

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Goal-driven versus creative flow

**S**o now that you know what the Success Trap is, and the various ways it can express itself in people's lives and careers, how do you break free of this trap? In this chapter, we'll look at the alternative to the goal-driven, 'Success Trap' life. We'll explore the idea of creativity – not as an artistic activity, but as a way of living and engaging with the world.

Creativity may give you an advantage in the workplace. As of 2020, a large survey of 660 million professional profiles found that creativity was the number one soft skill companies seemed to be hiring for (Sevilla, 2020). Creativity is also prized by organizational leaders. IBM, a company that has successfully reinvented itself despite fierce competition from Apple, refers to creativity as the reason why agile companies create and sustain a high return on investment (ROI). Its global survey of 1,500 CEOs (IBM, 2010) found that leaders deemed creativity to be the most important quality for leadership.

## The prison of the goal-driven life

I always think it's somewhat tragic that while we live in an essentially goal-driven culture, psychologists know full well that we humans are pretty bad at predicting what will make us happy (Gilbert, 2006). Even if we do experience a sense of accomplishment from reaching a goal, it never lasts for long. It's the anticlimax of finishing a big project or finally getting married: you're delighted for a period of time, but quickly default back to the goal-chasing state. What's the *next* big project; the *next* step in your relationship? With a goal-driven life, we can easily live in a perpetual gap between where we are and where we want to get to, without ever permanently reaching the elusive happiness or success we're working towards.

### *The good thing about goals*

I'm not arguing against having goals altogether. There's plenty of evidence that it's important to have goals and to take action towards them. Otherwise, the thing you're aiming for is just an idea, and no real progress can be made. Certainly, it makes sense to articulate goals, write them down, take action and be accountable to organize your energy and time. Being accountable to others is also a powerful catalyst. One study calculated how much more likely you are to achieve your goals based on how serious you are about them, by dividing participants into five groups:

- Group 1 was asked to simply think about the goals they hoped to accomplish within a four-week block.
- Groups 2 to 5 were asked to write down their goals.
- Group 3 was also asked to write action commitments for each goal.
- Group 4 had both to write goals and action commitments and also share these commitments with a friend.

- Group 5 went the furthest by doing all of the above plus sending a weekly progress report to a friend.

Those in Group 1 accomplished 43 per cent of their stated goals. Those in Group 4 accomplished 64 per cent of their stated goals, while those in Group 5 were the most successful, with an average 76 per cent of their goals accomplished (Gardner and Albee, 2013).

So, the evidence shows that having goals and taking action on them is useful. But we also know that becoming trapped in a cycle of endless goal-seeking is a significant element of the Success Trap – so when does working towards goals become unhealthy? The answer, like many things in life, is when it becomes a *compulsion* rather than a choice. When you're unable to sit still for a moment and just breathe; when you have to be doing something all the time and your attention has to be occupied constantly; when it leads to exhaustion and costs you your health and relationships. We could call this phenomenon 'goal addiction'.

### *Overcoming goal addiction*

Any addiction – from chocolate and cigarettes, to work and the office – involves the reward centres of the brain. These are the parts of the brain that tell you what you should chase, and give you a hit of pleasurable dopamine when you get it. Every time you get a dopamine hit for achieving a goal, your brain remembers what you did to achieve that goal – it learns. Soon it doesn't care what you have to do to achieve the goal, you just know you want to achieve it. While there isn't a huge amount of research on processes such as goal-setting or goal achievement, it stands to reason that if you feel good about yourself for setting and achieving goals, it's something you'll want to keep doing. Again, it's not that goal-setting is a problem in itself, it's when it becomes a compulsive way of behaving at the cost of your health and sanity (ie an addiction) that it can become a problem.

Life and business coach Tony Robbins talks about how addictions are bad strategies for meeting our human needs (Robbins, 2014). If a pattern of thought or behaviour – like goal-setting – meets three or more of your needs, you become addicted, and the behaviour becomes compulsive rather than a choice. The consequence is, of course, that you can burn out or waste your energy on meaningless goals that are not aligned with your deeper potential and values. Robbins, who builds on psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs and motivation (Maslow, 1943), explains that we have four basic human needs that must be fulfilled one way or another. These, he describes as survival needs of the personality (Table 4.1):

- 1 certainty/safety;
- 2 uncertainty/challenge;
- 3 significance;
- 4 connection.

