's a way for your mind to give you success. Something you can be good at. A sense of accomplishment and a distraction from the fear or discomfort that your art or your craft might not be any good.

Clever, aren't we? Okay. Maybe. But having a clever mind is really unhelpful sometimes. For me, just knowing this, being able to pragmatically work through what my thoughts are doing can sometimes be enough. [00:08:00] When I was preparing for this particular episode, I planned to get up at 6am on a Sunday morning to do the research.

I went to bed early. Before I went to sleep, I journaled on how the episode was going to be broken down into its constituent parts. At 8.30am I finally made it to my desk. As I was lying in bed, I kept on saying to myself, 'why don't I just get on with it? Why aren't I getting up? I have a lot to accomplish today. If I start now, I could have the bulk of the research done by mid-morning.' And yet, I still didn't do it. I dozed, snoozed the alarm, told myself I was researching by thinking about the topic of creative blocks.

And I guess in some ways that was true, at the very least I got an example to share with you all. The inner critic is at play here. This relates entirely to what we discussed when we talked about imposter syndrome. Go back and listen to episode three of this series if you missed it. If you can step outside yourself and acknowledge that your inner critic is at play, sometimes that's enough to allow yourself the chance to override that [00:09:00] thinking. You will feel able to get back to creating.

Let us remind ourselves here that your thoughts are entirely in your control. If you're thinking something negative that is stopping you creating, you can choose not to think that anymore. I know that seems oversimplified, but sometimes we forget that although our thoughts are the result of all our experiences, memories and beliefs, we are able to decide consciously to choose a different thought.

It's not always as easy to do as I have just described it, but if we lean into consciously recognising that we are sabotaging ourselves by allowing ourselves to think unhelpful things, it can be the first step to dealing with the blocker.

So what else can we do? Here is my list of ideas to overcome blocks. I've made a worksheet with these ideas that's available on my website so that you can come back to them later if you need to.

No. 1: change your routine. If you usually create late at night, try waking up earlier in the [00:10:00] morning. If you do your creative work in your

lunch break after you eat, try creating first and eating after. Just the smallest change to your usual habits can make a significant difference.

No.2: set a fake deadline. This is one of my go to blocker hacks. I think I've mentioned before that I will tell myself I'm just going to write a bad verse by noon. No pressure. I have all morning, plenty of time and no expectation of the results. By removing the pressure to make something good, and I'm doing the inverted commas with my fingers as I say good, it helps us to get back to process over outcome. Something we discussed at length in the first series.

No.3: create a real deadline. Alongside the fake deadline, sometimes a real deadline can help. And accountability is really important here. Especially if you work for or by yourself. That could take the form of a promise to a friend. Or perhaps it's time to enrol on a course or commit to an exhibition or a performance of some kind. [00:11:00] Sadly, nothing was ever learned inside your comfort zone and sharing your work is a critical part of your creative journey. A real deadline can be incredibly motivating and help us grow along the way.

No.4: collaborate. Explore a project or a part of your project that involves another person. By bringing someone else in on the journey with you, you create accountability to another artist who will depend on you. Now you have someone else invested in the project and its potential success, as well as the benefit of their creative ideas. I should say I'll touch on a form of blocker that can happen in collaboration before we end, but for now, do something with someone else and enjoy the sense of communion.

No.5: get a change of scene. This could take the form of an artist's date as recommended by Julia Cameron in *The Artist's Way*. Getting out of your usual location can work wonders for unpicking your blocks. Even moving rooms in your house or going to a different coffee [00:12:00] shop, taking your notebook to a park or simply walking around the block can be just enough to get you back on track.

No.6: get some exercise. Now, as you know, I'm a runner and I can't tell you the number of times I've had to stop on my runs to crash an idea into my voice notes. Any repetitive exercise will allow your mind to enter a meditative state that can release ideas and create motivation. If you run, I highly recommend that, but 20 minutes of yoga, a gentle walk, 10 minutes of skipping, 20 minutes of gardening, a swim, a cycle ride, they can all offer the same effect. Not that I want to encourage the procrastination we mentioned earlier, but I have found that even hanging the washing out with energy can be enough to get the blood pumping and the creative juices flowing again.

No.7: take a shower or bath. Again, just like running, I find the running water over my face is a surefire way to get me inspired. I do that dripping all over the bedroom thing to [00:13:00] get ideas down into my phone. Showering is particularly good for melodies. I'm not sure how that translates for a painter. It could be messy! If you're into cold water techniques, you could try that too.

No.8: find a creative input. Watch a film, watch a documentary, read a poem, do some research, look at a painting, go into nature, go to a museum. Anything that will give you a stimulus that could inspire you. You might choose to go and explore something that aligns with your own creativity or something completely different. Box set dramas are also inspirational, but choose your timing wisely. It's easy to get seduced into another episode and that can become a new form of procrastination.

