

INSEAD

The Business School  
for the World®

# Faculty & Research Working Paper

**Doing Nothing and Nothing to Do:  
The Hidden Value of Empty Time  
and Boredom**

# Doing Nothing and Nothing to Do: The Hidden Value of Empty Time and Boredom

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries\*

This paper can be downloaded without charge from the Social Science Research Network electronic library at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2432964>

\* Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, Boulevard de Constance, 77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France.  
Email: [Manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu](mailto:Manfred.ketsdevries@insead.edu)

A Working Paper is the author's intellectual property. It is intended as a means to promote research to interested readers. Its content should not be copied or hosted on any server without written permission from [publications.fb@insead.edu](mailto:publications.fb@insead.edu)  
Find more INSEAD papers at [http://www.insead.edu/facultyresearch/research/search\\_papers.cfm](http://www.insead.edu/facultyresearch/research/search_papers.cfm)

## **Abstract**

In this article, I suggest that doing nothing and being bored can be invaluable to the creative process. In our present networked society, introspection and reflection have become lost arts. Instead, we are at risk of becoming victims of informational overload. The balance between activity and inactivity has become seriously out of sync. However, doing nothing is a great way to induce states of mind that nurture our imagination. Slacking off may be the best thing we can do for our mental health. Seemingly inactive states of mind can be an incubation period for future bursts of creativity.

Keeping busy can be a very effective defense mechanism for warding off disturbing thoughts and feelings. But by resorting to manic-like behavior we suppress the truth of our feelings and concerns, consciously or unconsciously avoiding periods of uninterrupted, freely associative thoughts. Yet unconscious thought processes can generate novel ideas and solutions more effectively than a conscious focus on problem solving. I end by recommending some actions and conditions that can help achieve this state of mind.

**Key Words:** Busyness; Laziness; Boredom; Manic Defense; Stress; Incubation; Reflection; Left-right Brain Activity; Creativity.

*“It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?”*

—*Henry David Thoreau*

*“The busy bee has not time for sorrow.”*

—*William Blake*

*“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”*

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

*“Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.”*

—*John Lennon*

I had recently dinner with one of my students (let’s call her H  l  ne). H  l  ne runs a large organization in the educational field. I was curious about her working habits and asked her how many emails she received each day. “Five hundred,” she said, then continued in a rather upbeat manner, “Frankly, I don’t read any of them. If I did, I wouldn’t really be doing my job. My job is to think about the future of education in my country.” As if I wasn’t shocked enough by such anarchistic behavior, she went on, “These days, given the work I do, it isn’t a question of obtaining information. The more important question is how to push information away so that I don’t suffer from information overload. I need to have time to think.”

Once H  l  ne elaborated on her information strategy, her way of dealing with it turned out to be less dramatic than I had initially thought. She had an assistant who slugged his way through all her emails and she spent a few hours every week discussing the more problematic ones with him. But what I liked about H  l  ne’s comment was her realization that she needed plenty of time to reflect. She didn’t want to get caught up in the manic behavior so many executives share, frantically processing email after email. As she said, “I’m not paid to do that kind of work. If I’m so busy doing what people expect me to do, there will be no time left for what I ought to do. You can’t do creative work at a cyber pace. Creative work has its traditional rhythms. To be

creative, you need a more serene state of mind. Over the years I have learned the hard way that technology sometimes encourages people to confuse busyness with effectiveness. I need quiet time to be able to function.”

Hélène has a point. I have learned from experience that many people would be better off if they did less and reflected more. Perhaps the biggest problem we have today is not doing too little but trying to do too much. It isn't difficult to get stuck in that rut. Contemporary society provides ample opportunities to be busy but a lot of this busyness, if we take a closer look at it, has little substance. When it comes down to it, we are often prisoners of busyness rather than productively occupied.

