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How Creativity Can Be Used to Cope: My Creative Journey

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SUNY Buffalo State
International Center for Studies in Creativity

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A Project
In Creative Studies
By
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science

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ABSTRACT OF A PROJECT

How Creativity Can Be Used to Cope: My Creative Journey

This project examines how a positive attitude and affective creative skills and behavioral skills can raise self-awareness and empower individuals to make healthy changes in their lives. The goal is to demonstrate that no matter what the individuals' circumstances might be, they have the mind power to overcome self-victimization and create happiness from within. Affective creative skills such as fluency, flexibility, originality, divergent thinking, curiosity, imagination and many more skills allow for change and transformation within an individual. Behavioral skills are the actions or steps that are taken to achieve and demonstrate affective creativity to create happiness, clarity and longevity throughout life.

The outcome of this project is the plan to launch a website called "Monday Night Diary." This website explores the usefulness of affective creative skills and behavioral skills. The content of the website will include self recorded YouTube talks where I share my creative journey, TED talks that inspire change and transformation, Vimeo videos that demonstrate affective creativity and also Web MD and Reader's Digest articles that support many healthy behavioral skills. Other aspects that will be explored and discussed on the website will be alternative medicines, spirituality, meditation, nature and sustainability.

Key words: creativity, self-actualization, self-awareness, empowerment, happiness, and change.

Date

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Dates of Approval:

Project Advisor: J. Michael Fox

Candidate: Annamaria Todaro

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Introduction

This project is a journey that has saved me from myself. By using affective creative skills and behavioral skills I have been able to overcome self-victimization. I am in the midst of my journey toward self-actualization. By using creative skills I have been able to significantly reduce my stress, anxiety, anger and aggression. My project demonstrates how creativity can be used as a coping mechanism.

I chose to focus on my creative journey throughout the Creative Studies master's program at SUNY Buffalo State because I am so inspired by how much the program has changed my way of seeing. Receiving an education in Creative Studies has been like getting a master's degree in self-actualization. Between the assigned textbooks, assigned articles, informative, knowledgeable professors, and an eclectic group of classmates, my eyes have been opened up to the world in a whole new way. According to Abraham Maslow creativity means, "being lost in the present, timeless, selfless and being outside of oneself" (Green, 2007, p. 120). I have learned so much about myself, my emotions, my cognitive abilities, and my ability and willingness to create positive change in my life and the lives of others. I have learned to turn my inner focus out by not just thinking of myself, but of society, the living environment, my neighbors, my friends and family and overall I have grown to focus on the "other". People who actually move beyond self-actualization "are without a single exception, involved in a cause outside of their skin: in something outside of themselves, some calling or vocation" (Green, 2007, p.18). Before this program all I did was focus on myself, and my circumstances, which I felt were bad and I had this huge chip on my shoulder that was weighing me down. I finally feel like I

am in control of my environment and my long-term goals. I have learned to be very mindful of how I spend my time, I have connected with a healthy mind and healthy body, and overall I am much happier. Throughout this program I have gained acceptance, autonomy and patience. I want to share my journey to help inspire others. The following paper will dive into what creativity means to me, and how I have demonstrated making creative changes in my life.

My mission is to clarify the many ways individuals' can use affective creative skills and behavioral skills to make changes within their own lives. You can do the same to overcome stress, anxiety, depression, anger and other traits that are commonly found within us.

Personal Definition of Creativity

It is my belief we are all born with the ability to be creative and we all possess the power of imagination. When creative thinking and deliberate creativity is applied one can turn what is surreal into reality. Creativity sanctions dreams that at first seem unobtainable. Creativity inspires originality, imagination, ingenuity, resourcefulness and a vision for the expectations and beauty found throughout our lives. We can maximize our creative aptitudes just by being aware of what creativity truly is. Affective creativity skills such as fluency, flexibility, originality, divergent thinking, curiosity, imagination, complexity and elaboration should be part of each day. What is most important is that we fill ourselves up with experience. Behavioral skills such as creative inquiry, intuition, playfulness, mindfulness, and passion can allow individuals' to use creative affective skills and behavioral skills to cope with their environments.

