

Study: Creative idea generation at work leads to indulgent behaviors afterwards

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Generating creative ideas at work tasks employees with thinking expansively and being open to thoughts and concepts they haven't previously considered. Which, of course, provides significant benefits to

business because it can lead to new and innovative ideas in the workplace. But what happens after the brainstorming party is over?

New research co-written by a University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign expert in work behaviors and organizations shows that engaging in brief creative ideation tasks can have detrimental consequences for one's short-term health choices.

Across multiple experiments with more than 3,400 participants, the study found that engaging in a creative-idea generation task subsequently led to more indulgent eating, drinking and exercise behaviors.

Such indulgent behaviors included assembling burgers with higher calorie content; crafting cocktails with higher alcohol content; planning workouts that burned fewer calories; preferring candy to apples and pens as a poststudy gift; and generally eating more candy than control participants, according to the paper.

"The big picture takeaway is that, for decades now, research on creativity has really been focused on how to make people more creative on the assumption that [creative ideas](#) are significantly valuable for the workplace," said Jack Goncalo, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business.

"But the process of doing creative work involves transgressing [social norms](#), breaking rules and overturning convention. When you think widely and divergently across categories, that tends to disinhibit people—and that, in turns, bleeds over into their off-the-clock choices."

Goncalo's co-authors are Verena Krause of University College London and Lynne C. Vincent of Syracuse University.

The researchers attribute such behavior to the triggering of the

behavioral activation system, which increases individuals' pursuit of desires and rewards.

"After doing an afternoon of creative work, does it make sense that someone would want to overindulge at lunch or have one too many drinks after work? I think that's what we're finding here," Goncalo said. "There is a causal impact, and we do have a pretty good sense for what the underlying mechanism is, which is this sort of disinhibition that happens when we're actively being creative."

For some people, being creative is really hard work, so "when it comes time to make other kinds of decisions, the liberating effects seem to carry over," Goncalo said.

"If you've just gone through this expansive, wide-ranging experience, it carries over to other domains where people might have otherwise restrained themselves," he said. "So they grab the candy instead of the pen or the apple. They add more alcohol to their drink. They pile on the toppings on their burger, which adds more calories."

The implications of the research point to businesses and managers not ignoring the downstream effects of creativity on employees in their nonworking hours, Goncalo said.

"When you ask people to do creative work, you might be getting creativity, but you're also getting a wide range of things that we don't know very much about," he said. "And I think at this point, we should probably be attentive to the health concerns of people who are regularly doing this kind of work, because it's having a [psychological impact](#) on people. And we don't fully know what that is, because we're just starting to do research on it. But this paper would seem to indicate that it's not positive, necessarily."

There is, of course, existing research looking at the dark side of creativity, but "we're also showing that there are much more subtle side effects," Goncalo said.

"We might not be able to readily pick up on them, so I think it's important as we're moving forward in this work to really be attentive to the health of people who you're asking to be creative," he said.

Looking at the downstream "psychological, behavioral, emotional and even physical consequences of having people do creative work" is a fairly recent development, Goncalo noted.

"I think that is a really important shift because so many workplaces are asking their employees to be creative, and we know that when you want people to be creative, you get creative ideas," he said. "But we're also discovering that we get so many other side effects, and this research shows a few of them."

The paper will be published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

More information: Creative ideation activates disinhibited reward-seeking and indulgent choices, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2024).

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