In addition, there are two higher needs that are connected to our deeper potential rather than to survival:

- 5 learning/growth;
- 6 contribution.

While the first four can lead to a satisfactory life, it's the latter two that lead to fulfilment. According to Robbins, if a behaviour like goal-setting or goal achievement meets three or more of your six human needs, you may become addicted to goal-setting or goal achievement. As a high achiever, your ability to achieve goals successfully means you're likely to meet your need for challenge, significance, connection (for example, by working with teams) and safety (for example, your bosses will validate you and pay you for it). If you enjoy learning and making a difference, you'll also meet your need for growth and contribution. So, all your human needs can be satisfied because you're great at setting and achieving goals!

TABLE 4.1 Why goal-setting can be addictive

Type of need	Need	Underlying belief/strategy to meet the need
Basic (survival) need	Safety	Working towards goals helps me create security for myself and my family
	Uncertainty	Going for my goals keeps me moving and my life interesting; I never get bored
	Significance	Achieving goals gives me a sense of accomplishment and respect from others
	Connection	Working on goals with others gives me a sense of connection
Higher (fulfilment) need	Learning/growth	I learn new skills as I work towards my goals
	Contribution	As I set meaningful goals with social value, I help others

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### CASE STUDY John

Becoming aware of how you're using goal-setting as a strategy to meet your needs enables you to make more informed and deliberate choices. You may even find healthier and more diverse ways to meet your needs.

John is an executive in a global bank. His two most important needs are significance and connection. He tries to meet his need for significance by working extremely hard, which drives him to work long hours and skip family commitments. He's very effective at setting financial targets and meeting them for his organization and his family. He tries to meet his need for connection by sharing any struggles with his family – he talks about himself, and his work, and how stressful it is. He misses their school events and his wife complains that he doesn't

spend enough time with her. He emphasizes what a responsibility it is and that he is doing it for them. Over the years, he finds that his children don't feel so connected to him and that his wife has grown distant.

He feels he's got significance at work but is losing connection with his family. What can he do?

One possibility for John, once he becomes aware of how he is using work and goal-setting to meet his personality needs, is to focus on developing a better connection strategy. The little time he spends with his family could be devoted to listening to his wife and children and supporting them in any way he can rather than talking about his own struggles or trying to fix problems rather than listen deeply. He could strengthen and diversify his support system to include a leadership group or executive coach rather than relying on offloading to his family. This would enable him to reflect on the challenges he's facing at work and resolve them constructively instead of simply venting. He may also need to manage his commitments better by asking whether his priorities are aligned with his deeper values. A well-timed reflection and change of behaviour could save his marriage and family life while supporting his career.

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### **SWAPPING BEHAVIOURS**

One way to overcome addiction is by substituting one strategy for a healthier one that is more aligned with what you care deeply about – swapping an unhelpful or unhealthy behaviour for a healthier one. For example, an unhealthy strategy for meeting a need for safety might be compulsive goal-setting behaviour that is informed by a belief such as, 'if I meet this next financial goal, I will feel my family is safe'. A more helpful and sustainable strategy for meeting the same need for safety might be to have a meaningful conversation with your family about what helps them feel safe and review expenses. You may be surprised by what you find and feel a weight lift from your shoulders. You'll probably be reminded of what really matters in relationships and that you've always found a way to look after yourself and your family before.

Now try for yourself (use the layout in Table 4.2). What are your top two needs in life? Note that the ranking can change over time:

- 1 certainty/safety;
- 2 uncertainty/challenge;
- 3 significance/respect;
- 4 connection;
- 5 learning/growth;
- 6 contribution.

What is one way you meet each need?

TABLE 4.2 Meeting needs

Certainty/safety	How do I meet this need in my life?
Certainty/safety	
Uncertainty/challenge	
Significance/respect	
Connection	
Learning/growth	
Contribution	

Now think of a behaviour you would like to change. How many needs does it help you meet? How else could you meet these needs that might be healthier, more aligned and perhaps even more fun?