Problem/Questions to be addressed in the Project

I have played the victim role my whole life because I felt like a victim of circumstance, a victim that did not deserve what transpired and I was seeking sympathy from others without even realizing it. My aggressive attitude has led me down a lonely road many times. I carried this weight on my shoulders that I thought was going to always be there. I believed my anger was just a part of me and it was something that I was going to have to live with. I was not aware of what I was doing to myself until I started the Creative Studies program and started doing research into emotional intelligence, personality assessments, self-actualization, deliberate creativity, mindfulness, alternative medicines, creativity vs. mental health, etc. It wasn't me against the world it was me against myself. I was getting in my own way of happiness. Through my research into the ways we keep ourselves down I discovered "the neurotic organism is one that lacks of basic needs and seeks satisfaction from others, it is therefore more dependent on other people, and less autonomous and self determined" (Envanteri, 2005, p.100). I was letting my environment shape me instead of recognizing the power in me to shape my environment. Throughout my studies I recognized this was not only a personal problem, but society need's to get out of it's own way of progression as well, "to be able to live in peace in our cultures we must be able to create a peaceful environment to develop our potentials rather them block them" (Envanteri, 2005, p. 101).

Questions to be addressed in the project:

- How can people use creativity to cope?
- What are some creative lifestyle choices?

-How does living creatively affect society?

Need

A positive attitude is an affective skill, which contributes to an individual's overall health and well-being. A positive attitude allows for happiness, which we as humans strive for each day of our lives. We want to feel happy, safe, loved, and respected; we also have the capacity to feel angry, depressed, frustrated, stressed out, defensive, helpless, etc. This can affect our positivity, which in turn affects our attitude, which affects the way we treat people, and how we handle situations. This change from positive to negative does not better the self, but causes us to focus on the bad rather than the good. An individual can easily fall victim to circumstance and develop a victim mentality. People who feel they are victims of negative actions of others tend to ignore their own capacities to improve their situation. A victim mentality is often "an acquired personality trait in which a person tends to regard himself as a victim of negative actions of others" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/victim_mentality). When playing the victim role people often resort to feelings of, "Why Me?" "Look how hard I've tried." "Nobody understands how hard my life has been." "Woe is Me." Victims often hold grudges, take things to heart, they are aggressive and defensive, they are stubborn, and have an "it's me against the world" attitude. When a person harbors anger and resentment over time it has a negative affect on their quality of life. The possession of a false self can cause a permanent sense of victimization, always being at the hands of an external fate, just doomed from the beginning.

When a person makes a conscious effort to change, and acknowledges the fact they have been playing the victim role thus begins a creative journey, a journey that moves beyond the focus of “self.” Having the ability to turn the focus of self, outward and learn to focus on the “other” supports a sense of identity, independence and self-reliance. People who can turn their focus outward and move beyond self-actualization have a better quality of life because it takes creativity, knowledge and strength to recognize the ability to change. A person must hold a sense of responsibility for their future and desires. This sense of awareness, empowerment and open-mindedness can begin to direct an individual down the pathway of self-actualization and autonomy, which brings along peace and acceptance. One can make every effort to live a happier life and have the weight lifted off of their shoulders. A person can gain control, have direction, confront their fears and innermost conflicts, and challenge their self to forgive, forget and move on with a different way of seeing, and an improved way of thinking. This move in the direction of empowerment and self-actualization is also beneficial to an individuals’ physical and mental health, work opportunities, relationships with a significant other, family members and also friends. From a societal point of view, “it appears to be increasingly important to focus on the needs, interests and well being of people in general” (Green, 2007, p.122). This positive approach to life correspondingly improves relationships with co-workers, and is beneficial to achieving long-term goals. What you truly believe at the core of your being has great power and influence over the choices you make when creating your life. A change like this can have a ripple affect, once a person overcomes the hardships of victimization other aspects of their life can be viewed through the lens of creative, positive change.

