

Sustainable Creativity

Michael Nobbs

Advice on how to maintain a creative life for people
with low energy or limited time (or both!)



1 Sustainable Creativity

Table of Contents

- About the Author
- A Quick Word on How to Use This Book
- My Story
- Sustainable Creativity - An Introduction
- Little and Often
- Focus
- Keep Things Simple
- Simplifying Where We Work
- The 20 Minutes a Day Challenge
- Make a Public Commitment
- A Few Tips for a Successful 20 Minutes a Day Challenge
- How Little and How Often?
- The Three-thing (or even One-thing!) To-do List

Sustainable Creativity

- Recognising (and Celebrating!) our Achievements
- Being Kind
- Enjoy the Journey (or try to anyway!)
- Working with the Concept of the Energy Bank
- Practical Ways of Working with Your Energy Bank
- A Final Word: The Magic of Saying “No”
- Summing Up
- Further Reading

Sustainable Creativity

About the Author

Michael Nobbs is a full-time artist, blogger and tea drinker (not necessarily in that order). He writes, tweets and podcasts about drawing and trying to keep things simple.

In the late 1990s he was diagnosed with ME/CFS and, over the last decade, has learnt a lot about sustaining a creative career with limited energy.



Sustainable Creativity

A Quick Word on How to Use this Book

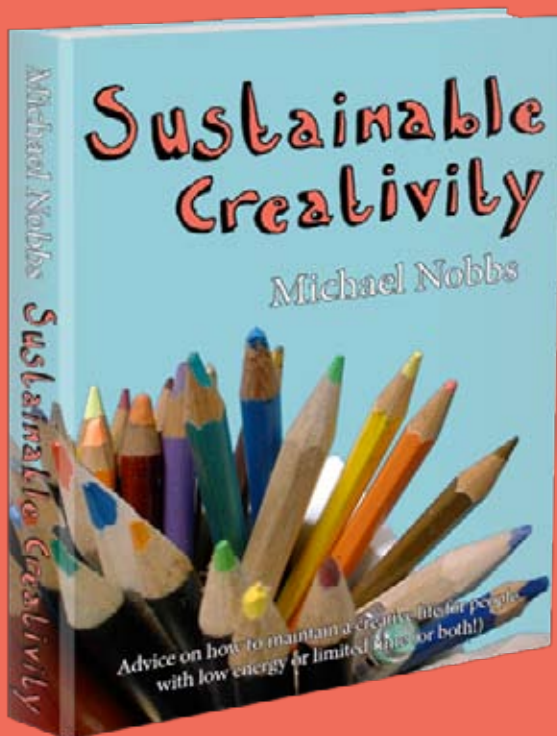
This book was mostly written in little chunks of time following the principles of the 20 Minutes a Day Challenge.

Whilst I hope it can be read as a whole, chapter by chapter, maybe in one or two sittings, I also think it lends itself well to be consumed in small chunks of time just as it was written.

I would suggest starting with Sustainable Creativity - An Introduction, but then just read the essays as they take your fancy and time and energy allows.

Each essay is followed by a “Things to Try” section containing suggestions for how to implement some of the ideas contained in the essays. Some of these things to try can be done quickly and some are worth meditating on and implementing over a longer period of time.

Happy reading and happy creating.



Sustainable Creativity

My Story

Back at the end of the 90s I was feeling very tired. Not the sort of tired you get from a doing some exercise, or staying up too late for a few nights, not the sort of tired that is cured by a good night's sleep, a day on the sofa, or even a holiday, but the sort of tired that means you can't move from bed, that your brain feels like it's been put in a box of cotton wool and your body feels like it's moving through treacle. And I hurt. My joints were constantly sore, everything felt heavy. It was as though I constantly had a bad case of flu. It didn't even have the energy to cry, but boy did I want to cry.

When I finally went to see the doctor he asked me how long had I felt tired. Was I feeling like this at Christmas? Yes! How about the Christmas before? Yes! For six months I went back and forth to my very kind and understanding doctor, had many, many tests, and took exhausting trips to see consultants at two hospitals. At the end of the sixth months I was diagnosed with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (now more commonly called Myalgic

DEFINITELY d



13-3-04

TREACLE DAY

Sustainable Creativity

Encephalopathy or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) ([Click here](#) for more information).

I'd already largely stopped trying to work (I'd been a freelance writer and publisher), but with my diagnosis I gave up work completely. I stopped trying to do much of anything (including trying to find a cure). I just stopped and sat, and ate good food (when I had the energy to prepare it), and moved about a little. For the best part of a decade I just existed and watched the world go by (often miserably as my friends grew and developed their lives and careers).



The Internet became an important link to outside world for me. Blogs were beginning to develop and artists were starting to meet up online. A friend gave me a copy of Julia Cameron's twelve week course, *The Artist's Way* and I worked through it VERY slowly. I found an online group of artists who also had worked through the book and joined them (I'm still in the group more than five years

Sustainable Creativity

later). One day I stumbled on a blog by New York artist, Danny Gregory and my life changed.

Danny's wonderful site, and the book he had just published, *Everyday Matters*, were about drawing. Danny drew the things around him to keep his life together after his wife Patti had been involved in an accident that left her in a wheelchair soon after the birth of their son. I loved how the act of drawing made every day matter and how the ordinary things around him gave him inspiration.

I'd never thought I could be an artist, never having had the confidence to draw (in fact I suspect I hadn't drawn since the wonderfully free days of playschool, when drawing was just fun and nobody judged it). Suddenly though, my illness somehow meant I had nothing to lose, I was at rock bottom and what did it matter what people thought about what I did? So, I bought myself a sketchbook and a pen and started to draw. Just a little at first, but most days.



Sustainable Creativity

Slowly I noticed that my energy was improving, not a lot, but enough to sign up and attend a weekly drawing class. About a year later I was well enough for an art foundation course. Eventually I began an illustrated blog about my life, and later still launched *The Beany*, an illustrated journal of my life's ups and downs and the things that my illness was teaching me.

About four years ago I returned to university and studied part-time for an MA in fine art, and for the last two years have been working full-time as an artist and blogger.

The path to where I am hasn't been as straight as those last couple of paragraphs might suggest. Rather, it's been a winding road with many wrong turns. Along the way I've learnt a lot about patience, and pacing myself, accepting my current limits and taking very small steps to get where I want to be going. Over time I've developed a theory of sorts, a way of working and living, something I think of as Sustainable Creativity.

Sustainable Creativity

Sustainable Creativity - An Introduction

I first thought about the idea of “Sustainable Creativity” back in November 2004, after I’d been blogging for a short while and after I’d just published the first issue of my illustrated journal, *The Beany*. In fact it was my half-formed ideas about Sustainable Creativity that got that first issue published. Here’s what I wrote just after I’d finished *The Beany #1*:

“I’m feeling proud of myself about getting *The Beany* to the printers. Not just because I’ve made a sixty page book of drawings and thoughts, but because of HOW I’ve made a sixty page book of drawings and thoughts. A year ago I would have done things very differently. I would have rushed at my work, I would have exhausted myself. I would have wanted it finished NOW.

“Hand on heart I can’t say I’ve perfected working within my limits but I have got a lot better at it. I’ve learnt that little and often get things accomplished. Even little and infrequently can build up a



Sustainable Creativity

body of work. A year ago I was struggling to paint. Painting big paintings that never got finished. Now I make small drawings I can finish in a day – even in a day I need to spend in bed. Now I make short entries on [my blog](#) instead of trying to write long essays and articles in my head that never find their way on to paper. Now I have slowly put together a small book I'm proud of. A small book I hope people will enjoy.

“I'm trying to live today – do today. I'm trying to find sustainable ways to be creative. Bit by bit, day by day, drawing by drawing, entry by entry, I'm getting there.”

Looking back now, I can see that the seeds of what I now think of as Sustainable Creativity are all there:

1. The idea of working little and often.
2. The importance of being kind to myself and accepting my limits.
3. Remembering to recognise and appreciate my achievements.



Sustainable Creativity

Over time I've expanded on these ideas and developed some simple techniques that have helped keep me on creative track through the low energy times, but these three things are really the core of Sustainably Creativity.