With pressure in the workplace and in the general social domain to collaborate, speak up, step forward, lean in—do practically anything to be noticed—there is very little said, other than negatively, about doing nothing. This is unfortunate, as doing nothing can be the prelude to bursts of creativity. The ability to balance activity and solitude, noise and quietness, is an excellent means to tap our inner creative resources. The secret of truly successful, creative people may well be that they learned very early in life how *not* to be busy

Hélène is not alone in realizing the value of doing nothing. More than 500 years ago, we find another story about the perceived inactivity of Renaissance sculptor and painter, Michelangelo. In 1466 Agostino di Duccio was commissioned to sculpt a figure of David for the cathedral in Florence. He began work on a large marble block from the famous quarries at Carrara in Tuscany but only managed to mark out the shape of the legs, feet, and drapery before he abandoned the project for reasons that remain unclear. For the next 25 years, the block of marble was left exposed to the weather in the courtyard of the cathedral workshop until Michelangelo was asked to revive the abandoned project. Although the marble had deteriorated, Michelangelo accepted.

According to the story, rumors began to circulate soon after that Michelangelo was making very little progress. It was said that he stared at the marble for hours on end, doing nothing. When a friend saw him and asked the obvious question—“What are you doing?”—Michelangelo replied, “*Sto lavorando.*” (“I’m working.”) Years later,

after the block of marble had become the great statue of David, he said, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

As these examples show, it can be beneficial to do nothing and make an effort to fit quiet time into our daily lives. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to find space to enjoy quiet time in our high-tech cyber world. It is not encouraged. In fact, people don't like it when someone is apparently doing nothing. They see it as a provocation.

In this article I suggest that boredom and doing nothing—seemingly non-productive activities—can be invaluable in nurturing our creativity. Our lives have become defined by busyness. Look around when you are at a rail station, in a café, even walking down the street: most people will be glued to a mobile handset or tablet. We are in danger of becoming victims of informational overload, with very little time left for excursions into our inner world. In our networked age, introspection and reflection are becoming lost arts and the balance between activity and inactivity is becoming seriously out of sync. Yet it can be well worth our while to make efforts to be “not busy.” Doing nothing, having nothing to do, and even being bored may be good for our mental health.

This is because busyness can be a very effective defense mechanism, deployed to ward off disturbing thoughts and feelings. But what we lose sight of in this process is the truth about how we're really feeling and what troubles us. Busyness allows no periods of uninterrupted, free-associative thinking, creativity, and insight. However, allowing unconscious thought processes to surface can be more productive than consciously focusing on problem solving.

We all know that the compulsion to be busy starts very early in life. How often did our parents or teachers ever suggest we sit still and do nothing? And how often do our bosses say the same? Doing nothing has never really been acceptable. We're usually told to work harder, be diligent, and stay on the ball. We associate doing nothing with irresponsibility, being on the wrong track, or even worse, wasting our life. Most of us feel guilty if we're not busy doing something and get a buzz when we feel really busy. In a world dedicated to distraction, silence and stillness terrify us. We protect ourselves from such situations by creating noise and frantic activity. Busyness can

become a developmental trap.

But what are we really busy about? Jane Austen once observed, “Life seems but a quick succession of busy nothings.” Perhaps, while we are so busy with “nothings,” things that do not really matter, we leave no time for the things that are important in life. Many of us delude ourselves that busyness is synonymous with productivity but this is frequently not the case. A lot of our busyness is ultimately meaningless, which can be a hard fact to face.

### **Boredom**

“My mind,” [Holmes] said, “rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper place. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession—or rather created it.” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*

Not many of us would volunteer to be bored. Most of us want exactly the opposite and do what we can to push the dark cloud of boredom away. Sherlock Holmes’s way out was opium. Many of us prefer unrelenting busyness. But although being busy may give us a temporary high, the danger of all this busyness is that we may lose our connections not just with one another but also with ourselves. We may become strangers to our own feelings and needs. We may become alienated from ourselves, and lose sight of who we are.

Doing nothing and boredom are closely intertwined and both get a bad press. Complaints of frequent and persistent boredom are typically viewed as a sign of a flawed character. But is there really something wrong with us if we’re bored? Because boredom, when we look at it more closely, has some unique values.