Objective

My objective is to create a sense of awareness of what it means to play the victim role and to clearly demonstrate the affects this has on an individual's mental health, physical health, relationships with others and their living environment. I want to clearly support that a positive attitude, creative thinking and a healthy lifestyle is obtainable no matter what the circumstances are. It takes inspiration, motivation and awareness for people to raise a momentum for change. I am a strong motivator and I also have the gift of story telling, I want to use these skills to express how important and progressive creative change can be. I believe that I am the creative product of my master's project and my journey is the project. I also have a future goal of continuing my Creative Studies by launching a website I have developed over this past semester called "Monday Night Diary." This is a future objective I will work towards once I have completed the program.

The key point of my master's project is empowerment. This is the attribute I have connected with the most throughout these last two years in the Creative Studies program. I feel a strong need to share my stories with people, my research, what has inspired me to change, and what has inspired me to view situations and circumstances more creatively with much better outcomes. I started looking into what it would take to create my own website or blog dedicated to over coming victimization, becoming self actualized and creating positive change.

I decided to develop a plan for a website because I am good with social networking, although I do not agree with it or find it entirely useful or progressive. I feel that people mindlessly surf the Internet by social networking and viewing other people's lives, events, and their own self-image through a distorted lens. When an individual is "killing time" or has time to relax and mindlessly do something, I know it would be more helpful to view a website or blog to learn something and raise self-awareness. Instead, people mindlessly surf the web measuring their self-worth by what they have not, instead of what they have.

The idea behind the name of the website came about years ago, when my friends and I would hang out on Monday nights at a little restaurant on Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo. We were all in our twenties and most of us were studying visual arts, English, philosophy, music or something of that nature, while in undergraduate school. I would sit at the bar and eat delicious food, drink good wine and have amazing conversations with people I did and did not know. It was fun, it inspired me, and I started calling those nights the Monday night diary. I really looked forward to it, it was the night of the week I felt most open, to share, to listen and to laugh.

I went back and forth with the name of the website. I wanted it to be something that stands out in your mind. Something that sounds avant-garde and intriguing. I was going to call the website "Woe is Me" but I decided that there is a stigma that surrounds this saying. It almost invites the focus of self-victimization, and that is not clear with my

vision. So I changed my mind and decided that “Monday Night Diary” sounded more open minded, playful and inviting.

Monday Night Diary is a compilation of various medias, articles, web archives, images and videos that have led me to want change. My data collection includes TED talks that inspired me to want to make changes in my own life and the world. I have collected Web MD articles that raised my health awareness, Vimeo videos and documentaries that have warmed my heart and moved me to tears, written articles that raised my awareness of the science behind happiness, and Reader’s Digest articles on healthy recipes and other interesting articles like, “8 ways to meditate while at work.” I find this sort of Internet usage much more healthy and worth my time. In a way it is being mindful of mindlessness.

I want to share my story, not for sympathy, but for understanding. When people start clicking through my website I want them to feel like they are not alone, many people share the same feelings. I want to share my transformational journey to help motivate and inspire others to make the much-needed journey themselves. This website is a way for me to continue my education, I have been in school since I have been five years old, I am thirty-one now but I still love to learn just as much. I like to learn about the world around me and myself. I fear *not* learning, or not being enlightened. This website, “Monday Night Diary” is a way for me to continue to challenge myself once I have completed all my assignments and have received my degree.

Monday Night Diary

Criteria- my goal is to get an innovative website up and running. I have looked into the many different online options of starting a blog or website. I have also had consultations with a professional web designer. There are many do-it -yourself options, but the artist in me wants to have the ability to pay a designer to help carry out my vision of Monday Night Diary because, well, that's what they do. I want it to be clean, navigable, unique, and have graceful non-invasive fonts. I want it to be inviting and comfortable. I want to create a unique online space and this will take time, and focus. On Monday nights I plan on communicating a brief online video where I share online a Diary entry from the past or present. I will create a website with an open forum option so that other people can share their stories too, and have the ability to create responses. There will be different categories to chose from, as there are with so many blogs and websites, but nothing overwhelming. The categories are based off of the data collection throughout my project, they are as follows: CHANGE, NATURE, WELLNESS, MOTIVATION, WOE IS ME, ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES, and MONDAY NIGHT DIARY ENTRIES. When I was researching other blogs and websites I noticed that most still participate in the "scroll" down method to visually represent their sites. A friend who is a designer let me in on the new trend and that is the "click" method of visually representing a site. Due to the fact there is so much going on in people's lives and time is precious, it is much easier to group things into categories that can be easily "clicked" on. It saves time and it isn't as ambiguous as searching through the website to find related articles.

