
The Curse of Creativity

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Throughout history, there's a long list of eminent creative achievers in all fields who've suffered from depression.

Winston Churchill famously described his darker times as his "Black Dog." Charles Dickens and Robin Williams struggled with clinical depression. So did Picasso, Beethoven and Virginia Woolf.

In her book *Touched with Fire*, (which was adapted into a movie with the same name) American clinical psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison writes that 38% of writers and poets had been treated for a type of mood disorder and virtually all creative writers and artists (89%) had experienced "intense, highly productive, and creative episodes".

With a popular narrative about creativity that focuses on suffering rather than success, It's not surprising that there would be a link between artists and pain, between creativity and anguish. However there are many who believe that the stereotype that links the artist with pain and suffering is overdue for an update.

"I am astounded I could let go of the drama of being a suffering artist," writes Julia Cameron in the introduction to *The Artist's Way*. "Nothing dies harder than a bad idea. And few ideas are worse than the ones we have about art."

The starving artist in particular, is a stereotype that anyone who pursues a career in the visual arts has to confront. Never mind that there are in fact many artists who have managed to achieve fame and fortune in their lifetimes. These include Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali and Michelangelo, as well as many celebrated contemporary artists who are exemplified by South Africa's William Kentridge.

It's equally important that we don't overlook the countless creative people who don't suffer from depression. The notion that from great pain comes great art doesn't mean that suffering is in fact a precursor for creativity.

In fact, studies reveal that while not all artistic people are happy, many are. It turns out that creative types have a tendency to be more psychologically stable than non-creatives – perhaps because of the outlet and connection to meaning that creative work provides. A study led by researchers at the University of Zurich, asked participants to list their jobs and then to rate their happiness with that position on a simple scale of 1 ("not happy") to 10 ("incredibly happy"). Artists and other creative types typically rated their overall job satisfaction substantially higher than did those in more mundane fields.

It's essential that we continue to identify and celebrate role models who are able to straddle both worlds: artists and creatives who successfully navigate producing art while supporting themselves and their families. We need a new narrative that reinforces the fact that making meaningful art doesn't necessarily require suffering and starvation before recognition post mortem. Anyone managing or considering a creative career deserves to hear this.

In Renaissance times the only way to survive as an artist was to secure the attention of a wealthy patron – someone who recognised your talent and who was prepared to fund your lifestyle while you spent your days courting a capricious muse. Almost as a hangover from these times, many modern creatives still believe that pursuing their art is a higher calling than the pursuit of filthy lucre and might spend their days waiting to be discovered. But the two extremes are unhealthy. Making art at the behest of patronage might result in the work losing its meaning. On the other hand, starving for one's art in the name of dedication and meaning is hardly a sustainable path either for the individual artist or for the arts in general.

Today, in the age of influencers and access to social media, even if you're a creative with moderate talent you have an instant route to finding an audience who might appreciate you or a community to work with as you hone your craft. You

might not be guaranteed success, but your chances are a lot higher than they will be if you stay in your garrett equivalent waiting to be discovered.

“Pick Yourself” incants Seth Godin the modern patron saint of the creative freelancer who dreams of making an impact. And there is something both liberating and instructional about the phrase.

Liberating because the decision to “just do it” without waiting to be discovered is an exhilarating one. If you are a writer you can self-publish. If you are an artist you can engage with the audience most likely to support you and co-create as you go. If your creativity presents itself in the form of a new business idea, you can start a side-hustle to test it’s viability before you risk investing the family fortune on funding your brainwave.

The instructional part of the slogan is that in order to be a creative person today, it’s necessary to learn another set of skills as well. Universities like the UCT Graduate School of Business have stepped in to fill the gap to offer courses like Business Acumen for Artists to equip creatives with the skills to thrive in the world, not just in the studio.

“Once you realize that no one is going to select you—that Prince Charming has chosen another house—then you can actually get to work.” Says Godin.

And hard work it will always be. In the war of art where battle is waged with keyboards or canvases with no guarantee of emerging victorious, days of self-doubt and even self-loathing are inevitable. It’s only when you find discipline and put on daily headphones to drown out your inner saboteur that you might be rewarded with occasional inspiration.

There’s no doubt that creativity can be difficult. It’s about making connections and contributions that no-one has made before. It’s about delving into the human experience in ways which make sense to ourselves and might end up making sense to others. That kind of excavation can be painful before it yields results. But it’s also about existing in the world while paying attention to what makes it breathtaking. It’s about dancing between the parallel worlds of reality and possibility. Even though it’s not without pain, it’s what makes life beautiful and what gives it meaning. Rather than seeing it as a curse, learning to manage creativity’s dark side, celebrating the gifts it offers and sharing them with the world is about the struggle of life itself.