Make Room for Ideas

What the Research Says About Incubation, Walking, Mood, Sleep and Creative Thinking

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: Two Kinds of Creative Thinking

Creativity is often treated as a gift. Researchers treat it as a set of thinking tasks that can be measured and, in some cases, helped along. This chapter sets out the two kinds of thinking the rest of the book keeps returning to.

DIVERGENT AND CONVERGENT THINKING

A meta-analysis of walking and creativity, which Chapter 3 describes, defines the two kinds this way. Divergent thinking is the ability to generate novel and useful ideas. Convergent thinking is the ability to analyse and select ideas to find the best solution (Thabane, Arora, Boilard, Sutoski and Parpia, 2026, PLOS ONE). In everyday terms, divergent thinking is coming up with many possible answers, and convergent thinking is narrowing to the one that works.

HOW THEY ARE MEASURED

Experiments need tasks they can score. One set of experiments used Guilford's alternate uses test to measure divergent thinking, where a person lists as many uses as they can for an everyday object. It used the compound remote associates test to measure convergent thinking, where a person finds the one word that links three given words (Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014, Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition). These tasks are narrow. They capture parts of creative thinking, not the whole of making a painting or a company.

WHY THE SPLIT MATTERS

Several findings in this book differ by kind. A meta-analysis of incubation found that divergent thinking tasks benefited more than some insight tasks (Chapter 2). The walking studies found a big effect on divergent thinking and an uncertain one on convergent thinking (Chapter 3). Knowing which kind you need helps you pick the right habit. If you need a long list of options, the divergent findings apply. If you need to choose between options, they may not.

WHAT THIS BOOK DOES NOT PROMISE

Creative work involves skill, knowledge, time and luck. The studies here look at small, specific things that can nudge thinking: setting a problem aside, walking, mood, sleep and meditation. They do not show that any of these makes someone a great artist or inventor. Most of the experiments used adults, many of them university students, and short tasks done in a laboratory.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the studies.

Name the task. Before you start, write "I need many options" or "I need to choose one".

Separate the two steps. Generate first without judging. Select afterwards with criteria.

Keep a place for ideas. A notebook or notes app stops good ideas from vanishing.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A small team needs a name for a new service. First, they spend ten minutes writing as many names as they can, with no comments. Then they take a break. After the break, they list three criteria (easy to say, easy to spell, not taken) and choose. They have used divergent thinking first and convergent thinking second.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Pick a small problem you face this week. Spend five minutes listing as many possible solutions as you can. Next day, pick the best three using criteria you write down first.

KEY POINTS

Divergent thinking generates many ideas; convergent thinking selects one. Studies score them with tasks like listing uses for an object and finding the word that links three others. Several findings later in the book differ by kind, so name the task first.

Chapter 2: Set It Aside: Incubation

Many people report solving a problem after they stopped working on it. Researchers call the break an incubation period. This chapter looks at what a pooled analysis found, including the details that make the idea less simple than the slogan.

WHAT THE META-ANALYSIS FOUND

A meta-analytic review pulled together studies of incubation and problem solving. Some researchers had found higher solution rates after an incubation period, meaning time when a problem is set aside before more attempts, and others had found no effect. The review identified a positive incubation effect overall. Divergent thinking tasks benefited more than linguistic and visual insight tasks (Sio and Ormerod, 2009, Psychological Bulletin).

THE CONDITIONS THAT MATTERED

The review examined what changed the size of the effect. Longer preparation periods gave a greater incubation effect, so time spent working on the problem before the break helped. Filling the break with a demanding task gave a smaller effect. And, surprisingly, for linguistic insight problems, low-demand tasks during the break produced a stronger effect than plain rest. The authors conclude that the conditions for using incubation as a practical technique need to be designed with care.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Three practical points follow from the findings. First, work on the problem properly before you set it aside, because the effect grew with preparation time. Second, do not fill the break with hard thinking about something else. Third, an undemanding activity during the break may be better than doing nothing, at least for word problems. The abstract does not give effect sizes, so we do not quote any.