On most websites the person who runs it posts every three or four days. Each time I post on Monday Night Diary I plan to post a self-recorded YouTube video where I talk

about different aspects of self-actualization, self-victimization, affective creative skills and behavioral skills and other topics I have discussed throughout my creative journey. I want to be as honest as I can when recording the videos. I want my personality and sense of humor to come through and shed light on the serious topics I will be discussing. They will be brief videos followed by articles and videos related to the topic. For instance, if I post a video that discusses the benefits of spirituality, yoga and meditation, I can follow the video with a link to a TED talk on the “Art of Stillness,” I can follow that with an image of a Japanese monoprint, followed by a WebMD article on how practicing deep breathing promotes longevity. In a way I plan to group the related articles, videos, and images together each time I post.

My plan is to create an opportunity to make this an interactive website so my viewers can comment on the posts and create dialogue between themselves and with me. I think that it will be more authentic to have feedback and interaction. I of course will be the host and have full control over what does stay on the website. If for some reason there is any negativity or negative feedback I will use my best judgment to delete the negative content.

Once I have complete my educational requirements and find a career where I am comfortable, Monday Night Diary will get the full attention it deserves, mentally, physically and financially. I have hopes of selling Ecommerce on Monday Night Diary and eventually looking into a Monday Night Diary Podcast. This website can easily be transformed into a lecture presentation and/or a workshop. I have collected so much online information and I have done a good job of organizing and categorizing all

downloads. I have included examples of the collected data in the reference portion of this document.

Person, Process, Product and Press

In 1961 a very important man in the field of Creativity, Mel Rhodes (1961), addressed what we know as the 4P's: Person, Process, Product and Press. Rhodes was very intrigued by what the definition of Creativity was and he formulated the classification as a function of his doctoral dissertation. He found a way to organize, or classify what creativity was and this model is the 4P's. The 4P's "represent the nature of creative *Persons*, the *Process* they use, the *Products* or outcome of their effort, and the *Press*, or environment that supports or hinders creativity"

(<http://facultyicsc.blogspot.com/2012/03/mel-rhodes-man-behind-four-ps-of.html>). I identify with the 4P's because I am a Type A personality and I like order, categorization and organization. I like the way Rhodes has broken down something that is so hard to define into parts. I can clearly define what creativity is to me and how it is reflected in my lifestyle, and I can see where I need to make changes and improvements.

Person- I have learned to cope with my anger, and the circumstances that have led me to feel like a victim by facing the beast head on. I never really paid attention to my anger. I did not know how much it affected my relationships with others, and my overall mentality. If I had to pin point a specific moment that I recognized my aggression I would say it happened the day I received the results of my Emotional Intelligence assessment when I was enrolled in Dr. John Cabra's *Creative Assessment* course. My results showed that I was highly self-motivated and outgoing, which I already knew! On

the other hand the results also showed that I had poor conflict resolution and I didn't work well in a group setting, which I was not surprised by. My aggression and anger was hindering my affective creativity skills and also my behavioral skills. This was a reflection of my upbringing, my living environment as a child, the way I misbehaved throughout my entire elementary and secondary education, my relationships with family members, my relationships with significant others, and overall, my defensive, aggressive nature. The results reminded me of something that a professor once said to me when I was finishing up my bachelor's degree in Art Education at Daemen College back in 2007. He told me, "Anna you are very smart, very creative, very driven, but you have this rough, and tough, harshness about you that you have to let go." This is what a man whom I deeply respected wanted to tell me before he sent me off into the world. I can't say that I ever made a conscious effort to change, but his words always stuck with me. Now, it is 2015. In 2014 a similar situation occurred in a conversation between a classmate Pablo and myself. Pablo was my partner, and had grown to become a good friend. At the end of the semester we had to give our partners useful feedback and talk to them about their strengths and weaknesses. Pablo confessed that he was intimidated for a while because he saw the same rough and tough harshness in me that my professor at Daemen did seven years ago. He also said that it did not take long for him to realize that I was very nice, creative, artistic, approachable, etc. Pablo also told me that in the end of our two years spent together in the program he did see a change in me. I was so happy that he was so honest with me, and I was even happier that he recognized a change in me. In November of 2013, while in the midst of my creative studies courses I started making efforts to

