

Writing and the Creative Life: Why Creative People May Feel More Anxiety

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I'm even nervous posting this...

When I first joined the Writers Guild, I spoke on the phone with someone there about my new health insurance benefits. The woman kindly went through several items, then she paused and said, "And of course, there's your mental health benefit." I was surprised by the coverage available (I don't recall the specific details she rattled off, but the plan was quite generous in terms of counseling visitations per year). When I mentioned this, the woman chuckled and said, "Well, you know... you're *writers*."

Ah, that old saw. How writers — and creatives in general — are a mental mess. Insecurities. Depression. Antisocial. I've certainly known enough writers who do have psychological issues, as well as many who do not... or at least manifest them publicly. But there is one dynamic which I suspect every writer deals with and that's this: Anxiety.



*"Why won't the words come? And what if they're the wrong words?
Know what? I hate words!"*

If you work freelance, it goes with the territory. You land a gig, great. That takes care of the next 3, maybe even up to 6 months depending on rewrites. But always lurking at the edge of your consciousness is the anxiety of, "What'll I do next?" There's good reason for that anxiety because at any given time, only around 40% of WGA members are employed plying their craft in Hollywood.

However, beyond this 'logical' form of anxiety, there are other contributing factors which seem to impact creatives more than non-creatives (I use these terms in a general sense for purposes of this discussion). This article — Why Creative People May Feel More Anxiety — details several examples of stress-inducing dynamics:

SITUATIONAL

- conflict between our values and the values of others (what is and what ought to be)
- interpersonal disharmony
- lack of intellectual stimulation or challenge
- challenges beyond our capability to respond
- threats to emotional or physical well-being
- lack of resources to accomplish a task
- time constraints

SELF-IMPOSED

- setting excessively high standards for ourselves
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- negative self-talk
- emotionally loaded/highly evaluative beliefs about ourselves and our environment
- believing that everyone should love, respect, and praise us
- buying into others' negative evaluations of us
- catastrophizing

I look at that and I boil it down to two primary culprits:

- **Perfectionism:** Driven to excel in our creative endeavors. This can be a plus, but can also result in anxiety levels which constrict our ability to be productive.
- **Imagination:** Creatives are capable of concocting a multitude of possibilities which is great for writing in

terms of character and plot development, but it also means we can transfer that to our own lives and generate all sorts of scenarios for what can happen to us, including lots of bad things.

How can creatives handle anxiety? In the article, Dr. Eric Maisel offers three ways:

*“The simplest is to remember to breathe; a few **deep cleansing breaths** can do wonders for reducing anxiety.*

*“The most important anxiety management tool is probably **cognitive work**, where you change the things you say to yourself, turning anxious thoughts into calmer, more productive thoughts.*

*“And creating a **lifestyle that supports calmness** is also very important: if the way you live your life produces a lot of anxiety, that’s a tremendous extra burden on your nervous system.”*

The first one anyone can do. Just engage in some breathing exercises. I find that and meditation reduces my feelings of anxiety. The second one will probably involve working with a therapist which brings us back to health insurance policies and what they cover.

But the third — “creating a lifestyle that supports calmness” — that’s trickier. You can go back in time and see to it you are born the son or daughter of an oil tycoon

who gives you a lifetime trust fund. Or just marry a millionaire who is willing to support your creative endeavors.

Perhaps the best approach: Don't rely on writing as your sole source of financial well-being. If you can create a situation where you write because you love it and not because you have to in order to pay the bills, that may be the best way to reduce anxiety to a manageable level.

What are your thoughts? How do you handle anxiety related to your creative life? Hit me up in comments with your thoughts.

For more Writing and the Creative Life articles, go [here](#).

UPDATE: The link to the article referenced in the original post has disappeared. I found this podcast with Dr. Eric Maisel in which he discusses ways to "master creative anxiety." I thought it might be helpful.