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For Some, Worry Inspires Creativity

In a new study, neurotic people did better on a creativity task after thinking about a worrisome incident.

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BY TOM JACOBS



Woody Allen. (Photo: Everett Collection/Shutterstock)

At least since Sigmund Freud, psychologists have suggested a link between neuroticism and creativity. But these traits are strange bedfellows when you think about it: A predisposition for anxiety and self-criticism would seem to be a hostile environment for stimulating innovative thinking.

New research from East Asia provides a solution for this apparent paradox. It finds that, for certain people, worry can actually enhance creativity.

Call it the Woody Allen effect.

“The emotions that benefit creativity may not be the same for all individuals,” concludes a research team led by psychologist Angela Leung of Singapore Management University.

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Its study finds that, when the pressure is on, worry appears to be a motivating force for neurotic people. “Higher levels of intrinsic motivation in turn predict greater flexibility in idea generation,” the researchers add in the journal *Emotion*.

If worry is your default state, intensifying it slightly may actually prompt more flexible thinking.

Leung and her colleagues describe three experiments that provide evidence for their thesis. One of them featured 274 Taiwanese university students, who began by filling out a questionnaire designed to measure intrinsic neuroticism. They were then asked to recall a happy, worrisome, or neutral experience.

Half were then instructed to memorize an eight-digit number, which they would later be asked to recall. This placed them in a stressful, high-cognitive-load state. The others memorized a two-digit number, a far easier task.

At that point, all were instructed to come up with “as many uses for a brick as possible.” After doing so, they recorded whether they found the experience interesting and fun.

The result: Under the heavy cognitive load, neurotic people displayed more flexible thinking after recalling worrisome events. This was in contrast to people low on the neuroticism scale, who displayed the most mental flexibility after recalling neutral events.

Similar results were found in another experiment, in which 87 students were asked to generate a new design for the cabin of an airplane. Participants with relatively high levels of neuroticism “tended to perform more creatively after recalling a worrisome instead of a happy event,” the researchers report. The opposite was true for those with relatively low levels of neuroticism.

It all suggests that, in the researchers’ words, “Individuals vary in their preferences for experiencing happy or worrisome emotions prior to performing a creativity task.” If worry is your default state, intensifying it slightly may actually prompt more flexible thinking.

Perhaps this explains that Korean study from last year that found a link between on-the-job creativity and a moderate level of abusive supervision. If you’re always fretting about being fired, harsh words from an angry boss just may get those creative juices flowing.