change my attitude, the way I handle stress, anxiety and bad situations. This was a direct result of how empowered I felt by my graduate studies.

Process- The Process reflects the tools or techniques I have used to overcome a victim mentality, and the ways I have optimized my creativity. I did some research and wrote a paper on the relationship between mental illness and creativity. This led me to looking into alternative medicines, and how exercise, yoga, walking, meditation, sleeping, laughing and eating a healthy well balanced diet can make you happy, relieve stress and anxiety, and how these habits can have a positive effect on your relationships with others. I decided to make the changes necessary to live a happier, more creative lifestyle. I started by quitting smoking. Yes, the Creative Studies program at SUNY Buffalo State made me finally realize after over a decade of smoking Newport cigarettes that it was time to make the change, because a healthy mind and body was my goal. I was so scared to quit because I did not want to gain weight, so I joined a really popular, trendy gym in my neighborhood on Elmwood Ave. called Bike or Bar. I never worked out intensely before because I didn't think my lungs could handle it. My first Spinning class I thought I was going to pass out but it felt great. Fitness became my new addiction and I have stuck with it ever since. I changed my diet because I feel more conscious now than ever of our environment and sustainability. I went completely vegetarian and I have been now or almost a year. I truly feel that my small effort to stop eating meat has created change in the world. I have never been happier, healthier or overall "better" in my entire life. These are the behavioral skills that I have chosen to connect with most to augment my affective creative skills. I feel like my life could have gone down a completely different path, but

the universe somehow derailed my train and put me back on the right track, utilizing my talent as a creative problem solver, a survivor, an artist, a nurturer, and a storyteller.

Product- Throughout my creative journey I would have to say the most valued product is my attitude toward life, and daily creativity, or what is know as Little “C” creativity. I no longer waste my time dwelling on the past, harboring anger, resentment and despair. If I wake up feeling bad, or something makes me anxious, nervous and/or stressed out during my day, I have many ways of turning the bad into positivity. While I was doing research into spirituality I came across to psychological traits that I demonstrated and had no idea I was doing so, magical thinking, and all-or-nothing thinking. These two “ways of seeing” were causing me so much added stress. Magical thinking was something I used to do everyday. What it is, “is the attribution of casual relationships between actions and events which cannot be justified by reason and observation”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magical_thinking). I was associating what had happened to me, and my circumstances from my past along with the present whether they applied or not. Before a situation would even occur, I would automatically associate the outcome with negativity. I was keeping myself down for no reason, all because I would engage in magical thinking. When I came across this in my research I was relieved, because I was beginning to pin point what was going on inside my mind. How have I overcome this? I use affirmations, silent emotional encouragements. This is another example of affective creativity skills. Affirmations and meditation are natural stress relievers. Research has shown that “meditation, a mental technique practiced for fifteen minutes a day reduces stress and anxiety by inducing a psychological state of deep rest” (Coppola, 2009, p.307).

All-or-nothing thinking is a reflection of how a person can be highly defensive at times by jumping to conclusions and only seeing one side of a situation. At times people only see black or white, positive or negative. I have found it very helpful to force myself to find ways of seeing the positive aspects of a situation instead of being blinded by the negative and focusing my actions based on those negative feelings. This behavior, or personality trait is what people have seen come through in me. I am so thankful that it was brought to my attention because I am better than that.

I am still a work in progress. I have far to go, what I am working toward is finding an inner peace, and sense of acceptance. I found a quote by Karl Weick that really sums up where I want to be, “ be keenly aware of and accept reality, be candid and genuine in a non-reactive way” (Green, 2007, p.119).