If you take nothing else from this book, remember that list!

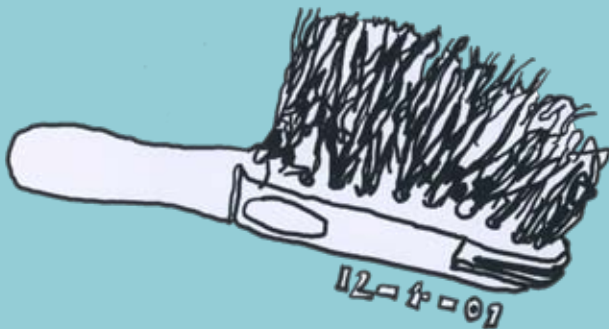


Sustainable Creativity

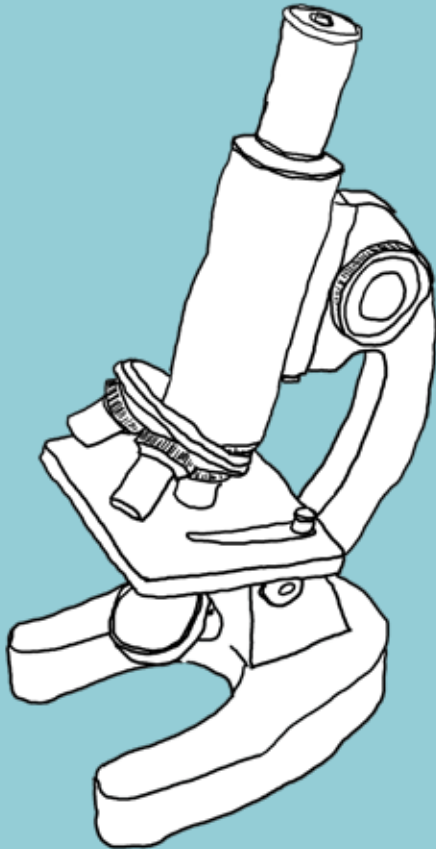
Little and Often

Little and often is my mantra of the moment. Looking back over the last few years I can see that it's a philosophy I've been developing and living by for a long time, but I think it's only been put into words (and more determined action) recently. The phrase isn't mine, it is something a good friend says often and is the way he keeps his own busy life organised and under control.

My own life is far less busy and energy often is limited, so doing little bits of things on a regular basis (whenever energy allows) really does accomplish stuff. Moreover, the effect is cumulative and builds confidence and feelings of self-worth. Today, I have projects (both finished and ongoing) that have been worked on in very small, manageable stages, one drawing at a time and even sometimes just one line at a time. I've made books and booklets, one page at a time (I'm writing this book in small 20-minute pieces of time). There are short podcasts made in five-minute bursts of energy. Tweeting almost daily means that I've found and



Sustainable Creativity



posted 1000s of links to wonderful drawings and artists for the world to see.

If I thought of any of these things as a whole, I'm sure I would just feel exhausted. But thinking about finding a link to tweet, or an image to draw, or a blog post to write, or something to chat about in a micro-podcast for a couple of minutes, all (usually!) feel manageable.

Recently, I'm discovering it's important to not only keep plodding along doing little things as often as time and energy allow, but to also look back and acknowledge and celebrate what has been achieved. It's easy to forget just how much one has done.

Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Think of a project that can easily be broken down into small chunks of time (five to 20 minutes is ideal). Maybe a series of small drawings, short blog posts, photographs or poems.
2. Set some time aside today to work on one small chunk of this project.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

**Little and
often is my
mantra of
the moment**

Sustainable Creativity

Focus

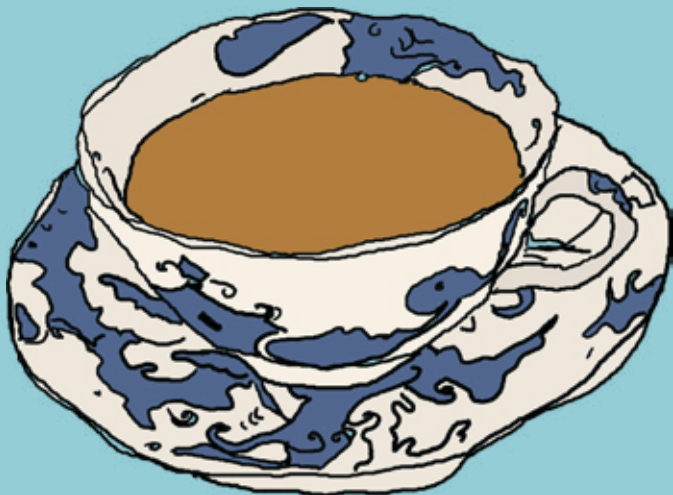
If you're someone who has limited energy, it's all too easy to let your creative ambitions slide. There are plenty of life's day to day activities that, if we let them, can easily take up all our limited time or energy. If you want to lead a creative life, or even make your living from your creative endeavours, then you'll need to learn to focus on and prioritise your Important Work.

Focus isn't easy, especially if you spend a significant amount of your time feeling tired. But the good news is it's a habit that can be learnt, and sustained creative focus can often be energising. Here are a few of the things I've learnt about making focusing on my Important Work easier:

1. Practice doing one thing at a time, no matter what you're doing. Forget about multitasking, it isn't a habit worth inculcating. Instead, spend time each day working on tasks at the exclusion of everything else. If you'd like some ideas for things to practice doing one thing at a time with, take a look at [this post](#).



Sustainable Creativity



2. Make your workspace as distraction free as possible. I've recently had a major declutter in my studio, clearing the walls of work, keeping my desk empty of all but what I'm working on, removing the TV (!) and making sure all my books are nicely nestled on a bookshelf instead of within easier reach of my work table.
3. If you work on a computer, try to declutter and keep this as distraction free as much as possible. When you're working don't check your email (and turn off any notifications), and avoid social networking and instant messaging applications. Oh, and turn off your phone, too!
4. Make a list at the start of the day of just one or two things that you REALLY want to get done, things that are a priority for you and not other people. I make sure I do these things first every day (I'm writing this straight after breakfast with a helpful cup of tea sitting next to me).
5. Simplify work tasks as much as possible. Break down tasks

Sustainable Creativity

and creative goals into small simple steps. These are the things you write on your daily list of things to get done, not the ultimate goal. It's exhausting (and impossible) to accomplish "write book" but "write 100 words I'm happy with for my book project" is far easier, and in all likelihood will make you feel great when you accomplish it. It is SO tempting to give yourself aims for the day that are just a little bigger than you can manage and this will just feel like a defeat. Much better to under-aim and cross something off your list.

6. Get a timer! Using a simple kitchen timer is probably the best thing I've discovered for staying focused on my important work. I regularly set it for 20 minutes and work on a simple creative goal in as distraction free environment as possible until it rings. Even on tired days I can usually manage twenty minutes of work, and I'm constantly amazed how these little bursts of creative activity mount up.



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Practice doing one thing at a time.
Try sitting for five minutes sipping a cup of tea, noticing the warmth of the cup in your hands, the taste of the tea, the aroma (Earl Gray tea works well for this!)
2. Make a short list of three (very small) things you'd like to achieve today. Work through it item by item.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

**sustained
creative focus
can often be
energising**

Sustainable Creativity

Keep Things Simple

I used to hunt for the perfect pen. I spent hours (and plenty of money) trying out this pen and that pen. Reading reviews. Listening to other people's recommendations. Quizzing artists about which pen they loved to use.

I think I must have been convinced that if I somehow found the perfect pen I would be able to draw more and draw better. The truth of course was if I wanted to draw better I just needed to practice, if I wanted to draw more I just needed to pick up my pen (any pen!) and draw.

I realised the error of my ways one day when I was trying to decide which of my many many pens to pick up and draw with. Wouldn't it be simpler I suddenly thought to myself, if I just had one pen? I'd have nothing to think about when it was time to draw something except that it was time to draw (I'd also have a much tidier desk and a lighter bag!). So I gave all my pens away (well,



Perfect Pen?

