**How to Reduce Practice Room Angst (and Boost Creativity)**

by Dr. Noa Kageyama You know the feeling. The one you get when you run into a particularly vexing problem in the practice room. Where no matter how hard you try, you just can’t get a note to speak right, or a phrase to come out the way it should.

Maybe you can’t get your fingers to cooperate, or figure out what’s wrong with your embouchure, or get the tempo where it needs to be. Whatever it is, it’s frustrating, and as the frustration builds, you dig your heels in, narrow your eyes, grit your teeth, and continue to hack at it, hoping that brute force will eventually lead to some sort of breakthrough.

There’s something to be said for persistence, but as someone once said, “If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.”

Generally, once we reach this level of frustration, we’re just making things worse.

So what alternatives do we have?

**A 5-shower day**

I met a writer once, who said that on days when she is struggling with her writing, she might take as many as 5 showers in a single day.

Creative types sometimes refer to this as a “[creative pause](http://www.cameronmoll.com/archives/2008/11/showering_and_thinking/)” – a brief pulling away from the problem, which often results in new ideas, or solutions presenting themselves unexpectedly.

You may have seen this video of the mouse and the cracker, but check out what happens around the 54-second mark.

Just when the mouse looks like it’s about to give up, it takes a creative pause, and tries one last time. Yes, the pause is like 4 seconds to us, but isn’t that like 2 minutes and 12 seconds in mouse seconds (1 human year = 33 mouse years)?

Am I making too much of this little mouse’s pause? Probably, but hey, it’s still a fun video.

So what is it about taking a break that jump starts our creativity anyway?

Well, it appears that it’s not the break itself that’s important, but what we do *during* the break that matters.

**Mind wandering: good or bad?**

When you are driving in treacherous road conditions, or performing delicate open-heart surgery, or auditioning for a big job, letting your mind wander aimlessly is just asking for trouble. Bad things are liable to happen unless you are super-focused on the task at hand.

But when it comes to enhancing creativity and problem-solving, mind-wandering may actually be quite desirable.

[This study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16019229), for instance, found that being distracted enhances creativity, while being too focused on the problem diminishes it.

[Another study](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S019188691000601X) found that individuals diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) tend to score higher than non-ADHD folks on standardized measures of creativity. The same researchers have also gathered data which suggests that people with ADHD may enjoy greater levels of achievement in creative domains like music, art, cooking, writing, humor, and invention.

**How to use your creative pause for maximal results**

[A more recent study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22941876) out of UC Santa Barbara tested 145 participants’ creativity with the Unusual Uses Task, where the objective is to generate as many unusual uses as possible for a common object (like a lawn chair) in 2 minutes.

After running everyone through this test once, participants were split into 4 groups. One group did it again immediately. Another group engaged in an attention-demanding task for 12 minutes. A third group engaged in a cognitively *un*demanding task for 12 minutes (basically just responding to a computer prompt asking if a number was even or odd). And a final group just sat quietly for 12 minutes.

The researchers then used an assessment to find out how much mind-wandering occurred during this “incubation” period, and found that the folks engaged in the undemanding task experienced significantly more mind-wandering than those who were busy with the demanding task.

Then the researchers had the participants repeat the same test.

Lo and behold, these folks who were in the **undemanding** task group – whose minds were doing the most mind-wandering – improved their scores by about 40%.

How did the others do?

None of the other groups improved their scores at all.

**Take action**

So the next time you run into a problem in the practice room (or elsewhere) that has you stumped, and you need new ideas to try, new approaches or solutions to implement, take a break.

Take a shower. Mow the grass. Wash the dishes. Fold laundry. Do something that uses some brain power, but not too much.

Don’t think about the problem directly, but just let your mind wander for a bit, then come back to your instrument after a little while.

When you return, maybe you’ll find that the solution was there the whole time. You just needed a little “creative pause.”