

Creating Space for Insight

Tapping into the Power of Strategically Stepping Away

Why Space for Insight Matters

When we allow **space without an agenda**, our brains shift into a different mode of functioning. Rather than using our prefrontal cortex to solve complex problems, the "**default mode network**" in our brain emerges - this network in our brain allows us to think in a non-linear way that often leads to **new perspectives, aha moments, and insight**.

Open space or “unstructured time” allows us to:

- **Process emotions**, which increases awareness, emotional intelligence and reduces reactivity
- **Feel more energized** by resting the brain, especially the prefrontal cortex that works hard all day on decision-making and problem-solving
- **Access insight and “aha” moments**, as the brain’s Default Mode Network becomes active, supporting creativity and integrative thinking across time and disciplines

How to Create Space

Three things that help our default mode network emerge

While we can't force our default mode network to emerge, we can create space and seek out environments that encourage our minds to relax and wander.

A few ways tips:

- **No predetermined “agenda”** - when you are actively trying to solve a problem or trying to “be productive,” your prefrontal cortex will dominate.
- **Do something automatic or mindless** - light, repetitive movement or activities (walking, chores) can help distract and quiet the mind.
- **Get into a relaxed state** - get into environments or do activities that help you feel grounded and calm (i.e., nature, breathing, music).



EXAMPLES

Where and how people create space for unstructured time is personal; some examples:

- **Walking:** especially while listening to music or podcasts; taking the stairs instead of the elevator as a moment of reflection
- **Doing chores:** Raking leaves, washing dishes, etc.
- **Driving:** Taking a long drive on a familiar route
- **Crafting:** Working on crafts or creative projects
- **Breathing:** Taking a few slow, grounding breaths; boxed breathing
- Having a meandering, unstructured conversation with a friend
- **Being in nature:** Spending time in nature - walking, sitting, or even playing in the grass or dirt
- **Repetitive activity:** Playing golf or engaging in a repetitive sport
- **Rituals between tasks:** one surgeon described washing hands in warm water as a reflective pause
- **Showering:** or even shaving, blow-drying hair (one person joked she wished she had more hair for more thinking time)

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What hobbies help you create space for reflection and insight?

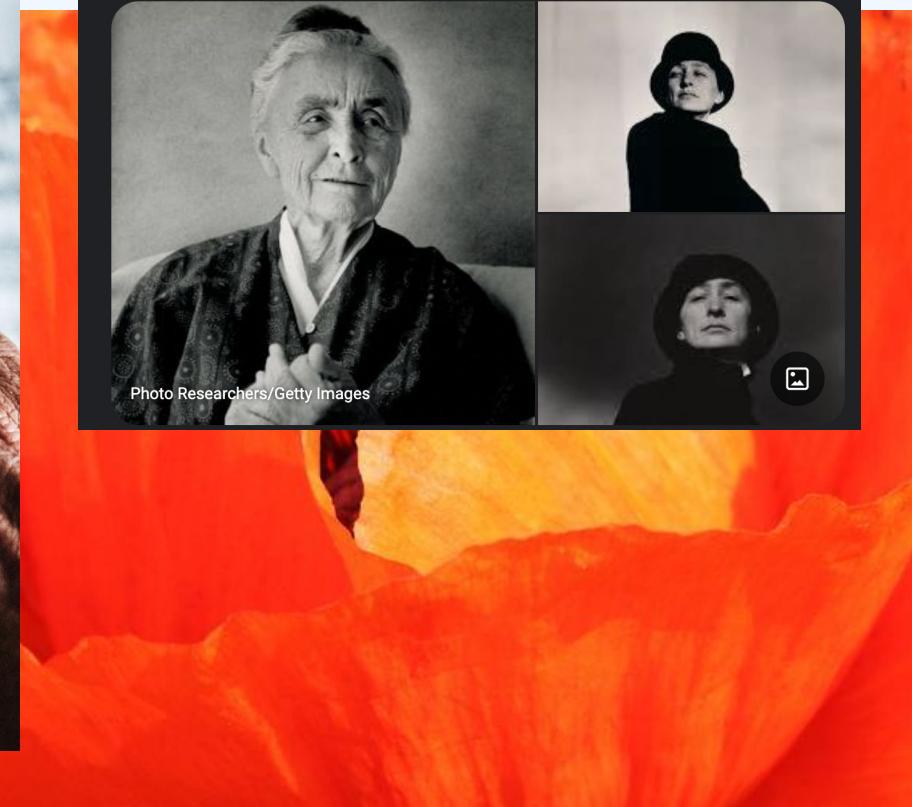
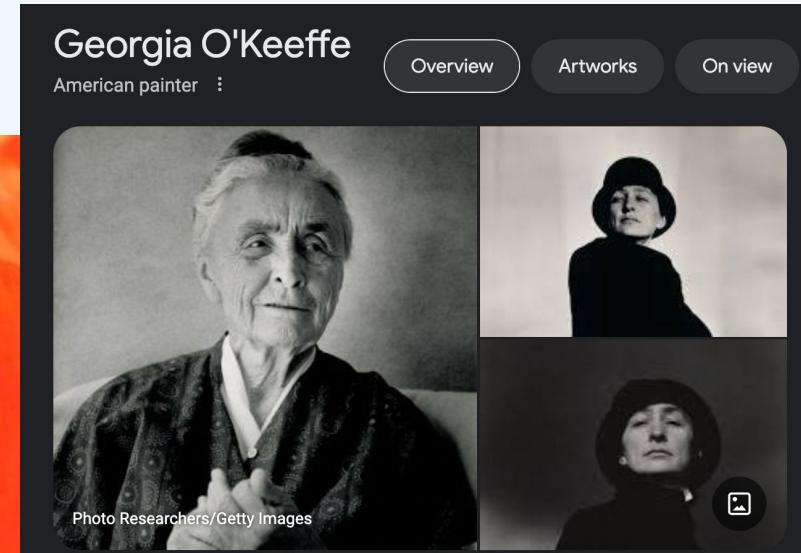


What can artists teach us about creating space for insight?



Ludwig van Beethoven

German composer :



Coach Yourself

Reflection questions

- When do you need unstructured time? What's the cost of not having it?
- What activities or environments ground you and quiet your thinking mind?
- How could you intentionally build 5–10 min of unstructured time into your day?
- What would it look like to protect longer, “sabbatical-like” moments (think an afternoon, a day, or a personal retreat) for deeper reflection?
- What gets in the way of these things happening?
- How can you remove those obstacles?
- What will you commit to trying next?

Creating Space for Teams

Reflection questions

Unstructured time isn't just an individual need - groups need it too. Consider:

- How might teams benefit from space to reflect rather than rush to solutions?
- Where could pauses, white space, or non-agenda time be intentionally built into meetings, retreats, or planning cycles?
- When leaders model and protect unstructured time, they create cultures where insight and thoughtful decision-making can emerge... how could you model this for your team?
- What will you commit to trying or modeling next with your team?

Next Steps & References



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Next Steps

- Create a space in your office or home that you associate with mind wandering
- Carve out just 10-min each day for open think time; block it in your calendar
- Plan time for a longer “personal retreat” or sabbatical
- Prioritize unstructured time into an upcoming team retreat

References

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- New York Times: [Don't Take Your Head Out of the Clouds!](#)
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- MIT Sloan: [Let Your Mind Wander](#)
- U Penn: [The science of creativity: how to train your brain for innovative thinking](#)
- Psychology Podcast: [Personality, Creativity and Wellbeing \(Scott Barry Kaufman\)](#)
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