Sustainable Creativity

if I'm completely honest I gave all but three of my pens away, I'm only a *recovering* pen addict, not a *recovered* one!).

I thought I'd learnt my lesson, but recently I realised I needed to learn it again.

Last month I was lucky enough to be able to buy an iPad. I've been having so much fun learning to draw on it. It's the perfect keeping-it-simple creative tool for me. My normal drawing process usually involved drawing on paper and then scanning the line drawing into Photoshop for colouring. This meant I needed to be in my studio for at least the scanning stage, and that I used a sketchbook, pen, scanner and laptop to complete a drawing. With the iPad I can draw directly on it and also colour. I don't need to carry anything else with me but the iPad (not even my three pens). I can make and complete a drawing anywhere. Perfect.

Except that then I discovered styluses...



Sustainable Creativity

There are some lovely styluses out there. For a few days I became quite obsessed with finding the perfect stylus. I read reviews. Listened to other people's recommendations. Quizzed other artists about which stylus they loved to use...



I was convinced that if I somehow found the perfect stylus I would be able to draw better and draw more on my iPad...

Luckily for my wallet I realised that all I was doing was complicating things (again). That I was avoiding just getting on with learning to draw on my iPad by hunting for accessories (albeit possibly gorgeous accessories!). If I bought myself a selection of styluses then I'd be confronted with choice all over again. Creating choices isn't the way to keep things simple.

In the end I've found the perfect stylus—it's one I carry around with me all the time. My finger. It really is the most efficient drawing

Sustainable Creativity

implement I own. I always have it with me, it's free and I'll never need to buy more ink (I won't go into my quest for the perfect ink, that would be another very long story!).

Some of the things I've learnt (and recently relearnt) about keeping it simple:

1. Tools don't make the artist, doing the work does.
2. Making things simpler isn't about trying new things, it's about using less.
3. Choice (whether that's choosing between lots of ideas or tools) often just complicates things.
4. If what you do works for you, don't change it needlessly.
5. Start from wherever you are, don't feel you need new things to discover the best work process (or tools), use what you have.
6. New processes and ways of working will present themselves as you need them, don't go looking for them.



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Spend some time thinking about the absolute minimum tools you need to work on one of your projects. Maybe if you're a writer that could be one specific program on your laptop. Or if you're an artist just a pen and sketchbook
2. This week practice working only with these tools.
3. celebrate what you've achieved.

**Choice
often just
complicates
things**

Sustainable Creativity

Simplify Where We Work

Simplifying *where* we work makes just as much sense as simplifying *how* we work. Being time or energy-poor can mean we don't think we have the spare resources to worry about where we work, but that can often be a mistake.

Keeping our working environment clutter-free, and distraction-free can ultimately free up energy that we can dedicate to getting out Important Work done. It also makes it far easier to focus on what we're doing.

Our working environment might be a purpose built studio or rented office, but the reality is that it's more likely to be the corner of the living room, the kitchen table, or even (my personal favourite) a bed.

Whilst it's still a challenge to keep a dedicated space clutter and distraction-free, it is easier than dealing with a multi-purpose (and



Sustainable Creativity

sometimes shared) space. It is worth putting a little time, energy and thought into how to keep our dual-purpose working space as ordered as possible.

If at all possible it is worth clearing your workspace of as much as possible. This may be easier if you work in your bedroom than if you work in a shared living room for instance, but even clearing a shared space can be helpful. As a rule of thumb it's a good idea to have nothing within arms reach that could distract you (so no piles of books within arm's length, or the television remote control!).

If possible it's even better to clear things away completely, so that there is nothing in your workspace but you and somewhere to sit. This is why I particularly like working in bed. It's much easier to remove unnecessary distractions from a bedroom than most other rooms in the house, and it'll still function well as a bedroom. In fact a lovely clutter-free bedroom makes relaxing and resting



Sustainable Creativity

easier, so you'll be doing yourself a double favour by keeping it clutter and distraction-free!

Once you have found a place that you can keep reasonably free from potential diversions there are one or two more things you can do to help making working easier:

1. Shut the door to your working space when you start work and ask anyone you live with to not disturb you for a set amount of time.
2. Keep your tools as simple as possible and keep them packed away neatly for ease of access whenever you want to work.
3. Only get out the minimum tools you need to use for the current project you are working on.
4. Unplug or turn off your phone.



Sustainable Creativity

5. If you're working on a computer turn off the Internet unless it's vital for what you're working on.
6. Use a timer to help you both stay focused for a specific amount of time (I'd say 20 minutes is ideal) and to make sure that you take regular breaks.

A note about working on a computer: Just like with your physical workspace, it is just as much of a benefit to keep your virtual working space as distraction and clutter-free as possible:

1. Try to only work with one application open at a time.
2. Switch off the Internet unless you need it for the task you're currently working on.
3. Keep your virtual desktop clear. I only have the files for the



Sustainable Creativity

project I'm currently working on today on there and file them away once I've finished working for the day.

4. Close everything down once you've finished working for the day. If you forget, it's amazing how easy it is to get distracted by an open program when you start work in the morning!



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Unless you have a dedicated office or studio seek out a quiet corner of your home that you can use as your regular workspace.
2. Sit quietly there for a while and make a list of the possible distractions and clutter you can see. Start to remove them one by one this week.
3. celebrate what you've achieved.

**Simplifying
where we work
makes just as
much sense
as simplifying
how we work**

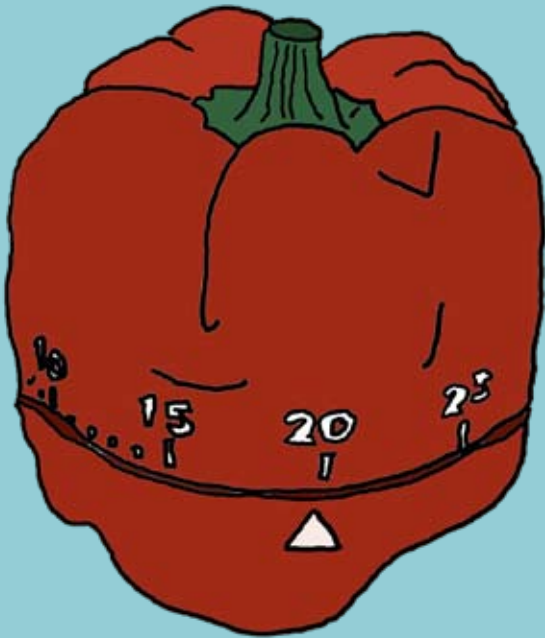
Sustainable Creativity

The 20 Minutes a Day Challenge

One very good way to stay on track with working little and often is to set aside a small piece of time once a day to get on with some creative work. I would suggest 20 minutes a day but if your energy levels won't allow 20 minutes, even five or ten minutes is beneficial).

There are lots of creative endeavours that lend themselves to being worked on in small, regular segments of time (this book is being put together in daily 20-minute bursts of activity). Anything that you can easily pick up and put down (and then pick up again from where you left off) works well. Here are some ideas:

1. Work on a series of drawings
2. Write a book.
3. Create a photographic project
4. Knit



Sustainable Creativity

5. Sew
6. Paint (working in oils is particularly good because they take so long to dry).
7. Film
8. Write a series of poems

and some less obviously creative ideas:

9. Meditate
10. Exercise (gently!)
11. Declutter
12. Learn a language

I'm sure you can think of plenty more...