When we are bored we are subsumed by the feeling either that there is nothing to do or that what we are doing is an unrewarding non-activity. We are swamped by the urge to engage in something satisfying but are unable to do so. (Vodanovich, Verner

and Gilbride, 1991; Fisher, 1993; Eastwood et al., 2012). Phillips (1993) sums up the state of boredom as “something I desire” and “nothing I desire”: “this ambiguity accounts for the curious paralysis of boredom.” Boredom is a real factor in many aspects of domestic life and in jobs with limitations, e.g. highly repetitive service, functional, and assembly line work, and we need to be able to tolerate it. In fact, we are handicapped if we cannot deal with boredom constructively. People, who respond to boredom reactively, with a continuous need for stimuli and thrills and a paucity of inner resources, can wreak havoc in the home and workplace.

In many instances, boredom can be a prelude to something. It can be a trigger for imagination and creativity and is closely associated with expectation: “The bored child is preparing for something of which he is unaware” (Phillips, 1993). It might indicate a desire to seek out new and potentially more interesting and stimulating avenues. Reframed differently, boredom can be seen as a liminal space, a critical resource that pushes us to seek the unfamiliar. Being bored can help us to develop a rich inner life and become more creative.

However, most of us do find it hard to tolerate boredom, especially as boredom is often associated with depression. Instead, we keep busy, and push our troublesome demons away—busyness makes us feel better and even virtuous. But what are we all busy about? Why are we running so hard? We’re stressed, we’re exhausted and half the time we’re not even sure we’re running in the right direction.

### **The stress of busyness**

Busyness and stress disorders are familiar companions in contemporary society. The danger of burnout has become increasingly imminent in our cyber age, with its constant onslaught of stimulation. Mobile technology alone means that we are never out of others’ reach and have an almost limitless selection of entertainment and distraction literally to hand. The new reality is that too many of us run around doing things that are counter-productive and in the process burn ourselves out. Often, being busy can be a poor excuse for living an unhealthy life. Busyness can be as addictive as a drug.



I believe that our e-efforts at productivity may have a very dark side. To be able to function well psychologically and physically, we need periods of calm. Our frenetic activities in cyberspace—a world of multitasking and hyperactivity—help us to delude ourselves, however, that we are both virtuous and productive. Although such delusionary thinking may have its place, being a work addict leaves very little time for the things that really matter—such as making love, making conversation (especially listening to others), listening to music, playing sport, seeing a play or film, taking a leisurely stroll in the country, or simply doing nothing.

There's a time to work and a time to play. Balance is crucially important in our lives. If we don't know how to calibrate the balance between action and reflection, we may become a casualty of psychological burnout. We can be so busy making a living that we forget to make a life. Perhaps our motto should be "better lazy than crazy."

The novelist and poet Christopher Morley wrote in his essay "On Laziness":

"It is our observation that every time we get into trouble it is due to not having been lazy enough. Unhappily, we were born with a certain fund of energy.... The lazy man does not stand in the way of progress. When he sees progress roaring down upon him he steps nimbly out of the way. The lazy man doesn't (in the vulgar phrase) pass the buck. He lets the buck pass him. We have always secretly envied our lazy friends. Now we are going to join them. We have burned our boats or our bridges or whatever it is that one burns on the eve of a momentous decision" (Morley, 1920, p. 244).

I realize that generation Z (the generation born just before the millennium), may find it hard to conceive that there was once a time when we had to do without smartphones, tablets, or computers and that not so very long before that most communication was done by post. Once upon a time there was no such thing as instant replay, instant response, or the ability to pause. There were no interruptions from emails or conference calls. Multi-tasking was rare. We lived at a more leisurely rhythm and had the luxury of periods of uninterrupted time in which to reflect and think. We could even be bored.

Now, most executives spend a large percentage of their time responding to emails, taking and making calls, and networking. All this activity takes more and more mental space. Sometimes, watching a member of generation Z migrating simultaneously between a television set, computer game, and texting and searching on a mobile phone, I wonder if they ever think to look away from their screens and simply up at the sky. Do they ever play for real, rather than in cyberspace? Can they ever just do nothing for a few minutes? It's my observation that many of us are not waving but drowning and that the incessant flow of our compulsive communication has become a kind of manic defense.