### *Goal-setting fatigue and recovery*

'I'm so glad you're not getting me to do that goal-setting stuff,' a doctor emphatically declared after an initial coaching conversation. Like many high achievers she knows how to make things happen. High achievers are often the person who can see what's

needed and they're ready to do what it takes. This usually makes them very valuable to their teams and organizations. But as we've seen, it can also lead to getting caught in the Success Trap, and consequently, to burnout and fatigue. The underlying expectation for many high achievers is that they should always know their goals and purpose/vision, and that *not* knowing these means something is wrong and they need to figure it out and start setting some new goals. But this is not necessarily the case.

High achievers can underestimate how much time, energy and cognitive effort they are consuming as they go about their daily lives. They tend to take success for granted and see failure as an aberration (rather than as something normal in a human life). This isn't helped by a culture of go-getting and success chasing where we will often be exposed to other people's successes, but not the journey and invisible trials and tribulations that led them there, including the 'failures' necessary for the learning process. So the first thing in recovering from goal-setting fatigue is to be aware of what achieving a goal truly requires.

The truth is that achieving something requires many components including focus, failure and a bit of luck. The Navy SEALs go through some of the toughest military training in the world. They are very familiar with what it takes to achieve a goal. Here are the SEALs' principles for success (Murphy, 2015):

- 1 Develop mental toughness.
- 2 Set (and achieve) micro-goals.
- 3 Visualize success and overcome failure.
- 4 Convince yourself you can do it.
- 5 Control your emotions.

So far, so good, right? But there is a sixth principle: *rest and recovery*. This is the space between goals, which people trapped in goal-driven behaviour can forget to allow for. Without this recovery time, you can never truly reach your potential since your mind



doesn't have time to reflect, learn, integrate and prepare for the next cycle of activity. Notice that item (4) above can be addressed through self-enquiry and reflection, and that item (5) refers to self-regulation. We'll go into both of these in depth in Chapter 6.

If you have reached goal-setting fatigue and need some emergency help to slow down and take a step back before you burn out, go to Chapter 5. Otherwise, the box lists a few quick ideas for dealing with goal-setting fatigue.

#### DEALING WITH GOAL-SETTING FATIGUE: STARTER PACK

##### 1 Have fewer goals

Warren Buffett's career advice to his pilot was to identify and focus on the top five goals that he wanted to achieve in his lifetime. Everything else below the top five went on an 'avoid at all costs' list (Oshin, nd).

##### 2 Use micro-goals

You don't always have to have big goals. Navy SEALs get through Hell Week by chunking it into small steps: get through breakfast, get to the camp, do the push-ups, etc. (Clarine, nd; Navy SEALs, nd).

##### 3 Focus on experiences rather than things

Experiences include learning, contribution, connection. Favour these over things like a job or a romantic partner; this means you can create the experience any time with the opportunities you have around you.

##### 4 Get comfortable with the unknown

Meaningful change requires stepping into uncertain territory and making friends with the discomfort of the unknown (especially if you're used to being in control!).

## From rigid goal-setter to creator in flow

As we have seen, one way to break an addiction or get rid of an unhealthy, unhelpful behaviour is to replace it with a healthier, more helpful behaviour. I should emphasize that the most important aspect of replacing the behaviour is bringing awareness to the behaviours and the thoughts and feelings associated with them, which we'll explore in Chapter 6. Here we're looking at what kind of possibilities are available to you for new behaviours as a by-product of expanding your awareness and committing to change. So once we have escaped from the trap of goal addiction and given ourselves a break from goal fatigue, what can we replace it with? I believe that the opposite of being goal-driven is not being goal-less; it is being in *creative flow*.

### *Flow*

You may recognize flow as a state of mind colloquially known as 'being in the zone'. It's what happens when the High Achiever Paradox is resolved and there is a balance between focus and flexibility. The term comes from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihályi, in his seminal work *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). He observed that people are happiest when they are in a state of flow, which he described as a state of concentration or complete absorption with an activity that they're engaged in *for its own sake*. This is a key difference between being goal-driven and being in a state of flow; a goal-driven task is done for the sake of the goal, whereas entering a state of flow is about the activity for the activity's sake.

