# Series 6 Episode 1

[00:00:00] Hello, this is episode one of the sixth series of *In 10 Years Time*. I'm so grateful you are here. I am 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 make your creative dreams a reality.

Before we get going with this new series, I just want to say a few words. This show is all about the beauty of creativity, of risk taking and forging your own path without the pressures of society's expectations. And the spirit of this podcast is independent. There's no commercial backing, no sponsorship, no ads, just me in my recording studio, bringing my creative dream to life.

If you've stuck around, I imagine you are the kind of person that supports that vision, and if so, I'd love it if you could consider a small contribution to keep the [00:01:00] show going, and ensure that more people can benefit from *In 10 Years Time*, I'm running a campaign to cover the costs of the next series, please visit my website www.intenyears time.com/donate.

Thank you.

In this series, I'm thinking about the science of creativity, about what is happening in our brains when we engage in our craft or our art, about how we might be able to use our creativity to improve our health and wellbeing, and how creativity can heal.

I want to explore how having a craft or artistic practice can support us as we age and think about what it means to be creative in the context of neurological differences. I'll explore social narratives and myths about our brains and try to sort the facts from the fiction.

Researching this series has been both enlightening and challenging. I hope it opens your mind and your [00:02:00] heart to embrace the creative person you are and always have been. I've talked about the

benefits of creativity, art, and craft on our health and wellbeing in previous episodes. Even before I started excavating the extensive research offered by neurologists, psychologists, sociologists, and arts academics, all my instincts told me that art and craft and creativity was good for me and everyone around me, I just didn't have the cold, hard evidence. Well relax everyone. The proof is in! Hundreds of studies in universities and institutions all over the world offer the same unanimous conclusion: living a creative life is good for your health.

One of my favourite creative resources is a book I mentioned briefly in the last series called *Your Brain on Art* by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross. On the very last page, they say "the arts have the ability to [00:03:00] transform you like nothing else. They can help you move from sickness to health, stress to calm, or sadness to joy, and they enable you to flourish and thrive. They can lead you to profound altered states, changing your very physiology."

Now if that doesn't encourage us to live with creativity, I don't know what will! Link to this wonderful book that incidentally cites more than 200 studies to back up this assertion in the show notes. I highly recommend it.

A distinct sensation I have been aware of in my creative practice for many years is a sensation that I clumsily describe as using my 'back brain.' The way I would describe this to others is if I was working on something creative, like say an episode of this podcast or a song that I would think about it consciously for a bit, and then I would try to actively send it to my 'back brain' [00:04:00] for computing. It felt like a process of sending information to a filing house for sorting and then letting it come back to me later when I was in a better, more creative state, or at least that's how it felt. Often when I was journaling, running, or when I'd just woken up. Either as a series of realisations or idea enhancements.

If you've ever been in a songwriting co-write with me you may have heard me use the phrase, "I'm going to put that in my back brain's pipe

for smoking." I like the visual. It's almost as if my so-called back brain is putting its feet up next to a fire somewhere dressed in a velvet smoking jacket and popping all the ideas into a big old pipe to be lit and puffed on until the ash crystallises as ideas.

I've never been a smoker, but songwriters love metaphors what can I say? Well, it turns out that this sensation of back brain wasn't entirely inaccurate in terms of what's actually happening in our grey matter. You are [00:05:00] probably aware that we have two hemispheres in our brains, the left and the right that are connected in the middle by something called the *corpus callosum*. In each hemisphere there are four lobes, the frontal, the temporal, the parietal, and the occipital.

Each of these lobes has a different function, and the frontal lobe or prefrontal cortex is primarily responsible for our personalities and what is sometimes described by neuroscientists as the executive function, responsible for making our daily decisions. We talked about this in a previous episode in the context of dreaming. When we dream, the amount of adrenaline being released is reduced and it stops our executive function kicking in. This function is completely critical for our survival. It's the part of the brain responsible for planning, decision making, and our attention. But when our guard is down, when the amount of adrenaline is toned down in sleep, we are more able to generate creative connections.

Feel free to go back and listen to that episode, series three, [00:06:00] episode three, if you want to explore more the relationship between sleep and creativity.

Moving back, the next lobe. The temporal lobe is home to the hippocampus and it's responsible for learning, making memories and spatial navigation. You may have heard this mentioned in the occasional scientific study that comes out about people who have the biggest hippocampi, such as taxi drivers who do The Knowledge and have committed lots of streets and roots to memory, impressive stuff.

I enjoyed learning that the hippocampus has a distinctive shape that some say resembles a seahorse. I feel another metaphor coming on: 'my seahorse is helping me learn right now!'

The next lobe is the parietal lobe, kind of a middle brain, which receives and processes sensory information, including touch, pain, taste, hearing, sight, and smell.

The right hemisphere of this lobe is responsible for the movement and touch on the [00:07:00] left side of the body, and the left is responsible for the right. You have a dominant and non-dominant side. Think about left-handed and right-handed people. However, regardless of which hand you use, in most people the dominant hemisphere is the left and is usually responsible for language and fine motor control.