### **The manic defense**

The key question is whether our frenetic activities in cyberspace are really good for us. It is debatable whether all this activity adds to our creativity and productivity or actually constricts them. All the innovations that we are so familiar with may have made it easier to bother each other rather than developing our own resources, an ineffective way of dealing with our loneliness.

Busyness can become a manic defense (Klein, 1940; Akhtar, 2007). Typically, people who use this defensive strategy spend all of their time rushing from one task to the next, unable to tolerate even short periods of inactivity. Even their leisure time is a series of "shoulds" and "have tos," things to be ticked off an actual or mental list. These people distract their conscious mind with either a flurry of activity or feelings of euphoria, purposefulness, and the illusion of control.

Being busy is a great way to ward off disturbing thoughts and feelings. But busyness suppresses the truth of how we're really feeling and what really troubles us. Keeping busy allows us to push away feelings of helplessness, despair, and depression by drawing on opposite feelings. People resorting to the manic defense search out busyness to ward off the demons of loneliness, separation, depression and (above all) death anxiety. For these people, inaction breeds doubt and fear. From this perspective, cyberspace has been a boon for the manic defense. But such denial of the vicissitudes of our existence will only work for a limited period of time. As is often the case, what we push out of the door may come back through the window. Increased anxiety leads

to increased activity, which instead of having an anxiety-reducing effect, leads to even more activity, enslaving the individual to some unhealthy behavior patterns.

Unfortunately, in contemporary organizations, work addicts are highly encouraged, supported and even rewarded. Often, the insidious development of the manic defense is difficult to counter because such behavior is useful to organizations. Ironically, many people seek out this manic defense, behaving like the proverbial rats on a treadmill, while an entire management industry exists to spin the treadmill ever faster. This dynamic can ultimately create tension and chaos in the workplace.

Many work addicts fail to realize that more work doesn't translate into more productivity. There isn't necessarily a relationship between working hard and working smart. And a workaholic environment may contribute to serious personal and mental health problems, including low morale, depression, substance abuse, workplace harassment, relationship breakdown, and above average absenteeism.

Of course, all of us use the manic defense to some degree but work addicts go a step too far, finding it difficult to cope with even short periods of unstructured time. When the manic defense predominates, the action-reflection balance becomes strained. But what's really important can't be pushed away forever and these defensive maneuvers take up an enormous amount of energy. Eventually, something has to give.

The most effective executives are those who can both act and reflect—which means making time to do nothing. Doing nothing involves unplugging ourselves from the compulsion to keep busy, the habit of shielding ourselves from certain feelings, the tension of trying to manipulate our experience before we fully acknowledge what that experience is. Doing nothing gives us the opportunity to look at the dark side of our nature, a domain of great energy and passion. But it takes courage to go to the regions of our mind that we're usually busy avoiding.

## **Doing nothing and creativity**

What explains our reluctance to do nothing—to make the effort to rely on our inner resources, rather than technology of one kind or another, to pass the time—when we know that doing nothing could be good for our intellectual and physical health and creativity?

In an age when we can watch a movie, download music, bid in an auction, and buy any type of goods with just a few clicks of a mouse, the one commodity we either can't or won't conjure up instantly is quietness, and the inner stillness beneath it. For many of us, being alone with ourselves can be scary. Journeying to regions of the mind that we don't always like entering will bring our existential anxieties to the fore. And yet taking a journey into our own interior is more important for our mental, physical and spiritual health than almost anything else.

Many people fear the consequences of silencing the noises that bombard them. Distraction-inducing behaviors, like constantly checking email, stimulate the brain to shoot dopamine into the bloodstream, giving us a rush that can make stopping so much harder. But if we don't allow ourselves periods of uninterrupted, freely associative thought, personal growth, insight, and creativity are less likely to emerge (Ghiselin, 1952; Arieti, 1976; Gardner, 1994; Amabile, 1996; Sternberg, 1988, 1999; Runco, 2007). If we never permit ourselves to be bored, we will never have those periods of reflective thought that are the preparation for creative processes.

