

In a Creative Slump? Take a Walk

Los Angeles Times: April 26, 2014

By: Deborah Netburn

Want to get creative? Get up and go for a walk.

People generate more creative ideas when they walk than when they sit, according to a new study published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition.



"Everyone always says going on a walk gives you new ideas, but nobody had ever proved it before," said Marily Oppezzo, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University and the lead author of the study.

To test for creativity, Oppezzo asked volunteers (mostly college students) to come up with alternative uses for a common item like a tire or a tweezer. Creative suggestions for a button, for example, might include tiny strainer, dollhouse doorknob or the eye for a doll.

Oppezzo defined a creative response as one that was both appropriate (a button could not be used as a light bulb, for example) and original, meaning no one else in the study had said it.

In the first experiment, volunteers were given four minutes to complete the creativity test -- first while sitting at a desk in a small room, and then while walking on a treadmill. Of the 48 participants in the study, 81% improved their creative output when walking.



The researchers noted that walkers were more talkative than sitters, but they said the increase in creative ideas generated when walking is not due simply to an increase of ideas in general.

"Walkers did talk more, but we took everything they said and divided the total creative ideas by the total ideas mentioned," said Oppezzo. **"Walkers had more thoughts, but they also had a higher density of creative thoughts than sitters."**

To see if walking improves brainpower overall, Oppezzo and her team also asked participants to complete a task that measures convergent thinking. The volunteers were given three words and asked to come up with one word that would combine with all of them to make a common phrase. For example, the words "Swiss," "cake" and "cottage" can all be combined with the word "cheese."

On this test, walkers performed slightly worse than sitters, leading the researchers to conclude that it is specifically creative thought that is enhanced by walking.

In subsequent experiments, the researchers found that the effect of walking on creativity can linger for a period of time. People who took the creativity test while walking, and then while sitting, showed a continued creative boost during the sitting portion of the test.

To make sure this wasn't due to volunteers getting used to the test, the researchers asked some participants to take the test twice while sitting. In that experiment, performance did not improve the second time.

In other experiments the researchers found that walking outside does not seem to be any better for creativity than walking inside, although it did seem to make the participants even more talkative.

Oppezzo said her next step is to try to understand exactly why this link between walking and creativity exists. "That is what we don't know," she said. She and her coauthor, Daniel Schwartz of Stanford University, hope to look into a few different possibilities including whether walking effects how we filter our thoughts.

In the meantime, her research suggests a brisk walk before a brainstorming meeting would certainly be beneficial.

"Our study shows everybody's creativity improved when they were walking compared to themselves when they were sitting," she said. "It's so cool that you can just go out, take a walk, and make your creativity better."



Lorie Eber is a trained Wellness Coach, NASM Certified Personal Trainer, Gerontologist and author. Lorie Eber Wellness Coaching provides one-on-one guidance and support to clients who are ready to make permanent lifestyle changes and lead a happier, healthier life.

16755 Von Karman Avenue, Suite 200, Irvine, CA 92606

 : 714-357-9946  : EberLorie@gmail.com  : www.LorieEberWellnessCoaching.com