No.9: talk to the mirror. Have you ever heard of this technique of giving yourself a high five in the mirror in the morning? It's a technique created by Mel Robbins. It basically involves positive self talk every morning to the mirror and, yes, you guessed it, giving yourself a high five. This is something [00:14:00] you could try as a daily practice or as a way to help you navigate out of your blocks. The rule is, no negativity. Go to the mirror and tell yourself, you got this. And how great you're going to feel when you've created. It genuinely works. So simple. I'll put a link to Mel's book and website in the show notes.

No. 10. Read a tarot card. Whether you believe in the powers of the tarot deck or not, I find having a set of tarot cards on my desk helpful just to get me out of my head sometimes and offer me a new way of thinking. It might sound a bit woo woo to you, so if you don't like the idea of tarot, which I completely understand, there are other cards you could use. There's a useful app called the Whack Pack, which I also sometimes use. It offers new ways into a problem. You can simply ask it to give you 'a whack' and it offers inspiration or a story.

Okay, let me do that now and see what comes up. Okay, I got 'use your shield'. The only [00:15:00] person who likes change is a wet baby, it says here! It's basically saying that change is inevitable, that you need to be brave and accept challenge when it comes, have a thick skin and push through.

Let me draw a tarot card and see what that does too. I shuffle the cards. I cut them. And then I pick one. But if a card falls out while I'm shuffling, I usually go with that one. Okay. I've got the 'knight of cups', let's see what the internet has to say about that. I drew the card upright so it says it's the card of creativity, romance, charm, imagination and beauty. Well that gives me confidence that I'm on the right track with this episode!

I want to be clear that I personally don't believe that the tarot deck can tell my future or solve my problems but it does offer me a new way of thinking and perhaps offers a little bit of external stimulus which is very useful. [00:16:00] I'm sure there are other hacks out there for getting past your creative blocks. If you have other techniques I haven't mentioned here, I would love to hear about them. Before we end, I just want to talk briefly about a couple of other types of blocks that you may encounter on your creative journey.

The first regards collaboration. Sometimes communication just breaks down and collaborating becomes a lot harder than it should. If this happens, I would encourage you to have a brave conversation with your partner or partners. Are they feeling it too? Break it down. Take a break.

Use the hacks I have listed already together. Communication is a critical part of collaboration. Be open and flexible and I have no doubt that you will get back on track if that's right for you both.

There are two other things that may come up for you as a blocker. Lack of resources, or money, or other personal challenges. We've talked about the lack of resources before. And I recognise that it is a real issue for many. [00:17:00] How can a painter paint with no supplies? Or a musician play without any instruments? I would encourage you to think outside the box. Sometimes what can seem like a huge limitation can be an inspiration.

Sometimes limitations can literally set you free. Look at Matisse and his scissor art created when he was in ill health or the book *Gadsby*, written with no E's, or the Cat in the Hat, written with less than 240 words, or indeed Hemingway's six-word stories.

Personal challenges, changes of circumstance can put huge pressure on your creativity. When you have other demands on your time and your mental capacity, this can be hugely challenging. And I think you have a couple of options here. You can wait for the time to pass. Or you can use your creativity to help you process what's going on for you. We're going to talk in a lot more detail about limitations next episode when I interview Sarah Johnson. [00:18:00] More on that in a second.

Right, it's time to get to the question, the challenge and the recommendation for this week. My challenge to you is to change your scene. Even if you're not currently blocked, actually, *especially* if you aren't feeling blocked right now, it is so useful to be able to take your creativity to a new place and see what comes up for you. If you do it when you're in a good space, it will be easier to try it again when you're struggling with motivation.

The question is a big one. What scares you? You may not be able to answer this in a minute. But again, taking some time to think about this when you're in a good place is useful because you can come back to it

and examine whether it's underpinning any blocks later down the line when they hit you.

If you're currently feeling blocked, it is a useful topic to meditate and journal on too before you try the hacks to ease you back into a good place.

Finally, the [00:19:00] recommendation. I have two books for you this week. Check out Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. It's a really easy read and it's crammed full of ways to work through creative blocks, whatever your chosen art form is.

A link in the show notes as always. The second book is not a creativity book, but it does offer some helpful case studies of people who've used great adversity to create success. It's called *The Obstacle is the Way* by Ryan Holiday.

Thank you for joining me this week. If you've enjoyed the podcast, please tell a friend all about it. And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter via the website intoneyearstime.com. I send recommendations and creativity tips every fortnight. I am working hard to keep the podcast ad free. If you've got some value from the episodes, the resources or my newsletter, please consider buying me a coffee. You can do that on my website too.

Next week, I'm so excited to be interviewing an incredible woman [00:20:00] who, like all of us, has many aspects to her identity. Sarah Johnson is a highly creative person, an author, a mother, an access coordinator, and a wild swimmer. She's going to help me navigate a conversation about physical and non-physical challenges that can sometimes seem unsurmountable. And I hope that it will help us reframe some of these things not as challenges, but as superpowers that can actually enhance your creativity.

Until then, I wish you peace and love.