### **Left- versus right-brain activity**

Consideration of distraction and boredom brings us to left- and right-brain activity. Neuroscientists have noted that “left-brained” people tend to be more logical, analytical, and objective, while “right-brained” people are more intuitive and reflective (Sperry, 1961; Hamilton, 1998). The left side of the brain appears to be the seat of language and logical and sequential information processing. The right side tends to be more visual, and processes information intuitively, holistically, and randomly. And although the right hemisphere lacks the major elements of verbal language (processes controlled by the left brain), it uses the “language” of pictures, music, and emotions, which plays an important role in the creative process. The two

sides of the brain need to work together, however, to perform tasks.

Keeping in mind this left-right brain division of labor, our more humdrum, daily activities are more dominated by the left side of our brain. Busyness and left-brain activities are closely allied. Going through our usual routines in our waking hours (and under most circumstances), the more cognitive processes of the generally dominant left hemisphere will overrule right hemisphere processes. This doesn't mean that there is no simultaneous right-brain activity. However, it's particularly during periods of inactivity (when we are doing nothing or are being bored) that the right hemisphere seizes the opportunity to express itself. It really gets to work in situations of relaxation, meditation, hypnosis, fantasy inducement, or daydreaming (similar to what happens during the night while we dream). Thus, although right hemisphere processes are always hovering about, these do not have much opportunity to assert themselves when we keep ourselves busy. Doing nothing, or having nothing to do, are valuable opportunities for stimulating unconscious thought processes.

Compared to conscious thought, unconscious thought excels at integrating and associating information and is capable of carrying out associative searches across a broad database of knowledge. In this region of the mind, we are less constrained by conventional associations and more likely to generate novel ideas than when we consciously focus on problem solving..

### **Incubation**

Although the unconscious may be better at associative search, the outcomes of these unconscious thought processes might not always enter our consciousness immediately. Initially, they may incubate in the unconscious. They may remain unconscious and dissipate, or emerge later into consciousness in the form of sudden insights, surfacing as tacit cognitive or affective recognition of patterns, coherences, or themes (Hélie and Sun, 2010).

The suggestion here is that doing nothing might turn out to be the best way to resolve complex issues. Slacking off—making a valiant effort not to be busy and letting our mind wander—might be the best thing we can do for our mental health. I realize, however, that making a case for laziness is counterintuitive. It doesn't fit

contemporary life and from an impression management perspective looks pretty negative. But “doing nothing”—just sitting in a café, strolling in the park, lying on the beach, or even staring into space while everyone else is running busily about—may be one of the most creative things we can do.

Incubation—the unconscious recombination of thought elements, associated with doing nothing and boredom—has not been a popular topic of research and has been largely ignored. But letting go of a problem for some time helps dissolve whatever is blocking the solution. Subsequently, and seemingly miraculously, the solution will come “out of the blue,” when we are thinking about something completely different. Many of us have discovered that passive, unfocused moments are necessary for these “Eureka” experiences to occur (Isaksen and Trefflinger, 1985; Smith, 1995; Dodds, Ward, and Smith, 2003; Dietrich, 2004).

Associative processes do not thrive under conscious direction. In fact, conscious thought can actually subvert the search for creative solutions. Novel connections or ideas often insinuate themselves into the conscious mind when our attention is directed elsewhere. The mathematician and philosopher of science Henri Poincaré described this process very well:

“I turned my attention to the study of some arithmetical questions, apparently without a suspicion of any connection with my preceding researches. Disgusted with my failure, I went to spend a few days at the seaside, and thought of something else. One morning, walking on the bluff, the idea came to me: the arithmetic transformations of indeterminate ternary quadratic forms were identical to those of non-Euclidean geometry.

“Most striking at first is this appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work. The role of this unconscious work in mathematical invention appears to me incontestable, and traces of it would be found in other cases where it is less evident. Often when one works at a hard question, nothing good is accomplished at the first attack. Then one takes a rest, longer or shorter, and sits down anew to the work. During the first half-hour, as before, nothing is found, and then all of a sudden the decisive idea presents

itself to the mind. It might be said that the conscious work has been more fruitful because it has been interrupted and the rest has given back to the mind its force and freshness.” (Poincaré, in Kanack, 1997, p. 9.)