While your non-dominant side, usually the right side, is involved primarily in spatial awareness and nonverbal aspects of communication. if you've ever heard anyone talk about people being left brain or right brain type, this might be what they're alluding to.

And it is true that the different hemispheres have completely different functions, but they don't work independently and the scientists tell us it's completely and utterly inaccurate to link personality traits to one hemisphere or another.

So if anyone has ever told you that you have a left or right brain personality, that's a myth. Although perhaps it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Human psychology is a complex business and we are what we [00:08:00] believe. If you want to find out more about this, I've left some links in the show notes, and I will talk more about handedness and the hemispheres in a lot more detail later in this series.

Well, we've almost made it to my pipe-smoking back brain now, or rather, the occipital lobe, which is primarily responsible for processing visual information from the eyes and holds visual memories. Right

underneath this lobe is the cerebellum, and that helps us to coordinate our balance, posture, and motor learning.

This is where we build muscle memory. And it takes care of the things that we do without thinking, which would include basic things like getting the glass accurately to our mouths when we want to sip a drink of water, but could also include more complex skills like playing the guitar or the piano. So naturally we don't even have to think about it. As a musician, this is very interesting to me. It's where my guitar playing could be handled without me even having to think about it while I'm [00:09:00] singing.

Science lesson nearly over. There's one more thing we need to just cover off: the limbic system, which is formed of a number of structures across the brain, including the hippocampus I mentioned earlier, along with the thalamus and the hypothalamus.

They work together and are responsible for processing and managing our emotions and behaviour, including our fight and flight responses. These lobes and structures that make up our brains are connected by synapses and neurons, and when we learn something new or make a new memory, we create new connections.

Our brain is formed of paths, roads, and motorways - to use another metaphor - some of which are busy trafficking information and making new connections, and others are deserted. Those deserted streets, the ones I imagine now with the tumbleweed drifting down the white lines of the cracked tarmac, are dormant, but in most cases are not beyond saving.

The brain has an [00:10:00] incredible capacity to become both atrophied if it's not used, but also to rebuild and regenerate when it is. If you start an artistic practice today, in simplistic terms, your brain will quite literally grow the cells it needs to help you with your craft, and this is how, in ten short years, you can achieve mastery.

By revisiting your art little and often as a form of compound creativity, your brain will respond with delicious new cells, new connections, and adjustments to the hormones that control your varying levels of stress, relaxation, pleasure, and pain.

This adaptability of the brain is known as neuroplasticity, and if I haven't made it clear already, our brains are absolutely incredible. It is able to reorganise itself, form new neural connections, adapt to new experiences, learn [00:11:00] new skills, recover from injuries - at least to some degree - and change in response to our environment throughout our entire lives.

The old adage of 10,000 hours is backed up by the science, and it's never too late to start. If you picked up a guitar pencil, paintbrush, lump of clay, wrote your first poem, started your memoir, or decided to take up stained glass, art, jewellery making, or anything else besides after a few weeks, you would start to form the connections you require.

After months, you would develop skill. After a year you'd be proficient, and in 10 years' time you could, if you chose, be a master at your craft, what can you do in the next 10 days, 10 months, 10 years? Of course you don't wake up on the first day of the 11th year and go, 'oh, well that was good, I'm a master oil painter now!'

It's not linear and we can continue to learn for life. [00:12:00] In fact, the impact of lifelong learning on our cognitive health is really a game changer.

But let me bring this to life from my own experience. I've been playing the guitar for just less than 10 years. I'm still far off mastery because if I'm honest, I didn't put the hours in for the first few years in comparison with my more dedicated practice now. But I performed an unplugged gig a few months ago at the RSA in London. After my performance, a man came up to me to thank me for my set, and I'd seen him singing along to one of my songs so I thanked him for participating. He said something along the lines of, "oh, I don't know whether that was a

good thing. I'm not a musical person!" He told me he would love to be able to play an instrument. And so of course, me being me, suggested that of course he was musical and now would be a pretty good time to learn. He retorted "ha, that's easy for you to say, you've been playing guitar for your whole life!" So I told him that I picked up the guitar for the [00:13:00] first time in my forties and his jaw nearly hit the floor.

Now I reiterate, I'm way off mastery at the guitar, but I can do a few things very well to put on a convincing show. And I'm committed to continuing my practice. By doing my 10 year plan, I know that being proficient at my instruments will serve future me very well, so that helps me with my daily decisions and commitment to my craft. And sometimes, it's almost as if I can feel the connections forming and strengthening in my brain, as things I once found hard, now fall simply into place and happen effortlessly.

I want to just briefly touch on imagination, which is critical to any form of creativity and innovation, and where the scientists tell us that is happening in our brains. Basically everywhere! Imagination involves a combination of many aspects of our brain from the seahorse shaped hippocampus, the sensory processing parietal, and the prefrontal cortex. [00:14:00]

I like to think of imagination in this context almost as a brain team sport. By allowing your mind to wonder, you'll be giving your brain a proper workout. There's a fabulous article on this from the *New York Times* in the show notes, as well as a couple of other academic journals which describe detailed studies on this phenomenon.

