

STRETCH YOUR BRAIN & IMAGINATION HANDOUT

The prompts below were developed by Dr. Jane McGonigal a futurist and game designer. These strategies can be used to stretch and grow three parts of your brain, in addition to building imagination and creativity skills. Viewing the YouTube video of McGonigal's talk: [The Future of Imagination](#) is highly recommended. This talk was presented in 2016 at the Aspen Ideas Festival and it offers detailed examples of these activities as well as the science behind them.

Prompt #1: Counterfactual Memory

Ask yourself: What if instead of doing 'X' at some point in my past, I had done 'Y'? How might my life have turned out differently? (Example: What if I had joined the Coast Guard instead of going to college right after high school?)

Keep it personal. Neurological activation increases when there's an autobiographical element to the memory or future you are trying to imagine. McGonigal suggests: "Trying to imagine how things could have been different in the past allows you to imagine how things could be different in the future."

Step one: Write your "What if" question at the top of a new page in your journal.

"What if instead of _____, I _____."

Step two: Write a journal entry describing as many details about the ways your life might have turned out differently *as if you had done it*.

Step three: Reflection. Was this interesting for you to do? Were you surprised what came into your imagination? Did you think about one or multiple possible futures? Did any other insights come to mind?

When doing this exercise, the brain reaches for something that didn't happen, but that could have happened, by using a combination of logic, intuition and imagination. Three parts of the brain are activated. Research shows this exercise heightens 'agency' (the feeling that you have influence over how your life turns out), depression is reduced, and your creativity goes up. McGonigal also reports practicing these exercises can: "increase the sense of control you have over your own life" and "lead you to becoming a better creative problem solver."

Prompt #2: Counterfactual Foresight

Option A:

Step one: Imagine yourself in the future doing something you've never done before.

Step two: Describe the experience as vividly as you can.

Step three: Write your journal entry from the future - as if it already happened.

Step four: Imagine who is with you, how you got there, or other things that happened while you were there. Give your imagination free rein to go wild.

(My example: I've never lived on a houseboat. I imagined and wrote about all the adventures I had traveling that way for a year.)

Option B: The X, Y, Z Format

Step one: Imagine a physical activity (ie: cooking, biking) that you've done (X).

Step two: Imagine a person you care about who is alive and you could possibly have a future interaction with (Y).

Step three: Imagine traveling to a faraway place (Z).

Step four: Now imagine yourself doing this physical activity with the person you care about in this faraway place. Picture it for 10 seconds and imagine how you got there, and why you are doing this activity with the person you care about in a faraway place. Write an entry in your journal describing everything as if it already happened. Add as many details as possible.

Dr. McGonigal suggests: "Every time you remember a future that hasn't actually happened, you rate that future as more likely and the more vivid details that you describe about this future that has never happened, the more likely you are to really start to believe it could totally happen." This is a highly effective skill to practice and develop if you are interested in creating positive change in the world.

Part 3: Collage Postcards from the Future

Use a large index card or half a sheet of paper as the base of your postcard from the future.

Step one: Flip through magazines looking for images that catch your eye. The brain recognizes symbols, colors, and shapes. Words anchor us to the present, so avoid them in this exercise.

Step two: When you have a 6 or more images, begin cutting out specific shapes rather than 'boxes.' Play with different ways of arranging your images before gluing them in place. Let your intuition be your guide. Our purpose is not creating 'great art'. The process is used to 'bring forward' a story from the future.

Step three: When your postcard is complete, journal a description of the images you see in your collage. How do you feel when you look at it? Imagine a story emerging. Write the story in your journal from the future – as if it had already happened. The process ends with silent witnessing of the collages and a debrief of the process.

Reflections:

Reference:

McGonigal, Jane. (2016). *The future of imagination*. Aspen Ideas Festival Lecture.
<https://youtu.be/BeoHGwBvXhY>