According to Poincaré, during creative thought processing, ideas are combined in novel ways, and this combination is performed largely unconsciously, by what he calls the subliminal self. The problem solver continues to work unconsciously on the problem after abandoning conscious work. A creative solution is found by working intermittently on the problem while attending to mundane activities (such as taking a shower, or driving).

Because switching attention from doing nothing to the incubated problem is very rapid, we forget episodes of work on incubated problems, and only remember the final step. Of course, the preparation phase in real-world situations can be very long and tedious—including getting bored. We might feel drained, having been unable to solve the problem and hitting a number of dead ends. The best strategy, when this happens, is not to make matters worse by forcing a solution but to focus our attention elsewhere, including trying to do nothing.

An incubation period provides room and space that allow us to be creative, pursue less likely solutions and respond to details and hints that might have gone unnoticed without priming from the unsolved problem in our long-term memory.

Perhaps the Italian painter Giorgio Vasari was thinking of his friend Michelangelo and the genesis of his *David* when he wrote, “Men of genius sometimes accomplish most when they work the least.” There are many well-known examples of brilliant ideas that came to people “out of nowhere” while they were doing something entirely unrelated or indeed nothing much at all, from Archimedes in his bath, and Newton in his Lincolnshire garden to Paul McCartney, who woke up one morning having composed the tune for “Yesterday” in his sleep. Sometimes, a link is made between the creative process and bed, bath, and bus, an idea allegedly from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Shank, Lyras, and Soloway, 2010). The point is that we often get ideas or solutions to problems when we are taking a shower, lying in bed, or travelling, periods of time when we are removed from the constraints of routine

activities. In all these situations, our attention tends to be unfocused, or even semi-conscious—and we rarely have access to pen, paper, or computer.

Doing nothing is often a welcome release from overload of one kind or another. In this state of mind the brain can turn down the volume, switch off the screen and recast the outside world in productive and creative ways. It's essential, when we have been wrestling with an idea or problem for a long time, to consider relaxing, and letting the subconscious take over. Creating inactive periods and deliberate distractions (such as day-dreaming, making music, having a drink, having sex) can actually make us smarter and more focused in the long term. So to a certain extent, susceptibility to distraction can be a real plus. When we are not busy being busy, we are more open to associative thinking.

### **Stimulating creative inactivity at work**

The time may have come for more organizations to recognize the power of doing nothing and the positive value of boredom. To be more effective, we need to allow others and ourselves regular disconnection from busyness and schedule times in our days when we are completely free to reflect and think.. Any activity that takes our mind off the problem at hand, that allows our thoughts to roam freely or helps us focus on an entirely different activity, might do the trick. Incubation time isn't just for the specially gifted. It's for all of us. Only by “unthinking” can we really arrive at new, creative ideas.

Incubation time can be introduced in many ways. For example, a number of companies have turned to mindfulness and meditation practices to help their employees tap into their creative potential. Companies such as 3M, Pixar, Google, Twitter and Facebook have made disconnected time, or contemplative practices, key aspects of their way of working. The objective is to increase their employees' self-awareness, self-management and creativity. They want them to work smarter.

### **Working hard, or working smart?**

How do we recognize that we could do more nothing in our life? Often, the main



give-away that we are working hard but not working smart is when we find ourselves in a place where there's always more to do, never enough time to do it, and no time to relax. Ironically, once we are in this trap, we fool ourselves by thinking that if we do just one more thing, we will finally be able to relax. However, this thinking is delusional. Either our to-do list will continue to lengthen with new additions or we are left feeling we could do things just a little bit better. If we get stuck in this mindset, it's high time to stop the treadmill. Feeling stuck is a good indicator that we are not doing the right thing and not operating at optimum capacity.

