A Band of psychologists, neuroscientists, and business gurus are teaching a raft of new techniques to help people tap into their creativity. By Louisa Kamps

The world is full of big and thorny prob-
lems, but right now there's one—bigger and thornier than most—that seems to be connected to, oh, just about every-
thing I'm referring to (and worrying about, naturally) the great "crisis in cre-
vative." Why have creativity-test scores bot-
tedly declined from American children and adults since 1990, as one recent re-
port showed (and was pounced on by edu-
cation critics, who say that the increasing focus on testing crushes unconventional thinking)? Why does a robust economic recovery still seem a pipe dream, despite ex-
hortations from the President (and even-
ly other leader in the land) to innovate, innovate? Why do we understand climate change is already proceeding down on us like-
ly, in the cases of Hurricanes Katrina, Irene, and Sandy—yet largely ignore its future risks? Why are so many movies bursting with dialogue so dog-eared that it springs, fully formed, into your own brain before the poor walking clitches on-
screen can even speak their lines?

And why [oh, why] does my own day-
ly thinking—about work, relationships,
what to do Saturday, you name it—so frequently feel stale and soggy? Back in
the day, complicated projects got me
almost ecstatically excited to dive in and
deive my own singular, slantsome solu-
tion. Growing up in the Midwest, I often
came people to remark, with wrinkled
noses—on the jewelry I fashioned out of little silvery dead alewives I scavenged
from the shore of Lake Michigan and
 dipped in resin, say, or on the log I
jumpined behind the tire of my ancient
Opel to hold it in place when the pack-
ing brake broke... Was that... real dif-
ferent? But it took the pinched noncom-
pliment/deflate me back to: I was onto something: uncharted turf I could explore and pos-
ibly use to create something useful. For
many, many writing and artistic habits of
mind served me well. As a writer, I devel-
op a certain talent for bobbing with an
unlimited freedom to decide how other
people might weave. And in my spare time, I made clothes and collages that were bea-
tiful to me—they served as happy records of time spent noodling with my hands, pushing through problems to get the things made.

Being less comfort-
able with invention and improvisation in
this fragile and anxious era—in which
toxic fear of us just might destroy any-
thing that we can't immediately see a
way to monetize—has got me wondering if I'm just getting into creative productivity again. Emily Dickinson, or Mark Zacher-
ker practicality impossible. But, I'm happy to report, a notably creative burst of psy-
chologists, business gurus, and artists have been busy lately breaking down creativity into its component parts.

Reassuringly, experts stress that we're all creative: We wouldn't be here if human brains weren't exquisitely equipped to perform a large number of
creative tasks. Instead of just making chocolate-chip cookies, it's saying, Hey, get to 10,000 cherry pies in the
bach in the backyard. Why not grind them up and put them in the cookies to make them healthier? The personality trait most associated with creativity is being open to new experiences. Travel (especially abroad) is ideal for giving appreciation for novelty. But even small
alterations in routine, Kaufman says, can enhance the likelihood you'll have more creative "aha" moments. These are the so-called Big Cs—paradigm-shifting geniuses like Beethoven, Einstein, and Mary Lea Bower. On the other hand are the Pro-Cs, expert professionals who've de-
tived it (typically a decade or more) to
mastering their field. For example, Kaufman says, "the amazingly creative programmers, engineers, and designers" of Steve Jobs' team who worked under C
invention. Psychologist Mihaly Csik-
zentmihaly, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Gradu-
ate University, spent three decades track-
ing highly creative people. Many had
no trouble accessing the pre-creative mind, "flow," in which a person becomes so engrossed in tasks before a strong new solution clicks into place. Harvard Business School pro-

fessor Teresa Amabile—who calls cre-
vativity "a fragile phenomenon, easily crushed"—recently read 12,000 diary en-
tries from more than 200 workers from seven corporations, charting their days. She was "pretty shocked," she says, to discover how often workers went home demoralized because their "inner work lives" seemed dull and gray or, worse, when they'd stare dry from the beaten path, they'd be publicly held up (or stealthily thwarted).