Sustainable Creativity

There are lots of creative endeavours that lend themselves to being worked on in small, regular segments of time

Things to try

1. Make a list of some things you've been wanting to achieve, but haven't felt like you have the time or energy for.
2. Pick ONE project from the list and ask yourself if it can be broken down into manageable chunks (most things can). Commit to making this your 20 Minutes a Day project.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

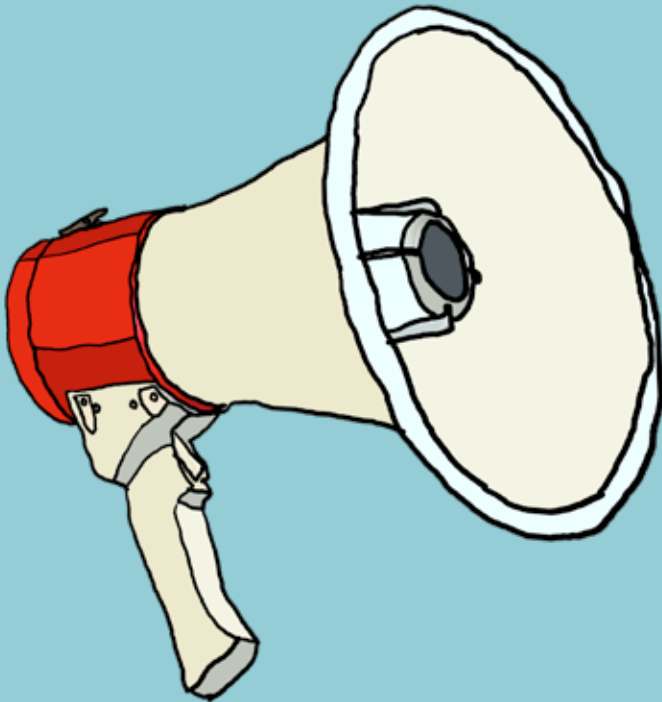
Sustainable Creativity

Make a Public Commitment

I've learnt over the years that getting my Important Work done is often more about focus than effort. Yes, writing and drawing takes planning and time. Yes, it uses up my precious energy (though sometimes accomplishing something can actually give a little energy boost. Sometimes).

However (and very importantly), often the time and energy spent on the actual work can be quite small. It is all the other things surrounding the work that can be time and energy sapping. There's the thinking about working. Thinking can be exhausting. There's the avoiding working. Avoiding can be VERY exhausting and time consuming (I used to have an exhausting habit of constantly tidying and rearranging my studio rather than just getting on with making work in it!).

Of course thinking and pondering can be an important part of the creative process, but it is all too easy to do nothing else but



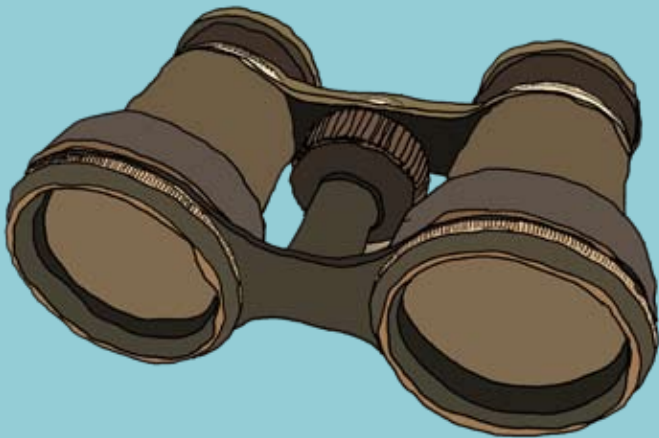
Sustainable Creativity

thinking if we're not careful. Sometimes just settling down and doing something (anything!) will get our creative juices flowing and our Important Work underway.

So, if we accept that the way to get our Important Work done is to just get down and do it, then we need ways to help us to do that. Ways to help us avoid energy sapping distractions.

One of the best ways I've learnt to keep myself on track with something I want to get done is to tell someone else I'm going to do it—to make some sort of public commitment.

Now, it's important to think carefully about making a public commitment. In my experience making one often provides a very strong incentive to get down to work on a project or idea, so you need to be realistic about any goal that you are publicly setting yourself. The aim isn't to make yourself work harder (that can be a disaster for people whose energy is low because of illness)



Sustainable Creativity

but rather to work in a focused way with your available energy reserves.

Telling people about something you want to get done helps you to stay focused for various reasons:

1. Talking about something with other people starts to make it real. Getting an idea out of our heads and into the real world is the first step to making it feel possible.
2. People will start to ask you about your project. Their interest can fire your enthusiasm.
3. Knowing that people are likely to ask about your project makes you far more likely to want to get on with it (you'll want to be able to tell people what you've achieved, rather than just telling them that you're still waiting to start!).
4. Once you've given your project a kickstart by telling people you're going to do it, it can often take on a life and momentum of its own. It starts to become part of your regular creative

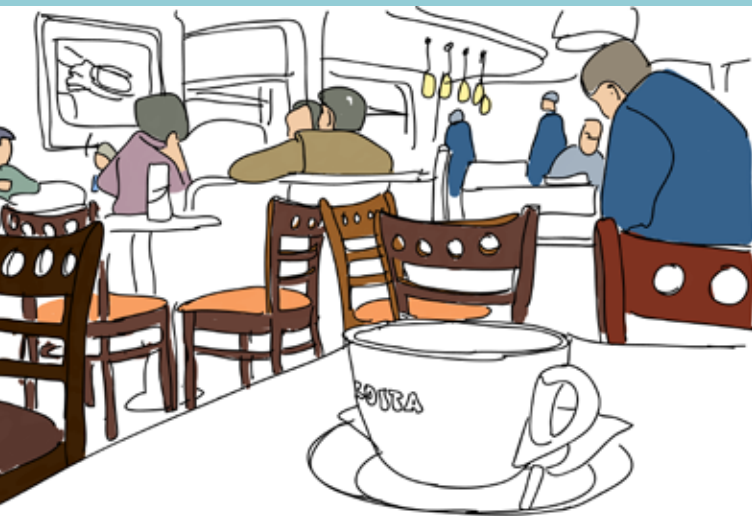


Sustainable Creativity

routine. It starts to just get done.

How to make your public commitment:

1. Tell one or two close friends about what you have planned and arrange to check-in with them regularly, maybe once a week.
2. Consider forming a small group with other people interested in becoming focused on creative projects and arrange to all report in about your progress regularly (maybe over tea and cake).
3. Think about making an even more public declaration of intent (I've found the more public a declaration, the more I'm likely to focus!). You could perhaps post your intentions on your blog if you have one and agree to check-in with progress on a regular basis.
4. Join a class or a group, maybe one you have to pay for (literally putting your money where your mouth is!) that fits with your creative aim. Perhaps a novel writing class if you want to write a book, or a drawing class if you want to complete a series of drawings.



Sustainable Creativity

Remember not to overdo it!

It bears repeating: Making a public commitment is a powerful tool to help you focus on your Important Work, but don't be tempted to use it as a stick to beat yourself with to make yourself work harder.

This is about being focused, not working harder. If you have the energy to work for 20 minutes a day then publicly commit to using those 20 minutes to concentrate on your Important Work. DON'T commit to working for half an hour instead.



Sustainable Creativity

I've learnt
over the years
that getting
my Important
Work done is
often more
about focus
than effort

Things to try

1. Make a list of the people in your life; friends, colleagues, online contacts, etc and consider which of them you'd feel happy talking about one of your creative projects with.
2. Tell someone from your list (or even arrange to meet with two or three people) about a current project and when you'd like to finish it (be realistic!).
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

Sustainable Creativity

A Few Tips for a Successful 20 Minutes a Day Challenge

1. Get yourself a dedicated timer for your project. You don't want to be constantly hunting for your timer when it's time to work on your project.
2. Projects that need very few tools or resources work best. It's best to pick something you can work on without the need to gather together many tools before you can start. If you do need tools then make sure you can leave them out somewhere so you can just get going each day. Keep things as simple as possible.
3. When working on your project, do so to the exclusion of everything else. Focus is vital for the challenge. Turn off all distractions—radio, TV, email, instant messaging. Take the phone off the hook if you can. Tell your family not to disturb you. Isolate yourself and just get on with what's in front of you.



Sustainable Creativity

4. Don't skip the public commitment step. Committing to something publicly is a great way to stay true to your goal. Leo Babauta has a very good post about this over on [*Zen Habits*](#).
5. At the end of your 20 minute session—stop. Don't be tempted to work on after your timer has rung. If you have the urge to do more, that's great, it'll mean you'll be even more motivated to start again tomorrow.
6. Give yourself a treat at the end of your 20 minutes! My treat of choice is cup of tea and a biscuit. Feel free to copy me, or to pick one of your own....