Press- The last P in the 4P's is Press, which is the climate or environment that either helps or hinders creativity. The environment that helped my creativity the most through out the program was when I was in class, involved in discussions and debates over the nature of creativity. We collaborated often with our classmates on projects and presentations and I really benefited from this because I was able to feed off of the creativity of others. When I worked on group projects we would often meet in the Creative Studies library where we were surrounded by the foundations of creativity. This library felt somewhat important and exclusive in a way because the books were so valued that we were unable to take them out. My creative classmates come from a variety of backgrounds and each of us had our own way of focusing on what interested us most in our fields, and applying this to our research papers and presentations. My friend Denise is an educator and she was always focused on creativity within children, the classroom, and

finding creative ways to enhance her lesson plans. Jim has a marketing background and he was very interested in organizational creativity and the creative climate of the workplace. Pablo, who was my partner in the end of the program is a chemical engineer from Mexico City and he is very passionate about the foundations of the 4P's and also how he can bring the Creative Studies program back to Mexico and find novel ways to introduce creativity to the Mexican people and their way of life. For me, my Press was how inspired I was by the interesting people I met in the Creative Studies program.

Outcomes

It was not until professor Dr. Gerard Puccio asked me the question, "What has the Creative Studies program done for you, how have you changed?" did I even find the words to explain the transformation I was going through. I raised my hand and said, "I have overcome playing the victim role." I felt empowered and I knew that I wanted to empower other people, because it is a good process. I learned a lot about myself and the changes I have made in my life have allowed me to live a better quality of life with significant gratification. I am healthier and happier and although this transformation is still something I am in the process of, I still feel the need to share my journey with others while I am caught in this whirlwind of change.

I had heard great things about Creative Studies at SUNY Buffalo State. I looked into the program and I felt that this would be something I could really benefit from and find interest in. I enrolled because I figured this would be a good way to end my education, and fulfill my requirements. I did not anticipate how much Creative Studies

was going to impact my well-being, and save me from myself. I hope this story of my creative journey inspires positive change in others.

I can still be overly aggressive and defensive at times. I still catch myself jumping to conclusions, taking things to heart, and using all-or-nothing thinking when it comes to conflict. There is a big difference now though, because now I acknowledge it; I no longer sweep it under the rug. Before I saw my attitude and behavior as acceptable because I played the victim role and felt sorry for myself. When you have an “it’s me against the world” attitude you don’t think about the fact that your actions may have consequences.

Living creatively has taught me a lot about myself. It’s not me versus the world anymore. I want to be a part of it. I am the creative product for this master’s project. The student loan money that funded my education will be repaid with gratitude. I am so happy with my results, my awareness, and my mindfulness of creativity and how I can use it to cope. I will teach and inspire others to make the changes necessary to be happy and healthy. We are just visitors on this Earth, we have to make the most out of our stay. I hope that my story of overcoming victimhood to achieve the goals of self-actualization and happiness can be passed on to someone who needs it most.

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emotional_reasoning

http://www.ted.com/talks/isabelle_allende_how_to_live_passionately_no_matter_your_age

- A humorous life story of how an individual can chose to live happily and passionately no matter what their age and circumstances.

http://www.ted.com/talks/jarrett_krosoczka_why_lunch_ladies_are_heroes

- An inspirational story of how even people who seem “invisible” to most people can encourage and inspire others.

http://www.ted.com/talks/mac_barnett_why_a_good_book_is_a_secret_door

- A humorous uplifting lecture on how it is important to hold onto the inner child and playfulness in us all.

https://www.ted.com/talks/nancy_etcoff_on_happiness_and_why_we_want_it

- This video/lecture looks into happiness, why we all strive toward it, and the long-term effects of a healthy mind and healthy body.

http://www.ted.com/talks/kare_anderson_be_an_opportunity_maker

- An uplifting motivational talk on how we all have great ideas, but it is up to us to seize the opportunity and implement our creative ideas.

http://www.ted.com/talks/haas_hahn_how_painting_can_transform_communities

- This talk is based on a documentary on how two men traveled to Brazil and used art to uplift a community.