Research has found that just 10 minutes of daydreaming encouraged people to come up with more creative solutions to a problem than when people took a break and did something else, such as scrolling on their phones. Allowing your mind to imagine, fantasise or drift off is good for cognitive function, and it makes me think that maybe being constantly stimulated, as we often are, isn't the best thing for our creativity. I think about all the times at school I was told off for

daydreaming. If only I had known this then - I could have defended my right to drift off into fantasy!

So we have the evidence: our brains can grow [00:15:00] throughout our life like a broken leg in plaster. The muscle may atrophy, but can rebuild as soon as the bone is fused and we start to walk again. It's never too late to start building connections in our minds, and one of the best ways to do that is by learning something new or engaging in any creative practice.

I need to introduce another concept here that can support us on this journey, the growth mindset versus the fixed mindset. The concept of the fixed and growth mindset was first introduced by psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck in 2006, in her book *Mindset: the New Psychology of Success.*

I've mentioned it in the show notes along with a nice article on the topic from Harvard Business School. Dweck makes the point that our mindset is a critical factor when it comes to success. Uh oh, that word again, the first episode of series one is dedicated to my thoughts on success, but however you judge [00:16:00] success, it's clear that having a mindset that sees challenges as an opportunity to learn that allows us to grow when we fail, that believes fundamentally we *can* build new skills leads to greater 'success' than a mindset that is fixed. A fixed mindset avoids making mistakes, believes that talent is given and static and actively avoids new things. This seems quite obvious to me when the psychologists put it like that, but I think many of us are programmed to have a fixed mindset, it cuts deep! A simple way to think about the difference between a fixed and growth mindset might be a willingness to accept the unknown.

I can't possibly know whether I could become a master at say, ceramics or the saxophone. And it is this unknown that serves me very well if I decide at some stage that I want to take up either practice. If I believe, like my audience member at the [00:17:00] RSA that I can't play music, if I really believe that, then what's the point of trying? Suspending

disbelief, imagining the possibilities, allowing ourselves to explore all the things we can't possibly know, will serve us well.

If you have a fixed mindset, the early stumbling steps at an unsatisfying dance class or the messages a teacher gave you as a child can be very powerful. I implore you: don't allow old narratives to determine what you can do or what you might find incredibly satisfying. With a little bit of repeated activity, your brain will form new connections and you will get better and better and better. You cannot possibly know what you are capable of, and that's a wonderful thing!

Okay, so if we know that our brains can change and grow and that our mindset can change and support us [00:18:00] what do we actually need to do to make this happen? If you're still looking for your craft or considering something new, there's a free creativity finder on my website. It has clear instructions for how to use it, and it should help inspire you to find the path to something that will either challenge you right now or offer inspiration to take another step on your creative journey.

Whatever practice you choose, it is true that early engagement in your craft might sometimes feel frustrating if we only focus on the outcome. I've talked about this at length in previous episodes, but it bears repeating: when it comes to our cognitive health, our joy, our healing, and our growth it does not matter one little bit what the quality of your creative practice is like.

As Amie McNee says in her book *We need your art, make bad art*, she says she hopes she will make lots of shitty art. And I wish this for you too! Because in the context of [00:19:00] society and our long-term cognitive health, we really do need your art, all of it. The good, the bad, and the ugly. Enjoy the process. Do not give up at the first hurdle. Lean into the practice and forget the outcome.

This couldn't be more true for me as a musician. My guitar and piano practice sessions are sometimes astoundingly bad, working on a little

corner that my fingers just don't want to comply with can sound shockingly awful, but I know for sure it won't get better if I don't practice it and I only focus on the things I can already do well! And I remind myself that this was all hard once, and look at what I can already do. What you can do with a little repetition is incredible, and the benefit to your long-term health while you are doing it is equally incredible.

Okay, it's time to come to the end now, and as with previous series, I will offer you a challenge, a question [00:20:00] and a recommendation.

The challenge is to make some bad art of any kind for a few days in a row, I would like to challenge you to draw a postage stamp-size picture every day for a week, or write four lines of poetry or song lyrics, or write one paragraph of deliberately bad prose.

If you are able, choose a practice that is different from your usual craft and enjoy the certain knowledge that the outcome will be crap, but this is a good thing. The act of creating is helping your brain grow, recover, or consolidate.

The question is this: given the overwhelming evidence for the value of creativity on your long-term cognitive health, can you commit to adding something new to your creative portfolio, and could you commit to encouraging someone else to find their own creative path?

And the recommendation. I'd love to recommend you watch the TV series *Secrets of the Super Agers* presented by the late [00:21:00] great Michael Mosley.

It's available to stream for free in the UK on Channel Four or the BBC iPlayer. And outside the UK you can find it on Sony Liv or on the BBC channel on Amazon. The first episode talks about all sorts of things, whether that's improved blood flow to the brain from skydiving, to the relationship between dementia and lifelong learning, along with the incredible cognitive benefits of simply wearing an eye mask when we sleep. Absolutely fascinating and very on brand for this episode.

Next time I'm going to tackle creative synchronicity and the spiritual side of creativity. How we navigate a creative life and believe things that we cannot see or easily prove to support us on our creative journey.

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 [00:22:00] 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 then, keep creating and learning. Peace and love.