Sustainable Creativity

When working
on your
project, do
so to the
exclusion of
everything
else

Things to try

1. If you haven't already, buy yourself a dedicated timer for your 20 Minutes a Day project. Pick something fun (this is the one I use. It makes me smile every time I wind it up!).
2. Set your timer for 20 minutes and work on your current project until it rings. Stop.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

Sustainable Creativity

How Little and How Often?



I imagine you're starting to get the picture that the key to being sustainably creative is learning to work little and often. How little and how often is something that very much depends on your own personal energy levels and the amount of free time you have available to you. Working that out is really a process of trial and error.

One rule of thumb that I hope you will take on board is that it is always best to do less than you think you can, rather than more. Over the years I've learnt that I need to think of my energy levels as being like a bank account. Regularly spending a little less than I have in the bank means I always have a surplus. Spending even a penny more on any given day means at best I need to make up for the overspend on another day and at worst (if I consistently overspend) that I increasingly get into debt (there's more on the concept of the Energy Bank [later in the book](#)).

Sustainable Creativity

Constant overspending (doing more than you can comfortably do) not only means a growing energy debt, but is also demoralising. It is so much better to finish a day's work with money (energy) in the bank. That way you have both accomplished something AND can still feel well enough to appreciate it.

Here are a few tips to help you work out how little and how often to work on your creative projects:

1. Start VERY small. Try working on something for only five minutes a day for the first week and three times during the week. At the end of that week gauge how you feel. Were you ending each of your three sessions feeling you could do more? Were you easily able to begin your next session?
2. If the answer to the above is yes, then increase your working time by a minute or two for your three sessions the following week. If the answer is no, reduce your time.



Sustainable Creativity



3. How do you feel at the end of the second week? If you're still feeling you have spare energy when you finish a session, either add an extra session to your third week or an extra minute or two to each session.

4. If you feel you have already found your right level of working, then celebrate that. Don't worry for a second if you're managing only a minute or two a day, just be pleased you know what you can do. Keep working at the level that is right for you. Keep leaving a little in the energy bank. The combination of the accomplishment and the surplus energy may make it possible to add a little more working time in the future.

5. Keep adding or reducing your time spent on your creative work until you find your optimum level. I would recommend aiming at a maximum of 20 minutes for six days a week. It's amazing what you can get done in that time.

Sustainable Creativity

the key
to being
sustainably
creative is
learning to
work little and
often

Things to try

1. Start to work out your ideal daily working time by starting very small, say for five minutes of creative work three times a week.
2. Judge as honestly as you can how you feel. Is that too much for now? If so reduce the time. Can you comfortably do more? Increase your working time a little. Play gently until you find your ideal working time.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

Sustainable Creativity

The Three-thing (or even One-thing!) To-do List

When I first realised I was ill, the to-do list was the bane of my life. I'd constantly add things to my list that I wanted to achieve. The ever-growing list would haunt me and taunt me, usually sitting by my bed so that it was the first thing I saw in the morning and the last thing I saw at night (in fact I would often wake up in the middle of the night and add things to it!).

Very little got done, and what did get crossed off the list was lost in the sea of things yet to be done. There was no celebration of what was achieved, instead just stress and a constant feeling of being behind with my life.

Instead of allowing myself to be taunted by my to-do list I made a decision to take control of it. I was very aware of the great feeling of accomplishment I got from crossing off a completed task (often quite energising in itself), so I didn't want to completely throw



Sustainable Creativity



out the whole idea of a to-do list from my day. However, I didn't want the pressure and feeling of failure that often accompanied the every growing to-do list that would wait for me in my studio or sit by my bed when I woke up in the morning.

My solution? The three-things to-do list. Instead of a ever-expanding list I would only allow myself to put three things a day on my to-do list. Moreover, these things weren't allowed to be large projects, but rather small, easily achieved steps (that might well be part of larger projects). The list also wouldn't only include work stuff, but anything that I needed to get done in a day (anything that used up my precious energy).

Working out my to-do list like this forced me to choose among things I wanted (or thought I needed to get done). It made me decide on my priorities and really see what was important. It also gave me credit for everything I decided to do with my daily energy.

Sustainable Creativity

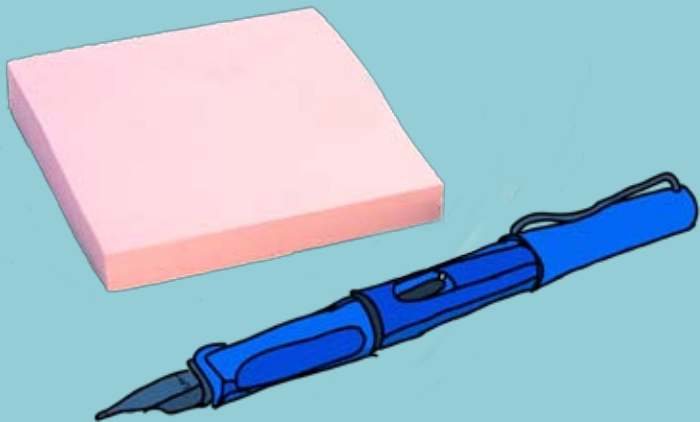
I found I had to be ruthless and choose between things like answering emails and going food shopping. Working on a drawing or using social media. I also had to often choose one creative project over another. On any one day my three things to-do list could look like this:

1. Shopping
2. Make a drawing
3. Post ten tweets

or

1. Walk dog
2. Work on my 20 Minutes a Day Project
3. Meet H for coffee

What's important is that I realised even something like meeting



Sustainable Creativity

a friend for coffee is work (it uses up my limited energy) and so making a choice to do that meant I wouldn't have the energy left for something else. This might all seem obvious to me now, but at the time it felt like quite a revelation!

On bad days, or just when I feel like I need to be kind to myself, I may well only make a one-thing a day to-do list (and some days the only option is to have a no-thing to-do list, and that really is okay!).

The very best thing about these little lists is the feeling of accomplishment when I can cross off something that is finished. Knowing I'm going to get that feeling keeps me going when sometimes I think I might rather stop (though of course it's very important not to push ourselves beyond our limits), and crossing a completed item off is often energising. Looking back at the list at the end of the day or the week shows me just how much I have actually done. In the pre-list days I may well have done as much,



Keep on
Keeping
On...

Sustainable Creativity

but I tended to always underestimate my achievements and felt no sense of pride in them.

This brings me on to what I want to talk about next; recognising (and celebrating) our achievements...



Sustainable Creativity

The very best thing about these little lists is the feeling of accomplishment when I can cross off something that is finished

Things to try

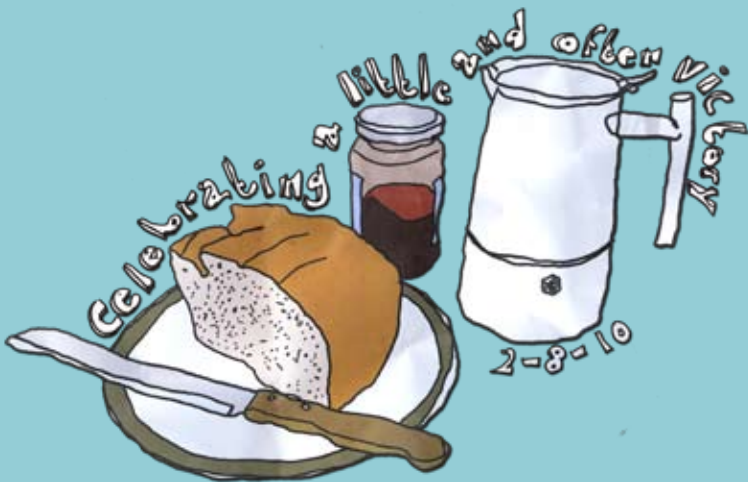
1. Begin a daily morning ritual of sitting down with a cup of tea or coffee and thinking carefully of all the things you'd like to do and achieve today.
2. If you could only do three things today, what which would be the most important? Which ones would move your Important Work on? Which ones would help support you? Which ones would make you happy? Pick just three and write them on your to-do list.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

Sustainable Creativity

Recognising (and Celebrating) Our Achievements

One of the best ways I've learnt to stay sustainably creative over the years is to constantly notice just how much I have done. Taking tiny steps towards a creative goal as often as my limited energy allows does mean I can achieve a lot, but it is also very important to NOTICE just how much I've got done.