A CAUTION

These were laboratory studies with specific kinds of puzzles. Whether the pattern holds for a real project such as a report or a design is not shown by the abstract.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Prepare first. Spend real time on the problem, write down what you know and what is blocking you.

Plan the break. Decide how long it will be and what you will do.

Pick an undemanding activity. A walk, simple chores or a routine task, not an email session.

Come back with a note. Before the break, write one line on where you got stuck. After it, start there.

Capture ideas that arrive. Keep a notebook where you can write quickly.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A writer is stuck on how to open an article. She works on it for forty minutes, listing what she wants the opening to do. Then she goes for a twenty-minute walk, thinking about nothing in particular. On the way back, she has a first sentence. She writes it down at once. She prepared, took an undemanding break and captured the idea.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Next time you are stuck, do the full cycle: prepare for thirty minutes, write one line on the block, take a planned undemanding break of twenty minutes, then return. Note whether anything changed.

KEY POINTS

A meta-analysis found a positive incubation effect, larger for divergent thinking tasks. More preparation helped, a demanding break reduced the effect, and for word problems an undemanding break beat plain rest. The review advises designing the conditions with care.

Chapter 3: Walk It Out

Walking is the simplest creativity habit there is. Two studies, one experimental and one a pooled analysis, speak to it.

FOUR EXPERIMENTS

A set of four experiments tested walking and creative thinking. In the first, adults did the alternate uses test and the remote associates test while seated and then while walking on a treadmill. The abstract reports that walking increased 81 percent of participants' creativity on the alternate uses test, but only 23 percent of participants' scores on the remote associates test. A second experiment found that walking led to higher scores whatever the order, and that people showed a residual boost when they sat down after walking. A third experiment generalised the effect to outdoor walking. A fourth tested analogy generation: participants sat inside, walked on a treadmill, walked outside or were pushed outside in a wheelchair, and walking outside produced the most novel and highest-quality analogies. The authors say the effects of outdoor stimulation and of walking were separable (Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014).

A POOLED ANALYSIS

A systematic review and meta-analysis covered 23 studies from 16 articles with 1,036 participants in total, most of them post-secondary students. Twelve of the studies were randomised experiments, nine were non-randomised experiments and two were observational. The authors found moderate-certainty evidence of a large effect of walking on divergent thinking (d = 0.93, 95 percent confidence interval 0.44 to 1.42), and very uncertain evidence of a null effect on convergent thinking (d = 0.16, interval -0.31 to 0.63). Looking at the randomised trials alone gave a similar large effect on divergent thinking (d = 0.82, interval 0.35 to 1.28). The authors conclude that walking likely results in a large increase in divergent thinking (Thabane and colleagues, 2026, PLOS ONE).

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Walking looks like a good way to produce a lot of ideas, and a poor bet for narrowing to one answer. Both sets of results point the same way: divergent thinking up, convergent thinking uncertain. And the effect appeared in short tasks, soon after walking.

LIMITS

Most participants were students, the tasks were short and many were done on treadmills. The pooled analysis is recent and the authors rate the certainty as moderate for the divergent result. It does not show that walking will rescue a stuck project.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the studies.

Walk when you need options. Use a walk to brainstorm names, titles, angles or alternatives.

Sit down to choose. Pick between options afterwards, using criteria.

Take a short walk before a brainstorm. The studies found a residual boost after walking.

Walk outside when you can. The outdoor walkers produced the best analogies in one experiment.

Carry a way to capture ideas. A phone note or a small notebook.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A manager needs ideas for a team event. She walks for twenty minutes, dictating every idea into her phone, good or bad. Back at her desk, she lists three criteria (cost, time, who can come) and picks. The walk made the list; the desk made the decision.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

This week, do one walking session for options. Set a timer for fifteen minutes, collect at least fifteen ideas by voice or notes, and select the best three afterwards at a desk.

KEY POINTS

Four experiments found that walking raised scores on an idea-generation task for most people, with a smaller effect on a word-linking task. A pooled analysis of 23 studies found a large effect on divergent thinking (d = 0.93) and an uncertain one on convergent thinking. Walk for options, sit to choose.

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