And these negative emotions often led to poor-quality work, she found, as well as decreased productivity. But even small efforts to reframe things can improve your own well-being. But even small alter-
ations in routine, Kaufman says, can enhance the likelihood you'll have more creative "aha" moments. These are the so-called Big Cs—paradigm-shifting geniuses like Beethoven, Einstein, and Mary Lea Bower. On the other hand are the Pro-Cs, expert professionals who've de-
tived it (typically a decade or more) to
mastering their field. For example, Kaufman says, "the amazingly creative programmers, engineers, and designers" of Steve Jobs' team who worked under C
invention. Psychologist Mihaly Csik-
zentmihaly, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Gradu-
ate University, spent three decades track-
ing highly creative people. Many had
no trouble accessing the pre-creative mind, "flow," in which a person becomes so engrossed in tasks before a strong new solution clicks into place. Harvard Business School pro-

fessor Teresa Amabile—who calls cre-
vativity "a fragile phenomenon, easily crushed"—recently read 12,000 diary en-
tries from more than 200 workers from seven corporations, charting their days. She was "pretty shocked," she says, to discover how often workers went home demoralized because their "inner work lives" seemed dull and gray or, worse, when they'd stare dry from the beaten path, they'd be publicly held up (or stealthily thwarted). And these negative emotions often led to poor-quality work, she found, as well as decreased productivity. But even small efforts to reframe things can improve your own well-being. But even small alter-
ations in routine, Kaufman says, can enhance the likelihood you'll have more creative "aha" moments. These are the so-called Big Cs—paradigm-shifting geniuses like Beethoven, Einstein, and Mary Lea Bower. On the other hand are the Pro-Cs, expert professionals who've de-
tived it (typically a decade or more) to
mastering their field. For example, Kaufman says, "the amazingly creative programmers, engineers, and designers" of Steve Jobs' team who worked under C
invention. Psychologist Mihaly Csik-
zentmihaly, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Gradu-
ate University, spent three decades track-
ing highly creative people. Many had
no trouble accessing the pre-creative mind, "flow," in which a person becomes so engrossed in tasks before a strong new solution clicks into place. Harvard Business School pro-

fessor Teresa Amabile—who calls cre-
vativity "a fragile phenomenon, easily crushed"—recently read 12,000 diary en-
tries from more than 200 workers from seven corporations, charting their days. She was "pretty shocked," she says, to discover how often workers went home demoralized because their "inner work lives" seemed dull and gray or, worse, when they'd stare dry from the beaten path, they'd be publicly held up (or stealthily thwarted). And these negative emotions often led to poor-quality work, she found, as well as decreased productivity. But even small efforts to reframe things can improve your own well-being. But even small alter-
ations in routine, Kaufman says, can enhance the likelihood you'll have more creative "aha" moments. These are the so-called Big Cs—paradigm-shifting geniuses like Beethoven, Einstein, and Mary Lea Bower. On the other hand are the Pro-Cs, expert professionals who've de-
tived it (typically a decade or more) to
mastering their field. For example, Kaufman says, "the amazingly creative programmers, engineers, and designers" of Steve Jobs' team who worked under C
invention. Psychologist Mihaly Csik-
zentmihaly, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Gradu-
ate University, spent three decades track-
ing highly creative people. Many had
no trouble accessing the pre-creative mind, "flow," in which a person becomes so engrossed in tasks before a strong new solution clicks into place. Harvard Business School pro-