When I was first diagnosed with ME/CFS I felt like a huge failure. Even doing the smallest thing felt like a huge effort, and instead of giving myself credit for managing to do something despite being ill, I would often berate myself for not being able to do more. How cruel is that? I'm sure I wouldn't have told a small child just learning to walk that it should be running a 100 metre sprint, instead I'd praise it's every faltering step and be excited by its amazing achievement. It took me quite a few years to realise I was like that small child, needing loving praise rather than criticism.

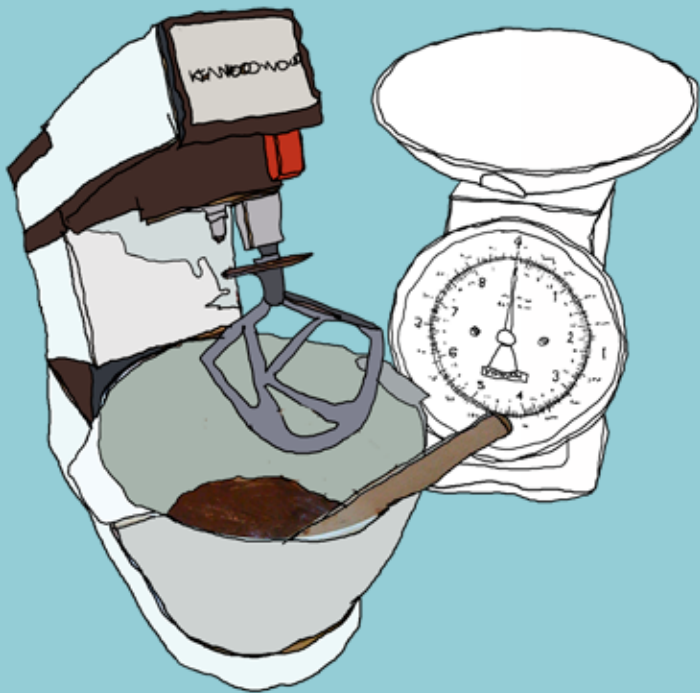


Sustainable Creativity

I think as people with ME/CFS (just like anyone who is very tired and low on energy) we are very apt to have a distorted view of how much we can do and also how much we have done. We overestimate how much we can do and severely underestimate how much we have achieved. The result often means we push ourselves far too hard and never appreciate how well we've done (meaning to push ourselves harder still). Now, that's a recipe for disaster if ever there was one!

Happily, at some point on my journey to creating a sustainable creative career for myself I realised what I was doing to myself and learnt how important it was to stop and recognise just how much I have done (and to celebrate it regularly).

There are a few things I do to keep track of what I've done. I don't necessarily use them all the time, but try to do something everyday to keep an eye on what I've achieved:



Sustainable Creativity

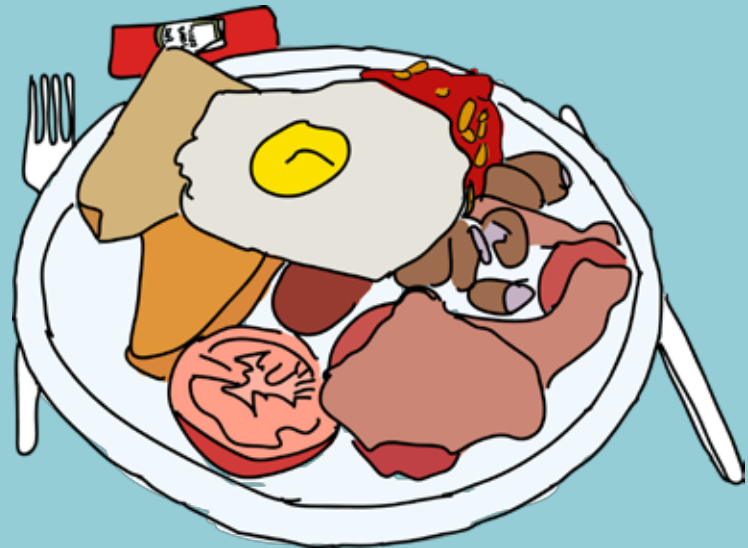
1. I keep my three-things to-do lists (keeping my lists is a quick and easy way to see just how much I've done. For a while I stuck them up on my studio wall so that they became an ever growing reminder of how productive I was being).
2. I keep a diary by my bed and before I go to I sleep write a couple of sentences down about what I've done. I include anything I've spent my energy on, it ALL counts. This helps both with recognising what I've done, and also helps me make choices in the future about how I want to spend my energy.
3. I stop during the day for elevenses and/or afternoon tea. This little ritual of stopping and making tea gives me an opportunity to reflect on what I've been doing, maybe redefine what I want to be using my energy for today, and is also a great treat to reward myself for what I have done.



Sustainable Creativity

4. I organise private celebrations for reaching goals on ongoing projects. Perhaps finishing a week's worth of writing, or a set of drawings for a larger project. I could treat myself to breakfast at My Favourite Cafe or rent a film I've been looking forward to seeing. I might even bake a cake!

5. I organise public celebrations to mark milestones on projects and completed creative projects. Publicly acknowledging achievements is a great validation (and other people are apt to be even more impressed with what we've done than we are!). It's important to realise these celebrations use energy too, so it's a good idea to treat oneself to a day or two off after one!



Sustainable Creativity

organise
public
celebrations
to mark
milestones on
projects

Things to try

1. Begin a daily journal of what you've achieved during the day. This could just be a collection of your three-thing to-do lists or a little book where you write down what you've done. The important bit is noticing and appreciating just how much you have achieved.
2. Organise a small gathering at home or in a cafe to celebrate something you've achieved.
3. Why not bake a cake to celebrate what you've achieved?

Sustainable Creativity

Being Kind

It's not always easy to remember to treat ourselves kindly. Let's face it, during a busy day or on a day when we're just not feeling 100%, it's not always easy to remember to be kind to others, let alone ourselves. But it's precisely on those days that we need to take a pause, remember that everyone needs a little TLC, and make time for a little self-love.

Why it's important to be kind to yourself

Remembering to be kind to ourselves is a great way to feed the creative soul. If like me you're someone with limited energy, then you'll want to make the very best use of what creative energy you do have, and look after it by feeding it well (just like you'd feed your physical body if you wanted to be in tip-top physical shape) is really the best thing you can do.

Here are 10 ideas for ways you can be kind to yourself and help



Sustainable Creativity

increase your creativity (there are a mixture of the restful and the energising ideas here; pick one that suits your current energy level):

1. Just stop. Some days there is nothing for it but to just give in and stop. As much as I like to maintain as much creative momentum as I can, there are plenty of times that I just can't. Sometimes my body feels like it's sitting in a vat of treacle and my brain is nestling in some cotton wool. If I push myself, I know things will just get worse, so there's nothing for it but to stop. Rather than feel bad about it, I might as well be kind to myself and just enjoy the rest. If you have low energy (or also suffer from CFS) a better strategy is to stop before the treacle day arrives. Why not schedule regular "stop days" into your week. "Stop hours" are a great idea for during the day too. I'm a great fan of just stopping!

2. Take a cup of tea and sit in the garden for 20 minutes. Now that spring has arrived here in Wales this is one of my favourite ways to



Sustainable Creativity

be kind to myself. In the winter I might take a cup of tea back to bed or sit in front of a blazing fire. I don't do anything but sit and sip my tea.

3. Take an afternoon nap. SARK has a great little book, *Change Your Life Without Getting Out of Bed: The Ultimate Nap Book*.

In it she extols the virtues of regular napping. I'm in complete agreement with her. I often have no choice but to take a nap in the day, but even if I don't really need one, there is very little nicer than an afternoon nap in a sunny room. To be even kinder to yourself put fresh, line-dried sheets on the bed (see 9).

