

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE *to the*  
**CREATIVE LIFE**

*Making  
something original —  
**ANYTHING!**  
— can heal you and  
enrich your life. Get  
started today!*

**BY NANCY MONSON**

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## Are you a creative type?

Before you answer that question, consider this: The act of creating is about bringing something into being that wasn't there before, the artistic choices you make along the way and problem-solving.

**CULTIVATING CREATIVITY IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE.** Several studies show that quilting, journaling and other creative pursuits can distract you from daily worries, improve mental well-being, reduce stress and promote relaxation. Creative activities can even blunt the psychological impact of chronic diseases: Research in Europe and the United States suggests that crafts help people with multiple sclerosis, depression, cancer and chronic fatigue syndrome cope better with pain, sadness and loneliness.

Creativity can also offer a potent anti-aging benefit: In a two-year study supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, healthy seniors who painted, wrote stories or poems, made jewelry or sang in a chorus reported better physical health, fewer visits to the doctor, less use of medication and fewer health problems than a control group that did not participate in creative activities.

Follow our guide to experience the healing effects of creativity this year.

STEP NO. 1

*Have faith — creativity can be cultivated!*

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STEP NO. 1

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### Have faith — creativity can be cultivated!

**MANY PEOPLE ARE QUICK TO LABEL THEMSELVES** as lacking a creative side, believing it's inborn or it isn't. But the truth may be that they just haven't given creativity a chance. "When people tell me they're not creative, I often find it's because their brains are too noisy," says Eric Maisel, Ph.D., author of *Coaching the Artist Within*. "They may be thinking so many mundane thoughts all day long — I need to pick up the kids at 3:00, I need to mow the lawn — that creative thoughts and ideas don't have room to surface."

**DO IT** Engage in relaxing activities to quiet mind chatter and get in tune with your creative right brain. You might try the pen-and-pencil doodling of [Zentangle](#), coloring rubber-stamped drawings with markers (professional artist Joanne Sharpe shows you how to use the fun array of markers available today in [online lessons](#)), collaging or scrapbooking, or journaling.

**DO IT** Julia Cameron, author of the classic *The Artist's Way*, recommends a tool she calls [The Artist's Date](#): a solo outing to a museum, craft fair, author's reading, movie or elsewhere to inspire and guide your inner artist. You might see a handmade felted wallet and say, "Hey, I'd like to make that!" Or the experience may simply heighten your awareness of art, design, music and literary styles you enjoy.



WHEN YOU'RE  
**ANGRY,**  
TRY ...

Ceramics, sculpting,  
metal crafts, gardening  
and other highly  
physical creative outlets,  
because they help you  
release your aggressions.



STEP NO. 2

read

*Find your bliss.*



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### *Find your bliss.*

**SOME WOMEN ARE DETAIL-ORIENTED, MARTHA STEWART-TYPES** who love hobbies that require precision, such as beadwork, decorative painting or embroidery. Others are spontaneous, messy Rachael Ray types who prefer more free-form arts such as ceramics, gardening, journaling, collaging and abstract painting. Experiment until you find the hobbies that suit you best.



**DO IT** To home in on your creative passion, visit local craft stores or national chains such as such as [Joann](#), [Michaels](#) or [A.C. Moore](#) for art kits and supplies. Surf YouTube for how-to videos, such as this one called "[How to Knit: The Basics](#)," which has been viewed more than 4 million times!

If you want to kick it up a notch, get a subscription to [Creativebug.com](#) (\$24.99 a month) for step-by-step videos on making artist's trading cards, sewing, jewelry and printmaking.

WHEN YOU'RE  
**SAD,**  
TRY ...

Quilting or sewing, because the bright colors of the fabrics can improve your mood, or drawing in a journal with colored pencils or markers, because expressive art can help you release negative emotions.



STEP NO. 3

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*Adopt a beginner's mind.*

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STEP NO. 3

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## *Adopt a beginner's mind.*

**THIS ZEN BUDDHIST CONCEPT ALLUDES TO SEEING** everything as if for the first time. In terms of creativity, it means not expecting to be an expert at a new task right off the bat, but rather allowing yourself to fail and make mistakes without being deterred or embarrassed. “The beginner’s humility and openness lead to exploration,” says Cameron, and “exploration leads to accomplishment.” Creating a beginner’s mind-set can also alleviate worries about whether you have artistic talent or not — which is often more about practice than innate ability.

**DO IT** While you’re learning, start with simple projects and be self-compassionate. “Judging your early efforts is artistic abuse,” says Cameron. Creativity is not about doing everything correctly or being perfect, it’s about expressing yourself. Rather than labeling your work “good” or “bad,” focus on its emotional merits, advises [fabric artist Marcy Tilton](#), and your intention in making it.





WHEN YOU'RE  
**REFLECTIVE OR PENSIVE,**  
TRY ...

Scrapbooking or collaging, because they give you a chance to recall key moments in your life. Or try photography, which allows you to compose as you go.

STEP NO. 4

read

*Go it alone.*



STEP NO. 4

## Go it alone.

WHEN YOU'RE  
REFLECTIVE OR PENSIVE,

ACCORDING TO SUSAN CAIN, AUTHOR of [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking](#), despite a recent trend toward brainstorming and “groupthink,” you don’t need to hang with a crowd to be creative. In fact, she says research suggests that solitude and quiet can be even better catalysts for expert performance and innovative breakthroughs. She cites the example of Apple inventor Steve Wozniak, who created the first Apple computer alone, as well as a classic University of California, Berkeley, study that found most highly creative people are independent, individualist introverts.

**DO IT** Make a “studio” in your home and schedule some regular creative time. If possible, arrange a dedicated spot — a guest room, a desk, an armoire, a storage area — where you can leave your supplies lying around and play even when you only have 10 minutes to spare.

**DO IT** If you need the structure of a course, try a virtual class, such as Sarah Bush’s [Creative Breakthrough Collage Teleclasses](#) (\$17 each) or [Quilt University’s online classes](#) (\$27 per class and up). Bush’s call-in format means you get formal support and guidance while you collage for your eyes only, without fear of failure or judgment from others.



WHEN YOU'RE  
**ANXIOUS,**  
TRY ...

Knitting, crocheting,  
cross-stitch and beading,  
because the repetition  
of movement can relax you.

STEP NO. 5

read

*Focus on the process.*

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## Focus on the process.

**WHEN WE'RE CREATING, MANY OF US ARE OVERCOME** by a desire to be, well, done. But the process of creating matters as much as the product you make, at least in terms of psychological benefits; creating can lift your mood by distracting you from everyday worries and pressures.

It's a great antidote to stress, too, according to a New York University study sponsored by the Home Sewing Association and published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. It showed that sewing a simple project had comparable relaxation benefits to meditation and deep breathing. Repetitive and rhythmic activities such as knitting may also prompt the relaxation response — a feeling of calm that is the opposite of the body's stress response.

*Tips adapted from* **Craft to Heal: Soothing Your Soul With Sewing, Painting, and Other Pastimes** by Nancy Monson.