fessor Teresa Amabile—who calls cre-
vativity "a fragile phenomenon, easily crushed"—recently read 12,000 diary en-
tries from more than 200 workers from seven corporations, charting their days. She was "pretty shocked," she says, to discover how often workers went home demoralized because their "inner work lives" seemed dull and gray or, worse, when they'd stare dry from the beaten path, they'd be publicly held up (or stealthily thwarted). And these negative emotions often led to poor-quality work, she found, as well as decreased productivity. But even small efforts to reframe things can improve your own well-being. But even small alter-
ations in routine, Kaufman says, can enhance the likelihood you'll have more creative "aha" moments. These are the so-called Big Cs—paradigm-shifting geniuses like Beethoven, Einstein, and Mary Lea Bower. On the other hand are the Pro-Cs, expert professionals who've de-
tived it (typically a decade or more) to
mastering their field. For example, Kaufman says, "the amazingly creative programmers, engineers, and designers" of Steve Jobs' team who worked under C
invention. Psychologist Mihaly Csik-
zentmihaly, a professor of psychology and management at Claremont Gradu-
ate University, spent three decades track-
...
inner judge. I explain to Carson what can happen to me: I have an idea, feel some frisson at the nape of my neck suggesting this could actually be pretty cool and exciting—but then, when another project I’ve tried to launch gets shot down, or I feel deflated by the general state of the world, what formerly seemed great suddenly looks flimsy. I wonder aloud, driftily, if women might have special needs when it comes to boosting creativity....

Carson knows exactly what I’m getting at, and she tells me something pretty depressing: In the history “of all Big-C paradigm-changing creative achievements,” only 3 percent were made by women, which she attributes to biological, sociological, and psychological forces. “Women are diagnosed with depression and anxiety twice as often as men are,” she says. “If someone criticizes their work, a woman is more likely to walk away, tail between the legs, andulk, while a man tends to be aggressive and fight back: ‘You don’t like that one? Here—try this idea!’ I think testosterone has influence over that. And women have been socialized to please.” And when we don’t, we feel bad about ourselves.

To help me reclaim some of my own creative boldness, Carson steers me to two groups of mind-set-enhancing exercises in her book. One batch is designed to help people stay loose and open to the new in the early creative-germination phase (among these are simple mindfulness techniques). The other is intended to help people cope better with rejection: drills to train yourself to regard criticism as valuable feedback rather than a personal attack. But along with these exercises, I realize that I need a good old-fashioned jolt of inspiration. That would put my mood on the upsweep, Carson says, thereby broadening my attention so I can collect more grist for the cognitive mill and hopefully combine it in novel ways. “It’s like, Wow! You see a bigger picture, and more things become possible.”

For my inspiration fix, I head to the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery (WID), on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus. The goal of the place, its lion-haired director, David Krakauer, tells me, exuberantly drawing arrows and intersecting circles on a whiteboard, is to bring together researchers from many historically isolated departments to share theories, concepts, and data sets. Krakauer, a geneticist who also happens to have deep and sophisticated interests in art and music and education reform, has written a quote from Niels Bohr across his office window in grease pencil:

“What often kills creativity is the idea that it’s a delicate thing,” says author Babineaux. “Don’t make it such a huge deal. Find a way to be creative. Even if you’re doing crummy work, have fun doing crummy work.”

Babineaux says, and surprisingly often, ideas popped out fast are the ones that fly. “I meet people with good ideas for a business or start-up, but they spend an eternity perfecting them. Many successful entrepreneurs, they’ll throw together some crappy prototype and go show five clients. They don’t wait.”

Move: Artist Ellen Harvey—whose recent show at the Corcoran Gallery, “The Alien’s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, DC,” seemed eerily apt when the government shutdown closed almost every other museum in the city—says she likes to ponder new work while traveling. “I’m particularly fond of trains, but swimming in the Ruins, or even floating in the sweet water at the core. You’re good only for a few hours a day anyway, and this way you bore through all the cliché, the boring, the boastful, and the self-savaging, until you reach that moment you throw together some crappy prototype and start-up, but they spend an eternity perfecting them. Many successful entrepreneurs, they’ll throw together some crappy prototype and go show five clients. They don’t wait.”

Just do It: Chef and best-selling author of Blood, Bones & Butter Gabrielle Hamilton says she gets up before dawn—and still uses the “hot pen” method she learned in high school. “You put the pen to paper and keep going. It helps you bore through all the cliché, the boring, the boastful, and the self-savaging, until you reach the sweet water at the core. You’re good only for a few hours a day anyway, and this way you’ve already wrapped up a respectable day’s work.”