You may have experienced a flow state and noticed that time flies, basic needs like food are ignored and every action, movement

and thought unfolds perfectly from the previous one. You're *in the zone*. Csikszentmihályi characterized nine component states of achieving flow: 1) balance between the level of challenge and level of skill; 2) merging of action and awareness (your ego or perception of 'a "me" doing something' is switched off); 3) clarity of goals in the moment (clarity of motivation, prioritization, small steps, absence of inner conflict); 4) immediate and unambiguous feedback; 5) concentration on the task at hand; 6) paradox of control (relinquishing control leads to greater control); 7) transformation of time (it flies by); 8) loss of self-consciousness; and 9) autotelic experience (experience for its own sake) (Fullagar and Kelloway, 2009).

You can shift from goal-setter to creator by simply shifting your attitude to outcomes. Rather than setting fixed goals and working towards them, you can articulate possibilities and uncover creative solutions to the obstacles that come up. Rather than making something happen, you're removing the obstacles so that the actions unfold effortlessly.

Artist and sculptor Michelangelo is believed to have said:

*The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material... Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it. I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*

In other words, your environment isn't there to be used for your goals. Instead, you can acknowledge that you're engaged in an interactive process between your environment and your creative inspiration – like a conversation. You're engaging with life more like an artist than a mechanic.

But why aren't we more connected to this creative way of engaging with life? Why is pushing to achieve goals still the dominant cultural model of productivity?

### *What is creativity?*

Many definitions of creativity exist. Most of us are familiar with the idea that creativity extends beyond art forms like painting or writing, but it can be difficult to pin down what it actually *is*. In a 2016 US study of creativity, it was defined as 'the ability to come up with original ideas, think in a detailed and elaborative way, synthesize information, and be open-minded and curious' (Kim, 2016). Ok then, that's all well and good... but what does it mean for your life? How can you recognize it and cultivate it?

General traits among people considered creative in the wider sense were identified in the 2016 study. These include:

- **Big-picture-thinking:** thinking abstractly, looking past the concrete details of the current situation and seeking new solutions. This optimism and curiosity are sometimes seen as dreamy and unrealistic.
- **Spontaneity:** a tendency to be flexible and act fast on new opportunities, approaching them with an open mind and a playful perspective, which can come off as impulsive.
- **Playfulness:** light-heartedness and a drive to explore the world, which can be perceived as mischievous.
- **Resilience:** picking yourself up after a failure and bouncing back from challenges, refocusing on new ways to overcome adversities. Sometimes, this comes across as combative.
- **Autonomy:** striving for independence in your thoughts and actions, relying on intrinsic motivation to pursue goals. At times, such individuals can seem out of control.
- **Defiance:** a tendency to reject existing norms and authorities in pursuit of their own ideas. This allows you to see what others cannot see and develop solutions that push boundaries, which can seem rebellious.

- **Risk-taking:** fuelled by their optimism, many creative people are willing to forgo security in favour of uncertain rewards. To the average person, this may come across as reckless.
- **Daydreaming:** by daydreaming, creative individuals are able to envision new perspectives and solutions – but along the way, some of their ideas might seem delusional.

As you can see, these traits are not specific to a cultural stereotype of the ‘creative’. They reflect the wider creative ability that we all have in facing life and its challenges. Here’s a simple definition of creativity, then, for the purposes of this book: *creativity is the ability to combine previously existing elements in a new way*. No paint or musical instruments needed. Just a functioning imagination!

#### CREATIVE CYCLES

One thing scientists seem to agree on is that creativity is a process rather than a personality and that a brilliant idea, or solution to your problem, usually comes after a period of incubation (Ritter and Dijksterhuis, 2014). This seems to have four stages:

- preparation (acquisition of knowledge on some task);
- incubation (process that occurs when conscious attention is diverted away from the task);
- illumination (creative idea flashes into sight);
- verification (creative idea is subjected to evaluation). (Wallas, 1926)

In other words, the brilliant idea, which might be an insight about your next step regarding a dream job or your big mission in life, comes after you’ve gathered information and then taken your focus *off* trying to find the answer (Ritter and Dijksterhuis, 2014).