4. Do some baking. If you have little energy or time, baking might seem like an indulgence too far. Believe me, taking time out to bake some bread or make a cake pays you huge dividends in terms of creative energy payback. Not only will your house smell wonderful, but you'll have something to treat yourself with (see 5) when you've finished working on a creative project.



Sustainable Creativity

5. Create a treat box. Put in it some good quality chocolate, a homemade cake, some special tea or coffee, or something else you enjoy but rarely buy yourself. Now, create a special ritual out of taking a little treat out of the box as a reward for finishing work on one step of a current creative project.

6. Go for a walk. Julia Cameron argues that walking is a great creative energiser in her book, *Walking in this World*. Some days you might not have the time or energy for a large walk, but even a few minutes stroll can really help recharge the creative batteries.

7. Take a bath. Taking a bath is a great way to be kind to yourself. Lots of bubbles are a must, a radio play can be a lovely addition, too. Why not try a little drawing (though use a sketchbook you don't mind getting wet).



Sustainable Creativity

8. Dance. Put on your favourite track and just dance for five minutes.

9. Do some laundry! This might not sound much of a treat, but I think that there's very little else that feels more like self-care than putting on a soft clean jumper, getting into a bed that has been freshly made with clean sheets, or opening a draw and smelling the aroma of clean clothes. If you're lucky enough to have some outside space, line-drying clothes is wonderful. Pegging out the wet clothes, sitting for a few hours in a deckchair while they dry and then unpegging, folding and bringing in the sweet smelling laundry can't fail to lift one's spirits!

10. Take A Day Away (a big idea to end on). This is a wonderful idea from Maya Angelou (from her book, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*). Every now and again Maya takes herself away from her home town for the day, wanders about a new city and recharges her creative batteries. She says when she returns



Sustainable Creativity

home the next day more often than not things that were worrying her, knotty creative problems, or things that felt in need of urgent attention had often simply solved themselves or no longer seemed a problem. She feels renewed and able to face the day.



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Make a list of ten things that you like to do to pamper and be kind to yourself.
2. Pick one thing from your list and enjoy being kind to yourself today.
3. celebrate what you've achieved.

**Remembering
to be kind to
ourselves is
a great way
to feed the
creative soul**

Sustainable Creativity

Enjoy the Journey (or try to anyway!)

One of the best pieces of advice I've been given since I was diagnosed with ME/CFS (and one of the hardest to really include in my life!) is "try to enjoy the journey." I well remember sitting in a counselling session a year or two after my diagnosis alternately crying and shouting, "How can I enjoy the journey when I feel so crap most of the time and this (VERY strong expletive removed!) illness means I can hardly do anything, let alone anything I enjoy!"

I was in my late 20s, I felt I'd been robbed of my life, I couldn't see a way forward and I felt crap! The journey just wasn't fun!!

I couldn't see it at the time, but the most important part of my counsellor's advice wasn't the *enjoy* part, but the *try* part. Don't get me wrong, enjoying is great and it is certainly possible, but it is the idea of trying that really has helped me over the years.

Trying implies, or at least leaves room for, not always succeeding.



Sustainable Creativity

If you're coming to the concept of Sustainable Creativity through illness, then you probably have bad days, perhaps some very bad days. If someone tells you you're supposed to be enjoying the journey on those bad days, then you probably just want to stick two fingers up at them and tell them where to go! That's perfectly understandable, and what's more, shows a certain vitality of spirit that should give you cheer!

Over time I've learnt that that sort of understandable anger at my situation was a sign that there was at least some energy available to me. Learning to channel it into at least *trying* to make the journey better has been a big help. Of course I don't always succeed, but over the years I've learnt to do more of the things that make my journey feel better and less of the things that make it feel worse. I've found things I can do that I enjoy to do, some of which can actually add to my energy levels rather than deplete them (more on that in the next chapter).



Sustainable Creativity

Most importantly I've learnt that there is no point in waiting until I feel better, to enjoy my life. Feeling better could be a long way off and life is happening right here, right now (and moving surprisingly fast!).

So as the days, months and years march on, I find and take my pleasure where I can. I savour my morning cup of tea, I go for a slow walk, I watch something on the TV I enjoy. I "save up" energy for trips to The Big City, I meet friends for breakfast, I draw. On bad days I let myself rest (and sometimes even enjoy that).

I'm not perfect at enjoying my life, my journey, but I am trying.



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Make a list of ten things you could do to make life more pleasant today.
2. Do one them. Do another one tomorrow.
3. celebrate what you've achieved.

**there is no
point in
waiting to
enjoy life**

Sustainable Creativity

Working with the Concept of the Energy Bank

One of the hardest lessons I've learnt about dealing with low energy (and one of the best techniques I've discovered for staying sustainably creative) concerns the concept of our own personal Energy Bank. Our Energy Bank is a bit like our ordinary bank account. Instead of money, we deposit and withdraw energy from it. And just like our ordinary bank account we can easily overspend and build up an overdraft.

Sometimes monetary overdrafts are useful for helping us through a brief cash flow problem, but used to excess they can just lead to more debt. If we're not careful with our finances we can eventually live in a permanent overdraft, only ever earning enough to just about pay off our existing overdraft before we start to live off our debt again.



Sustainable Creativity



The same is just as true for our Energy Bank. It is all too easy, especially if we suffer from low energy in the first place, to live in a permanent energy overdraft. I know from my own experience that in comparing myself to other people, measuring myself against what they could do and trying to emulate it, I was constantly using more energy than I had available to me. Soon I was in a permanent energy overdraft situation, when I would rest just about enough to get myself back to a zero balance before starting to withdraw energy from my overdraft again.

In time things got worse and worse and before long I wasn't even resting enough to get back to a zero position before I would withdraw more energy from the Energy Bank. Eventually things became so bad that I was to all intents and purposes energy bankrupt!

The only way back to any semblance of health was get myself out of this debt. There were no shortcuts and the process took the best

Sustainable Creativity

part of a decade. What I learnt over that time was that for every penny I took out of the energy bank I needed to put three in. In other words for every three hours of rest I has about one hour of energy. So in any given day I had about six hours of energy available from 18 hours of rest. This was another revelation to me. I began to keep a very careful energy diary, noting how long I slept and how long I rested and then how much activity I undertook.

Of course my useful six hours of earned energy couldn't all be used to great feats of activity (and equally my 18 hours of rest time didn't need to be complete inactivity either), but working with the basic equation was my first step in getting out of energy debt and eventually became the system I used to stay out of debt and actually build up a positive balance in my Energy Bank.



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Start to play with the concept of the Energy Bank. Are you aware of how much you need to rest in order to be able to be able to function? Start to keep an energy diary (how much you pay in and how much you "spend").
2. Experiment with resting more and doing less for a week. How does that make you feel?
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

**It is all too
easy to live in
a permanent
energy
overdraft**

Sustainable Creativity

Practical Ways of Working with Your Energy Bank

So what am I saying here? Firstly, I'm saying you always need to pay your energy into the Energy Bank BEFORE you use it, and second, you need to be aware of what we could call your own personal Energy Exchange Rate is. Maybe it's better than my 3:1 ratio, maybe it's worse. You'll need to work it out with trial and error.

Start with a high exchange rate and work down. 7:1, if you're particularly ill might be a good place to start. That means that for every seven hours of rest you get one hour's worth of energy—that's three hours of activity each day.

Getting this right is really worthwhile. Even if you only have one hour of useful energy in every 24, you can still take steps to be sustainably creative (and over time, as you slowly get out of your energy overdraft you may well find you have more energy to spare).



Sustainable Creativity



The third thing to realise when thinking about putting energy into the Energy Bank is that energy deposits don't just need to come from inactivity and sleep. If like me you end up needing to put 18 hours of energy deposits into your Energy Bank to get six hours of activity then you can "earn" your energy in a variety of ways. Yes, sleep is a good place to start, but I've learnt over time that just sleeping to put energy in the Energy Bank isn't good for my more general well-being. I try and aim for around eight hours of sleep each day, generally split between 6-7 hours at night and 1-2 hours off napping during the day (I love napping). The other ten hours of energy earning I do in other ways.

Generally, "resting" for me includes two elements: What I'm doing physically and what I'm doing mentally.

