

Series 6 Episode 4

Hello and welcome to episode four of the sixth series of *In Ten Years Time*, I am so grateful you are here. I'm Tricia Duffy, 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 your creative dreams a reality.

Before we start this week's episode, I want to take a moment to talk to you about independence. As a small creator, I work independently in all my work, but the truth is I couldn't do it without the support of my amazing listeners. I believe strongly in keeping this podcast sponsorship free so that I can independently decide what I speak about.

If you believe in creative freedom, I'd love it if you could become a monthly or one off donor. I'm currently running a campaign to cover the cost of the next series. Please visit my website www.intenyearstime.com/donate [00:01:00] to give to the show, and thank you.

In this series, we're thinking about the science of creativity and what is happening in our brains and our bodies when we engage in our art or craft, how we might be able to use creativity to improve our health and wellbeing, and how creativity can heal. I have been exploring how having a craft or artistic practice can support us as we age and thinking about what it means to be creative in the context of neurological differences.

We're exploring social narratives and myths about our brains, and trying to sort the facts from the fiction. Researching the series has been enlightening and challenging, and I hope it opens your mind and your heart to embrace the creative person you are and always have been. I've touched briefly on the impact that creativity can have on our long-term cognitive health in many episodes of this podcast series already.

And today I want to dive further into one of the most compelling reasons to embrace a creative life today offered by the [00:02:00] scientific community: the devastating impacts of dementia.

Are you or do you know someone who is impacted by dementia? As I sit here today, I can immediately think of at least a dozen friends with close family members living with a form of dementia, and I also have relatives who've been recently diagnosed. It is unfortunately a common disease. It's estimated that one in three people will be diagnosed with some form of dementia, and cases have been on the rise due to the fact that we are living longer, as well as other causes such as genetic predisposition, lifestyle factors, and even environmental pollutants.

When I think about what might happen to me as I age, the thought experiment takes me to several different places. I think about the changes in my physical appearance, my body, my hair, my face, the lines around my eyes permanently etched from the million times I have laughed in a lifetime. [00:03:00] The horizontal strokes across my forehead from a thousand frowns.

I think about my physical ability changing. It is inevitable that I will slow down and I might even become immobile. I do not relish the idea of ageing into disability, but of all the areas of decline that perhaps inevitably await me, to lose any ability to think or make sense of what's happening around me and not to be able to create terrifies me the most.

There's a common narrative when thinking about people in very old age that we prize them for being 'all there'. 'She was all there right to the end.' An admirable quality we see in others, perhaps because it's what we wish for ourselves, and yet it's something that we might not be able to control, not entirely anyway.

This episode is all about what we might be able to do to keep our minds young [00:04:00] for the whole of our lives. The statistical chance of us being diagnosed with dementia remains high. And the vast

number of types of dementia and how it impacts any individual cannot be predicted, or in some cases completely avoided.

But all my research into this has led me to the same conclusion: that living with creativity of any kind, regardless of the quality of the creative output, coupled with lifelong learning, can make a positive difference to the way our brains will age.

Going through the menopause was the closest I have come in my own lifetime to thinking I had lost my tiny mind. Some days the mental fog I was operating in, my inability to retrieve simple information, words, facts, to remember straightforward things, made me feel like I was being tortured. In my darkest moments, I started to entertain the idea that perhaps my own family were in on [00:05:00] some elaborate plot to make me believe I had gone crazy so they could get me committed and get hold of my possessions, like the plot of one of those Hallmark thrillers where the protagonist has witnessed something they shouldn't have seen and their husband starts drugging them with low levels of sleeping pills every day in their morning coffee.

These partners, they act so sympathetic. 'Things will get better. I'm here for you.' And all along it was *him* who was making the very sensible, beautiful, clever woman feel like she was going mad. Yes. Okay. I've got to watch fewer bad movies!

I'm not the first to tell a story of feeling confused during the menopause, but if you haven't experienced it for yourself, I want you to understand how disorientating it can be. At the peak of my confusion, I got into my husband's car, drove to the local high road, paid for parking, got out of the car and stood there on the pavement with absolutely no clue what I was doing there. There was nothing in my diary to offer me a hint. I can only assume I'd gone to pick something up or to buy something, but to this day, [00:06:00] I haven't got a scooby-doo what it was. It was horrible, terrifying. I drove home and I cried because I was clearly being tortured. That was the only possible explanation, right? Either that or early onset dementia.