As you can intuit, this process requires you to be ok with ‘not knowing’ for a while as you sit in the incubation period where the elements you’ve gathered are recombining with knowledge and

experience already stored in your subconscious. Because the incubation period of creativity requires slowing down external activities, it can fly in the face of a modern culture where you need to be constantly doing something. We have to make a conscious effort to create some peace and quiet.

'Aha' moments are associated with alpha waves and occur when we are less active mentally and physically. Alpha brainwaves are slower and higher in amplitude than beta waves, which occur when we are fully alert and engaged in routine activities and conversations. You experience alpha waves when you sit down to rest, take time out to reflect or meditate (Scientific American, 1997). Deadlines and trying to push through to get things done can be detrimental to your inner genius, whereas rest, exercise and daydreaming will help generate ideas.

### *Creative flow in practice*

In 1661, the son of a farmer was admitted to Cambridge University to study. An outbreak of the Black Death forced him to return home until it abated. One day, while spending time in an orchard, he noticed an apple fall to the ground and wondered why it fell in a straight line. At that moment, not in a library, not in a lecture theatre, and certainly not in front of a computer, Isaac Newton had an insight that led to an idea. It hatched a whole new system of thought and transformed our understanding of the physical world – gravity.

While we don't understand the full social psychology explaining the origins of great ideas, many such anecdotes of inspired insights exist. Newton is one famous example. Others include Archimedes' *eureka* moment in the bath. Albert Einstein wrote his most famous papers on the theory of relativity outside the confines of academia. He wasn't deemed good enough for an academic post at the time and worked as a clerk in a patent office. He was turned down for a promotion because his bosses thought he didn't

understand technology well enough! Beatle Paul McCartney came up with the famous song *Let it Be* after dreaming that his mother, who had died from cancer when he was 14, visited him and reassured him that, ‘*It’s gonna be OK. Just let it be...*’ (McCartney, 2019). It’s a recurring theme: the best ideas seem to come up at unexpected times or in unusual situations when you’re not hyper-focused on getting things done or solving a problem.

You’ve probably had the experience yourself of having a problem that you’d spent some time trying to figure out to no avail, only for the solution to come to you as an ‘aha moment’ when you were doing something completely different. You may not think of yourself as a ‘creative person’, but in that moment, you were being creative, just like Newton, Archimedes, Einstein and McCartney. The psychological process was the same.

So how can we develop this creativity and access the ability more purposefully? The key ingredient is worrying less about what others think of you, switching off your inner critic and letting go of self-anxiety (Jacobs, 2017). If you’re harsh and critical with yourself as you try to come up with a solution, your creativity will be dampened. But flow goes beyond the problem of the harsh inner critic. It requires that we completely forget ourselves in the first place and make way for pure creative thinking. Can you imagine what it would be like if your concerns about safety and survival evaporated and you lived in flow?

Here are two key principles, validated neuroscientifically, from ancient wisdom traditions like mindfulness.

#### LET GO OF WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF YOU (SWITCH OFF YOUR SOCIAL SELF)

It’s almost impossible for human beings not to care what others think. We’re social animals and have a biological need for belonging and connection, so we develop ways of behaving that fit in – this helps us feel safe and connected. The downside is that this need for belonging and ability to act socially can suppress our independent thinking and creative ideation. What happens if we switch off this instinct for monitoring other people’s opinions?

Eadweard Muybridge moved from the UK to the United States and set up a successful antique book shop. However, he had a serious road accident and a severe head injury to the front of his brain that left him with double vision, confused thinking and an impaired sense of taste and smell. But he also developed eccentric behaviour – the social inhibition instinct in his brain appeared to have been damaged and seemed not to work anymore. He stopped caring what people thought! Following this injury, his career path transformed and he became a world-famous photographer and pioneer in photography and motion pictures.