The best thing we can do at this point is to take a break. And surprisingly, very often after a period of disconnection, the problem will look quite different. In fact, we might discover that the answer was there right along, staring us in the face.

### *Carpe diem*

Although most of us would prefer not to overwhelm our lives with work, we frequently push ourselves because we have our eyes on a long-term goal. Of course, there's nothing wrong with having a dream and working toward it; but if we're going to sacrifice much of our present well-being for a later good, we need to be sure that we're really headed where we want to go. Are our aims aligned with what we really want from life? For example, if having a family is one of our top priorities, but achieving our long-term goal might compromise that, all our busyness might lead to a place where we will not be truly happy.

We also run the risk of becoming too fixated on the way things would, should, or will be. It's very easy to get caught up in a race toward a fantasy tomorrow that will inevitably fall short of our expectations. Dreams may disappoint, and may in any case have more to do with avoiding the present than building the future. We need to remember that—regardless of how things might be once our efforts pay off—life always takes place in the present. We never know what the future holds, whether we'll still be in good health, or the people we love will still be around. The opportunity to enjoy what we cherish is in the here and now, so we need to seize the day and engage with them while we can, even if it can only be in small doses.

### **Maintaining relationships**

Sometimes while we're working toward something, we forget that we're part of something larger than ourselves—family, friends, or the community. We need meaningful contact with other people to feel fully alive. The quality of our relationships correlates directly with our overall sense of happiness. We are social animals and relationships stand central to a successful life. If we accomplish all our material goals but do not attend carefully to our relationships, we are likely to end up miserable and alone. Family reminds us what is truly important in our lives, in particular our children. But maintaining our relationships needs interaction, engagement, and time out.

### **Saying no**

None of us wants to disappoint other people, and on some level we all want approval. Saying no is hard when we want to please but if we are going to maintain a modicum of private space we have to learn to do so. Being able to saying no is one of the most useful skills we can develop. Saying no to unimportant requests can free up time for more important things; and resisting daily distractions can give us the space we need to focus on what really matters.

Saying no is not necessarily selfish and by the same token, saying yes to every request is not healthy. When we say no to a new commitment, we're honoring our existing obligations and ensuring that we'll be able to devote high-quality time to them. If we are unable to say no, everyone ends up frustrated, ourselves in particular. We need to take care of our own needs before we can begin to be helpful to others. When we're overcommitted and under too much stress, we're more likely to feel run-down and may even get sick.

### **Managing sleep habits**

In a perfect world, we should all sleep eight hours a night. Sleep is essential for personal growth and creativity and clearly we're not best equipped to handle life's challenges when we're dropping with fatigue. When we sleep, our brains are actively trying to make sense of what we've been working on during the day. Lack of sleep impairs creativity.

Most of us have probably experienced some form of sleeplessness at some stage in our life, but chronic and prolonged sleeplessness leads to mental and physical health issues. More usually we experience poor sleep, rather than insomnia—difficulty getting to sleep, waking earlier than usual, prolonged periods of wakefulness, and feeling tired on waking in the morning. However, poor sleep is has been linked to high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, heart failure, heart attack and stroke, diabetes, and obesity. If that were not bad enough, poor sleeping habits also inhibit the creative process. They are proof we haven't stepped off the treadmill of busyness.

### **Making time for nothing to do**

This essay is a plea for us all to dare to make time in our daily life to do nothing—even be bored—and indulge in some quiet reflection. For busy people, that idea may seem worthy of only a very hollow laugh. So many of us are so action-oriented, or action-addicted, that time for reflection is no longer part of our make-up. Each day, we are carried away by yet another project, yet another activity, and allow little or no time to stop and look at what is happening to us and the people around us. Yet our compulsive and relentless communication and our obsessive activity may be the emotional and intellectual equivalent of fast food and just as bad for our health.

It may seem counterintuitive but stopping for a while and stepping off the treadmill can actually help us progress more quickly and effectively. Confucius once said, “Learning without reflection is a waste, reflection without learning is dangerous.” There should be nothing laughable in getting away from it all and asking ourselves who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. The answers might reveal that we have been so concerned with an idea of what we ought to be that we have failed to take into account the things that make us who we really are. We may realize that if we just go forward blindly, creating more unintended consequences, in the end we may fail to achieve anything substantial.