Now everyone's experience of the menopause will be entirely unique, ranging from a symptomless transition to an even more extreme version than I've described happening to me. The comedian, Cally Beaton, has spoken openly about her own mental health crisis, a misdiagnosis of the menopause as bipolar disorder, which led her to dramatically change her career in midlife.

The impacts of menopause were, for me, relatively temporary, although it felt like a lifetime. In my case, I'm a good candidate for HRT and that has felt like it's brought my body and mind back to something resembling its premenopausal state. Modern medicine is quite incredible. But this is not an episode about the menopause [00:07:00] Though I'm always interested to hear other women's experience of it. Rather, I'm raising this because in those moments it was a brief insight into the terrifying nature of what it might be like not to feel myself, to lose a sense of my identity. It was disorientating.

It was a fleeting way for me to imagine what living with dementia might be like, but it was temporary. And the symptoms of dementia only get worse over time: most commonly memory loss, difficulty controlling emotions and problems with language. It's a cruel disease, and for family members, it can be tragic and upsetting to feel they've lost part of their loved one.

The scientific community believe that there are over a hundred known forms of dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's. But as I explained in previous episodes, every single brain is completely unique, and so the impacts of dementia and how the disease presents [00:08:00] itself is entirely different in every individual.

It is widely accepted that lifestyle changes such as regular physical exercise, getting enough sleep, eating a healthy diet and not smoking, can reduce the likelihood of being diagnosed with dementia, alongside reducing the risk of all sorts of other diseases as well.

However, in the last few decades, a myriad of studies have also associated a lower instance of dementia in individuals who have meaningful and regular social interactions and participate in some form of art or creativity. Professor Daisy Fancourt of University College London has conducted multiple studies into dementia incidence. In one such study culminating in 2018, she and her colleagues found that the occurrence of dementia was reduced in adults over 50 in a ten-year period just by visiting an art gallery, museum, or other cultural exhibition once every few months. [00:09:00]

Why? Her theory is that visiting such institutions led individuals to experience a vast array of stimulating things including light, physical activity, social engagement, and of course cognitive stimulation.

Another study conducted in 2006 by Swiss researcher Beat Ted Hannemann begins with the premise that being creative is a basis for human life, and explored the impact that creative practice had on dementia patients. Hannemann found that creative activity of any kind, regardless of the output or quality of the art or craft, reduced depression and isolation, and offered the individuals the ability to exercise choices and make their own decisions and opened up a means to access emotions.

He found that art sharpened the senses and improved the patient's ability to 'act themselves'. Most compelling and moving for me, the participation in art offered hope. [00:10:00] Link in the show notes.

A term that repeatedly came up when I was researching this episode was 'cognitive reserves.' What are cognitive reserves? To use a computing analogy, if the brain is a hard-drive, then the cognitive reserves are the software that makes that hard-drive usable. It is a term that was coined in the eighties when researchers did autopsies on the brains of people with no detectable symptoms of dementia, but found that their brains showed physical changes consistent with advanced Alzheimer's disease. The hypothesis from this study was that these individuals had such significant cognitive reserves that they were able to

offset the damage from the disease and participate in daily life completely normally. There's a brilliant article about this study from Harvard Medical School in the show notes.

Further research has backed up these findings: that the greater the cognitive reserves, the better chance we have of reducing the impacts of not [00:11:00] just dementia, but other brain diseases such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, or even a stroke.

The research also indicated that larger reserves can help us function better when we encounter other challenges, from stress to surgery, or even coping with toxins in our environment. The bright folk at Harvard Medical School are clear that these reserves don't just come from learning a new skill. It's a combination of factors that improves our brain's fitness, which includes sleeping well, eating healthily, exercise, stress management, and social interaction alongside mental stimulation and learning. This was reinforced by the episode of the late Michael Mosley's show *The Secrets of the Superagers* that I recommended in episode one of this series. The very first episode of the show explored the impacts that learning to paint and picking up a new language had on the cognitive age of patients, one of whom achieved a cognitive age of just [00:12:00] 19 years old after just a few months.

I don't know about you, but I'm convinced. And even better news, as we have discussed in many previous series, not only does investing in my creativity have the potential to keep my brain age lower and build my cognitive reserves, it also has immediate benefits to my wellbeing today. Boosting my mood, improving my communication skills, reducing my stress levels, and improving my memory.