It's thought that the injury to the part of the brain responsible for social inhibition unleashed Muybridge's creativity (Shimamura, 2002). Similar conclusions have been drawn from imaging the brains of masterful jazz musicians while they perform. MRI scans show that areas of the brain that monitor for social approval are switched off while they perform and that this leads to the emergence of spontaneous creative activity – the improvisational quality that is typical of jazz (Limb and Braun, 2008). Hopefully, you're not going to rely on a brain injury like Eadweard Muybridge to release any inhibitions about being more spontaneous and therefore more creative! Awareness is the key, as we'll continue to explore in Chapter 6.

#### LET GO OF WHAT YOU THINK OF YOU (SWITCH OFF YOUR NARRATIVE SELF)

We all have narratives about who we are and what we do in our lives and we love sharing them (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). If repeated over time, these narratives become an identity. These can be social roles like daughter, doctor, wife, or archetypes like hero/rescuer, rebel, lover. However, the idea of a fixed 'you' is flawed. The self is constantly changing and with the growing understanding of the brain as neuroplastic, we know that learning and moulding of our patterns of thinking and behaving is a lifelong process if we so choose. So who are you really beyond the narratives associated with labels like daughter/son, sister, expert, partner, etc?



Who you think of as ‘you’ is in fact a series of interlinked processes and memories in your mind. So far, neuroscience has not been able to locate an isolated part of the brain where the personality is found. On the contrary, a network of connections linking different parts of the brain creates the experience of being ‘me’, the story of ‘me’ and the memories of ‘me’.

What’s interesting is that the absence of a coherent persona has been found to be a hallmark of creative genius. Creative geniuses are more likely to display contradictory behaviours and tendencies rather than one coherent personality (Csikszentmihályi, 2013). People we would categorize as geniuses in their levels of intelligence or quality of output appear to be more interested in the variety of thought processes and experiences available to them than fitting into a fixed personality or identity.

#### **PRACTICE CREATIVITY: ARE YOU IN FEAR OR IN FLOW?**

Here are a few suggestions for bringing more creativity into your life (whatever form it might take for you):

##### **1 Mindset**

A creator is the opposite of a victim and sees a wider range of choice and possibility in everything. Carefully examine, address and weed out all excuses that come up as you try to take a creative step forward. Ask yourself: *am I in fear or in flow?*

##### **2 Strategy**

Get involved in a creative activity every day, whether it’s a hobby, or a more creative approach to work (see the creativity traits above). Identify what is repetitive in your work and whether to modify, cut, outsource or delegate it over a period of time.

### 3 Actions

Make time, however short, to be deliberately creative by putting a regular time slot in your calendar. Include: 1) quiet time (see Chapter 5 for ways to do this if your schedule is overwhelming); and 2) your creative endeavour of choice. Create accountability and reward. Find support if necessary.

Make space for creativity in your life and creativity will come. Every time something feels automatic review and evolve it. You'll feel more alive and you could also make your job more interesting as a result...

## Creating a new career

Whether it is creating a painting, a job or a career, creating something long term is a marathon rather than a sprint. This can feel like a problem if a sudden change of circumstance has occurred unexpectedly – like a redundancy or illness – and your bank account is suffering. For some people, a mid-life career change might only involve a change of scenery without any deeper transformation. For others, though, it can involve a radical re-evaluation of who they want to be, the balance they want to experience and the values they want to live by. They're creating much more than a new job or career. They're experiencing a change of identity and letting go of patterns of thinking and acting that no longer serve them (Ibarra, 2003).

People undertaking this kind of reinvention go through six stages in a creative cycle. It's a cycle that allows space for incubation, learning and 'failing' as they take action.

Here are the six stages:

- 1 **Relax:** The world can be an overwhelming and confusing place. Take a step back and increase your self-care. The reduced cognitive load creates mental space and reduces brain

fog and reactivity. We'll go more deeply into this and ways to make space in your life in Chapter 5.