There's a terrible price to be paid when our exterior life is not an honest reflection of our interior life—when we are out of sync with what really matters. And when we turn away from that inner exploration and look outside ourselves for answers, it

becomes very hard to avoid or correct that disconnect. Taking time to do nothing, however, will make us more productive and creative. As the saying goes, sometimes we need to fall from the mountain to realize what we have been climbing for.

## References

- Akhtar, S. (2007). *Three Faces of Mourning: Melancholia, Manic Defense and Moving On*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Amabile, T. M. (1996). *Creativity in Context*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Arieti, S. (1976). *Creativity: The Magical Synthesis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dietrich, A. (2004). "The cognitive neuroscience of creativity," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 11, 1011–1026.
- Dodds, R. A., Ward, T. B., and Smith, S. M. (2003). "A review of the experimental literature on incubation in problem solving and creativity." In M. A. Runco (Ed.), *Creativity Research Handbook*, vol. 3, Cresthill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Eastwood, J. D., Frischen, A., Fenske, M. J. and Smilek, D. (2012). "The unengaged mind: Defining boredom in terms of attention," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7, 482.
- Fisher, C. D. (1993). "Boredom at work: A neglected concept," *Human Relations*, 46 (3), 395–417.
- Gardner, H (1994). *Creating Minds*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ghiselin, B, (Ed.) (1952) *The Creative Process*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hamilton, C. R. (1998). "Paths in the brain, actions of the mind: Special issue in honor of Roger W. Sperry," *Neuropsychologia*, 36 (10), 953–954.
- Hélie, S. and Sun, R. (2010). "Incubation, insight, and creative problem solving: A unified theory and a connectionist model," *Psychological Review*, 117, (3), 994–

1024.

Isaksen, S. G. and Trefflinger, D. J. (1985). *Creative Problem Solving: The Basic Course*. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Publishing.

Kanack, A. K. (1997). *Fun Improvisation for Cello: The Philosophy and Method of Creative Ability Development*. Emeryville, Ca: Alfred Music Publishing.

Klein, M. (1940). "Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 21, 125-153.

Morley, C. (1920) "On Laziness," In *Pipefuls*, <http://archive.org/stream/pipefuls22699gut/pg22699.txt>

Phillips, A. (1993). *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored*. London UK: Faber.

Runco, M. A. (2007). *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development and Practice*. Amsterdam/Boston: Elsevier Academic Press.

Shank, R. C, Lyras, D., and Soloway, E. (2010). *The Future of Decision Making: How Revolutionary Software can Improve the Ability to Decide*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Smith, S. M. (1995). "Fixation, incubation, and insight in memory, problem solving, and creativity." In S. M. Smith, T. B. Ward, & R. A. Finke (Eds.) *The Creative Cognition Approach*, Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 135-155.

Sperry, R. W. (1961). "Cerebral organization and behavior: The split brain behaves in many respects like two separate brains, providing new research possibilities," *Science* 133 (3466), 1749–1757.

Sternberg, R. J. (Ed.) (1988). *The Nature of Creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Sternberg, R. J. (Ed.) (1999). *Handbook of Creativity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Vodanovich, S. J., Verner, K. M., Gilbride, T. V. (1991). "Boredom proneness: Its relationship to positive and negative affect," *Psychological Reports* 69 (3 Pt 2), 1139–46.

Europe Campus  
Boulevard de Constance  
77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France  
Tel: +33 (0)1 60 72 40 00  
Fax: +33 (0)1 60 74 55 00/01

Asia Campus  
1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore 138676  
Tel: +65 67 99 53 88  
Fax: +65 67 99 53 99

Abu Dhabi Campus  
Muroor Road - Street No 4  
P.O. Box 48049  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates  
Tel: +971 2 651 5200  
Fax: +971 2 443 9461

[www.insead.edu](http://www.insead.edu)

**INSEAD**

The Business School  
for the World®