This is probably the best advert for creativity I can possibly give you. The question is though, does this really help us to start creating? We have a problem in Western society that undermines all the undeniable benefits I've just outlined. If our creativity is not contributing to the economic system, that it is somehow considered worthless. I mentioned the prevalence of left-brain thinking in the previous episode. It is my

wish for you that the [00:13:00] evidence I've provided in this episode gives you the language you need to defend your right to create.

I wish I could use some sliding doors to prove the financial benefits of choosing to invest in your creativity. Sadly, even the fairy godmother of creativity cannot ever know that investing in my cognitive health today will save me a small fortune in the future, but I'm willing to take the risk. None of us have a crystal ball that can predict the future for our physical or financial health. We walk every day into a sea of unknowns, but at some point we have to take a step towards a future that feels right for us.

In Western culture, the concept of retirement and the way that ageing is perceived is pretty narrow. As my 80-year-old mother says, 'I hate getting old, but I don't fancy the alternative.' I am in midlife and I want to change entirely the narrative about my own ageing journey so that I can, with a [00:14:00] combination of good choices, genetics, and of course a bit of luck, hopefully die with my mind 'all there.'

I think most of us don't really want to think about dying. However, it's the only thing we can be certain of, and it will happen to us all whether we think about it or not.

The bestselling author, Bronnie Ware, in her book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* list, the lessons she learned from working in palliative care with patients at the end of life as a tool for the living. Link to the book in the show notes, of course. But her five insights from her patients were, number one: I wish I had lived a life that was authentic to me and not the life others expected of me. Two: I wish I hadn't worked so hard. Three: I wish I had the courage to express my feelings to show love and vulnerability. Four: I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends and invested [00:15:00] in my relationships. And five: I wish I had let myself be happier.

She talks eloquently about the 'choice' of happiness. This is really powerful, and I wonder if you're already thinking about how this applies

to your own life. I've also included a link in the show notes to a short YouTube video of Bronnie describing these benefits. What's amazing about this book and Bronnie's experience is the universality of these themes. They don't just come up some of the time, they come up consistently. Isn't it time for us to learn from all the human beings that have trodden this mortal coil before us and start doing some of the things that really make us tick for a life well lived and for our short and long-term cognitive health?

With that profound thought in mind, I think it's a great moment to stop and to offer you a challenge, a question, and a recommendation. The challenge is this: I would love to invite you to journal on [00:16:00] Bronnie's five regrets of the dying. How do they apply to you, and how can you prevent having those regrets for yourself? Another way to think about this is to think about what a life well lived might look like for you. What do you wish for as you age?

I know this is uncomfortable and some of you may find it extremely challenging. When I run the In Ten Years' Time workshop, I ask participants to think about how their lives will look in ten years' time. I will be - assuming nothing tragic happens - 64 in ten years' time. whether I think about it or not. Thinking about it empowers me to make decisions that align with my truest self every day. That makes me more content, less stressed. And, as we have discussed here today, those choices hopefully will help me protect my brain health now and for the future too. This is a win-win and some.

The question is this: what would you like to [00:17:00] learn? What's the one thing you've always thought it would be nice to learn, but you've never done it? Is it a language, a craft, an area of philosophical inquiry, or some other research theory? It's never too late to learn. Make a short list of things and take one tiny step, just five minutes, to explore where you might find a class or a book or some online content to help you start. Go back to the episode on compound creativity to inspire you to take those small, tiny steps each day.

You will be amazed how quickly you can start to learn and develop skills. And the recommendation is this: to pick up a copy of the poetry book *Dancing by the Light of the Moon*, compiled by Gyles Brandreth. It's a beautiful compilation of poetry, but more than that, Gyles goes into detail on why memorising poems is so good for your brain health, to [00:18:00] boost your brain power, extend your vocabulary, and beat cognitive decline. A right on message for this episode. He breaks down techniques for doing this in the book too. A lovely book to have on the nightstand.

Next time I want to talk about the relationship between our own unique neurodiversity and our creativity. Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook. Sign up to my creativity newsletter on the website, and if you know someone who might benefit from everything we've been thinking about today, please just open your phone right now and text them a link to this episode.

I suspect they will appreciate that as much as I will. Until next time, keep creating and learning. Peace and love.