



# What are you thinking?

**Sandra Kimball** adopts a more creative approach

**D**id you know that creative thinking skills are reported to decrease by 90 percent between the ages of five and seven years old? This is the time when you started school and the learning patterns encouraged were for you to figure out what the teacher wanted and for you to give the right answer. If you didn't give the right answer, chances are your creative thinking skills started to shut down and you began to think there was something wrong with you. But you can re-awaken and hone your creative thinking skills again when you want to break out of old patterns and discover something new about yourself or when working on a creative project.

Creative thinking thrives in a relaxed, open state of mind, but it can be jolted into action by being under pressure or it can occur by accident, like when you have a sudden burst of inspiration. This usually happens to me quite inconveniently when I'm without the aid of a pencil and notebook while sitting in the sauna at the *sentō*, my own private think-tank.

Besides happening by accident, creative thinking is an ability to generate ideas or imaginings of something new that has never happened before, usually by combining, rearranging or reapplying existing ideas. Sometimes these imaginings can be brilliant, or simply practical ideas you just haven't thought of yet.

Creative thinking is having a "maybe" attitude, to accept change and newness and have a willingness to play and try new things. We are socialized, sometimes culturally, into accepting only a small number of permitted or normal things. For example, think about cooked fish. This might seem like the only normal way to eat it until you are in Japan where eating raw fish is the culturally accepted norm.

Besides having the ability to generate new ideas and an attitude to accept newness and change, creative thinking is a process of just plain, hard work, tweaking and fiddling with something until you get it just right, and at the same time knowing there is always room for improvement.

## Here are some creative thinking methods that you might try:

Combining things that don't normally exist

together (like the sauna, pen, and notebook) and coming up with a new idea is a way to think creatively. Contrary to the popular myth that creative geniuses pull their ideas from out of nowhere, they will often combine things that normally don't exist together for inspiration. Once I attended a watercolor class given by one of my favorite painters. I thought I would be in the presence of a wild genius whose creativity flowed straight from her head, down her arm, and out the tip of her brush. What she did was set objects and photographs around her, added color and technique, and combined them to make her beautiful paintings.

Another way to think creatively is to get out of the box. Let me give you an example from a recent counseling session. Christine found that she had two patterns of behavior when she was communicating with her partner. She acted either like a spoiled child, or she withdrew and accommodated. And she wasn't getting what she wanted, which was open, free-flowing communication. Her energy was taken up in keeping these two aspects of her personality happy. So what I suggested was to not think outside the box, but to get outside the box altogether and jump into another one. When we try and think outside the box, more often than not, we get stuck sitting in the box and just thinking. Picture this image and you can see you get nowhere. But by jumping into another box, we employ creative thinking processes because it's playful, adventurous, and out of the ordinary. I asked her what somebody else might do and she imagined a doctor coming to try and fix the situation. Developing the idea further, she could see that having a more "scientific" approach – being rational, brave, methodical, and creative – would be a new way to deal with the situation. She wouldn't have to revert to her default positions, well-learned and practiced over time, of being overly emotional or switched off. And at the same time, those behaviors weren't made to be wrong and they were no longer limiting her.

The third way is called "frame-setting," which is to make a model and develop a vision of what you want. This is sometimes confused with the thinking espoused by the popular book and movie *The Secret*. While attraction-based thinking can help you direct more attention and energy to what you want, which is a good thing,

it tends to break down after some time because people try and control their world by controlling their thoughts, which can't be sustained over the long term. When you fail to keep the thoughts of attraction going and don't get what you want, or you feel closed off from a power source considered outside yourself, it can very sneakily turn to self-hatred. The real secret is to keep things moving, what I call "thinking like water." Thinking like water means you go back to your vision, or creative project, fiddle around with it, talk to someone about it (preferably not an expert), fiddle some more, sometimes working with focused attention, and sometimes walking away and coming back to it later. When you suspend judgment and approach your project and indeed your life this way, the impossible and unthinkable moves the boundaries of who you think you are and what you are capable of, just a little wider.

Thinking like water means going around obstacles, sometimes carving and crashing, but sometimes moving like a lazy river. This isn't the same as "going with the flow," a passive stance which usually means you've missed the opportunity to feel real joy from an accomplishment that comes after a lot of work.

Heraclites, one of the original creative thinkers tells us, "A thing rests by changing." In other words, sometimes delaying a course of action is the best thing to do. Peter came into counseling ready to leave his wife for one of his students. But as his story unfolded, he realized he was too close to the situation to see clearly. By waiting, and letting the situation rest for awhile, he came to see that what he truly wanted was to stay with his wife and to begin putting more of his creative energy into getting his marriage back on track.

What I've described here are some of the methods that are in my creative thinking pattern, but to stay true to the subject, consider what your creative style is. Some questions to ask yourself are: Do you work better under pressure or when you forget about your project altogether and wait? Are you so close and connected to what you're thinking that you don't consider other possibilities? And, are you paying attention to details? And you know, I still haven't figured out how to jot down my inspirations and thoughts that come to me while sitting in the sauna. Any ideas? **KTO**

*Names and information have been changed to protect identities. For more creative counselling resources go to: [www.internationalcounselling.com](http://www.internationalcounselling.com).*