Now, I'm sure there is a sliding scale between "resting" at one end and "doing" at the other, but basically for me resting involves

Sustainable Creativity

keeping both mental and physical activity reasonably low. Again, you'll need to work with trial and error to work out which things count as "resting" and which as "doing", but for me I find things like the following work well:

- Meditating
- Listening to the radio (I like radio drama, but gentle music works well, too)
- Some baking and cooking (I keep this simple—making soup is good for me, putting the ingredients in the bread maker and enjoying the smell of baking works well too!)
- Stroking a cat
- Knitting
- Reading (on bad days, looking at picture/art books might be a better choice than reading actual words!)
- Drawing (again I keep this simple, just a pen and sketchbook and something small to draw)
- Watching a favourite TV programme/film (I find making an



Sustainable Creativity

- event out of TV watching is better than aimless TV surfing)
- Pottering (I believe my North American friends call this "puttering." The art of moving slowly and doing a few very gentle chores)
- Sipping a cup of tea
- Sitting in the garden
- Writing long-hand

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea. Generally think "mindfulness" and you won't go far wrong. Notice some of the things I do to "earn" my energy might be considered work (drawing for instance). I'm careful here to stay very aware of how I'm feeling. Making a drawing when it is going well can be very relaxing, but if it becomes a struggle I always try to stop and come back to it in my "doing" time.

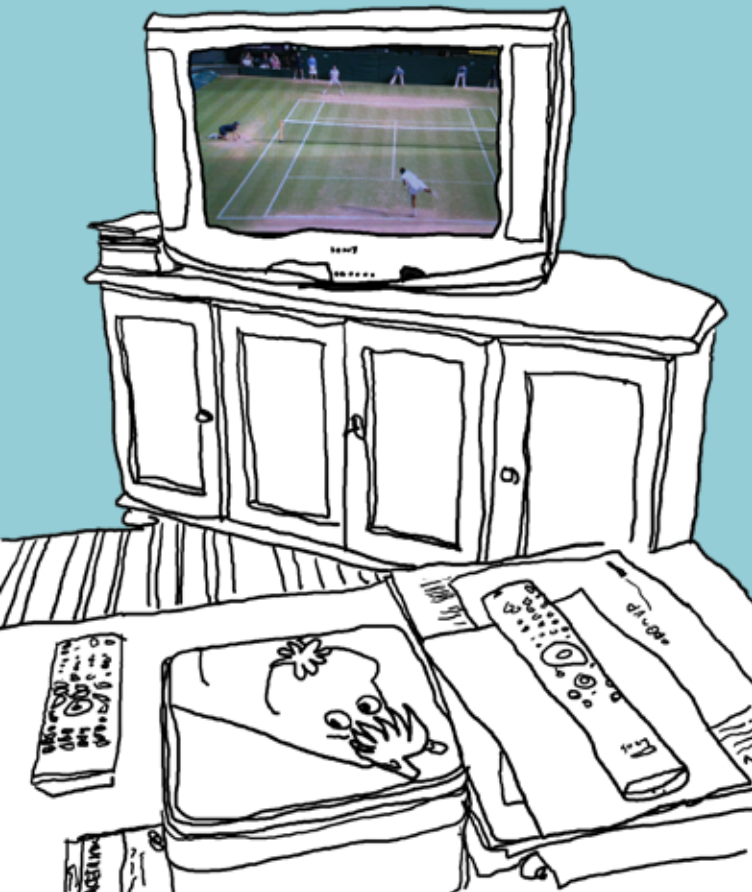
Basically you'll need to find out what works for you. Be as honest with yourself as you can. There may be things you love to do, that



Sustainable Creativity

you'd dearly love to be things that feed your energy rather than sap it, but if they don't then it's important to be aware of that. That doesn't mean you can't do them of course, just that you need to make the choice to do them in your "doing" time and not your energy earning "resting" time.

Have fun discovering what works for you.



Sustainable Creativity

energy
deposits don't
just need to
come from
inactivity and
sleep

Things to try

1. Make a list of things you enjoy to do and as far as possible split them into 1) things that use up your energy and 2) things that replenish it.
2. Think about ways you can include a mix of both in your day.
3. celebrate what you've achieved.

Sustainable Creativity

A Final Word: The Magic of Saying “No”

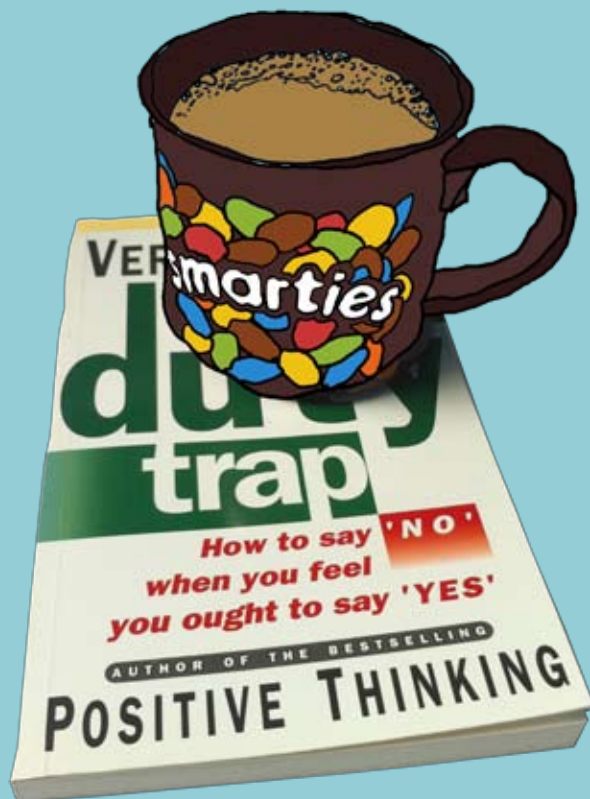
Whether you’ve come to Sustainable Creativity because you have limited time or limited energy (or both!), there’s one tool you can add to your creative arsenal that is sure to help:

Learn to say “no.”

“No” really can be a magic word, however...

Learning to say “no” is one of the most difficult aspects of dealing with limited energy. We all want to be able to help other people when we can, and many of us have been brought up to think it is rude to say “no” to people. Equally, can anyone have been on the receiving end of someone else saying “no” to them and not have felt hurt and a little rejected by it?

So, saying “no” can be fraught with complications. However, that’s not a reason to not get better at it. If you can get rid of the



Sustainable Creativity

guilt and social conditioning that make turning down someone's request for help so difficult, then you'll be rewarded with more time and energy to devote to what is important to you.

It's a little like learning to pay yourself first. Take what energy you need to get today's creative work done, and then you may well find you have the energy and goodwill to be able to do things for other people too.

Pay yourself second, and the added resentment that will come from not getting your what's important done will more than likely just mean no one is happy!



Sustainable Creativity

Things to try

1. Try to stay aware of when you'd like to say "no" to something even if you don't or can't. Do you really want to accept that invitation to visit a relative? Have you really got the energy or time to help out with someone else's project?
2. Resolve to say "no" once this month to something you don't want to do.
3. Celebrate what you've achieved.

**"No" really
can be a
magic word**

Sustainable Creativity

Summing Up

Learning to be sustainably creative is really only about two things; knowing how much energy you have available to work on your creative projects and then making that work a priority in your life.

You can be successful creatively even if you only have a little spare energy if you also remember to:

1. Work little and often.
2. Be kind to yourself and accept your limits.
3. Remember to recognise and celebrate your achievements.

Central to embracing Sustainable Creativity in your life is self-awareness and compassion. Learn to listen to the wise voice that we all have that tells us where our limits are and to treat ourselves with gentleness and understanding.

Above all, enjoy the journey!



Sustainable Creativity

Further Reading

Change Your Life Without Getting Out of Bed: The Ultimate Nap Book by SARK

How to Get Focused and Create What Matters by Dan Goodwin

How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers by Toni Bernhard

Smalltopia by Tammy Strobel

Take That Nap by Lisa Baldwin

Zen to Done by Leo Babauta





www.sustainableablycreative.net