

25 Ways You, Your Brain, and Your Experience May Be Stifling Your Imagination

1. Formal education tends to train us in convergent thinking (coming up with the one right answer) but not in divergent thinking (coming up with many alternatives).
2. The brain is predictive rather than reactive, which means it is always trying to figure out what is going to happen next based on what has happened before.
3. The brain, being uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, prefers answers; imagination is stimulated by questions.
4. The brain seeks to detect patterns and make connections, which can either help us be more creative, if directed, or keep us stuck in the status quo, if automatic.
5. The brain's retrieval system is based on coming up with a rapid response, not the best response—and then running with it.
6. Our inherent personalities and personal experiences can incline us toward concrete rather than abstract and/or short-term rather than long-range thinking.
7. Operating from the **be good** mindset versus the **get better** mindset can result in an unwillingness to experiment or take risks.
8. The belief in a “true” (authentic) self may lead us to focus on fixing ourselves (to be who we ought to be) rather than creating ourselves (to be who we want to be), so we end up playing small instead of living with passion.
9. Asking why? backward instead of forward turns our attention away from present or future possibilities and toward explanations, rationales, reasons, and/or excuses.
10. Overvaluing productivity over creativity can lead to constant busyness and a lack of “white space”: unstructured time for play, relaxation, or daydreaming.
11. A productivity orientation also reduces opportunities to experience awe, which has the power to shift our perceptions and alter our mental model of the world.
12. Not reading fiction can mean missing out on the easiest way to expand the imagination (and reap a host of other benefits in many areas of our lives).
13. Lack of curiosity, all by itself, can kill imagination. Curiosity engages the brain's reward system and motivates exploration, expansion, and experimentation.

Farther to Go!

14. A belief in the possibility of continual growth and expansion can lead to unwillingness to destroy something that currently exists, especially if we have invested our time, attention, and energy in creating it. But destruction is a part of creation.
15. If we don't understand what imagination is, we might fail to recognize when and where we do use it.
16. A limited perspective on imagination might lead us to equate it with "fantastical" imagination (a tendency to have highly vivid and realistic fantasies and become absorbed in imaginary worlds), which is only one of several types of imagination.
17. The theory that some people are right-brained creative types and others are left-brained logical types creates a false either/or category, as a result of which we may view ourselves as not having the capacity to be creative.
18. Mindfulness training, although effective in some circumstances, can in the long term reinforce the status quo instead of inspiring problem-solving and change.
19. For some individuals, growing up in poverty can affect the hippocampus (a brain structure that plays a big role in imagination and memory) in terms of decreased environmental enrichment and increased chronic stress.
20. Trauma can also negatively impact the hippocampus in regard to the types of memories that are retained, which can lead to a diminished ability to imagine positive outcomes in the future.
21. The habit of ruminating or engaging in catastrophic thinking can lead us to develop a negative association with our imagination. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions can also disrupt positive, constructive imagination.
22. Superstition about the negative power of imagination can activate mental "thought police" who keep us on a straight and narrow path lest we bring bad things into being.
23. For some people, religiosity proscribes against flights of fancy or thinking in certain off-limits areas.
24. Always trying to conform, fit in, or avoid offending anyone squelches imagination.
25. Sometimes having too many "toys" can limit imaginative play for both children and adults.