- 2 **Reflect:** Now that you have made space for your creative thinking, take time to sit with the big questions like 'what do you really want?' and 'who do you want to become as a person in this next phase of your career?' Notice the thoughts and assumptions that come up. This may stir up strong emotions of fear and excitement. This is where some of the deeper shifts in perspective occur as old, limiting beliefs and presuppositions are challenged. We'll discuss a specific process to do this (self-enquiry) in Chapter 6.
- 3 **Release:** As you allow for deeper enquiry of your thoughts, an insight is likely to occur. You'll hit upon something that may have been weighing you down or holding you back. This can be emotional. You may also feel a surge of energy that was trapped by a limiting belief. In Chapter 6 we'll look at ways to help you stay calm and clear as you go through the cycle of change.
- 4 **Reconnect:** As you break free of old expectations and patterns, new ideas and thoughts will emerge. The fog will dispel and your inner genius will spark new ideas. Practically, you may get clarity over which people, places and habits are right for you to align with. You'll connect with your deeper vision and values.
- 5 **Respond:** From this place you are well equipped for action. You may find yourself motivated or inspired to send an email, a CV or finally resign and move on. A flexible strategy implemented in small, consistent steps is best. We'll look at a few tools for capturing your new ideas and actions around your purpose and mission in Chapter 7.
- 6 **Receive:** This is the hardest one for high achievers, because it can be perceived as passivity. But it's not. Learn to be patient and trust the journey and celebrate your efforts.

Of course, deep work like this is easier said than done, and people can and do get stuck at various stages of the cycle (Table 4.3).

TABLE 4.3 Creative cycle

	Main action needed	What might keep you stuck
Relax	Radical declutter (of your mind and environment) and quiet time	Fear of boredom. Most people find it hard to relax and find they spin their wheels trying to keep going
Reflect	Powerful questions that challenge pre-existing assumptions. Learning from the past. Taking stock	Overanalysing. Answering intellectually rather than spontaneously from the heart
Release	Being with intense emotions and letting them complete their course (eg, grief over the loss of a job)	Resistance to experiencing feelings
Reconnect	Capturing new ideas, values, mission or purpose	Indecisiveness and trying to perfect a plan. Overwhelmed at the scale of the vision you've uncovered
Respond	Test new ideas. Take immediate action in small steps. Take a bold leap where needed	Fear of failure. Taking on too much
Receive	Patience, celebration, letting go of the outcome and its exact timing	Need to control outcome and timing

It's entirely possible to recreate your career once, if not two or three times in this day and age (Meister, 2012), and you don't have to go through the process alone. Mentors, guides and communities of support who are aligned with your values can make the process a whole lot easier although you still have to do your own work and be grounded in yourself.

### **MICRO-CYCLES AND MACRO-CYCLES**

The length of time of a single creative cycle varies enormously. A great idea can unfold over the span of a few moments, or an entire lifetime. Of course, within each larger (macro) cycle, there are smaller (micro) cycles. In 'goal speak' we might talk of smaller projects within larger projects. Unlike goals, however, the creative cycle is not about achieving something external. It's about expressing something internal – an idea, a vision, a mission – and intuiting the next action without forcing it.

### **CREATIVITY BOOSTERS AND KILLERS**

You've probably noticed that there are times, places, people and habits who help you think outside the box and feel open to new ideas and possibilities. There may also be times, places, people and habits that dampen that quality of openness to new ideas in you.

For example, creativity boosters might include daydreaming, nature, being in the shower, being on holiday, listening to music (these activate alpha waves that are associated with creativity). Creativity killers might include stressful deadlines, highly critical or negative people, a lack of sleep or alcohol excess.

What helps you come up with great ideas? What are the times, people, places and habits that support or dampen your ability to come up with creative solutions?

## **The bottom line: you're not a machine**

Many of us grew up in a culture in which creativity was undervalued – it doesn't seem like a path to a stable job and happy life. Productivity has become equated with automation and efficiency rather than innovation and spontaneity. Our brain has been moulded to serve the needs of an industrial knowledge economy

that supports mass production, much of it to do with processing information and logical problem solving.

But humans need time and space to think their best thoughts. It's usually during rest, play or time in nature that the genius idea comes through; not while you're hyper-focused on information gathering or problem solving. I believe solving complex 21st-century problems requires that we drop the biggest productivity myth of all: that machine-like productivity is more valuable than genius-like creativity. Humans are still capable of being more innovative, adaptable, empathic and entrepreneurial than machines, which means there can be rich rewards for those who give space to their spontaneous creative ideation.

Next, we'll explore how to slow down and create space even if you have a busy life and big responsibilities.