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BY STEPHANIE ORMA

CREATIVITY

YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY

It happens to the best of us: Our creative process derails and we feel like failures. Pros like Chip Kidd, Paula Scher, Stefan Sagmeister and Robynne Raye can relate, and here they share tips for picking ourselves up when we're down.

I spoke with an extremely talented graphic designer who was struggling with a book cover design. "I'm starting to feel like I suck as a designer because I can't figure out a solution to this problem," she confided.

"Oh, thank god!" I exclaimed.

She was a bit baffled (and slightly ticked off) at my response until I explained that I literally thought I was the only graphic designer who felt this way.

Hour after hour of trying this idea and that idea and still not coming up with a feasible solution feels— well, pretty darn crappy. But now that the "yeah, I'm not alone!" party is over, the question remains: How

exactly do we get rid of this negative self-talk? For help on this matter, I went to the top—the very top: Chip Kidd, Paula Scher, Stefan Sagmeister, and Robynne Raye—to be precise.

Like all creatives, these designers have certainly felt the pressure to deliver supremely impressive ideas, exceed their clients' expectations, and solve mind-blowing design challenges. One could even argue that because of the caliber of work they've become publicly recognized for, they face even greater pressure in maintaining that sky-high bar of excellence. But rather than crumble under the intensity, these designers have

not only thrived, but they've also continued to conceive and design some of the most iconic creative work in existence today. To say they're doing something right is beyond an understatement. So what exactly is their secret? Are they completely immune to self-doubt? Have they never had the bang-your-head-on-the-desk moments when the solution just isn't coming? And most important, do they have any tips or advice that can help us through the tough design challenges sans the internal punches and bruises?

WORKING THROUGH DOUBT

It's important to note that every creative has experienced stumbling blocks along their path to achievement—even the rockstar designers. "Like most creative people I know, I am plagued with self-doubt," admits Kidd, author, editor and graphic designer, most recognized for his innovative book jacket designs. Scher, partner in renowned design firm Pentagram and creator of some of design's most iconic images, confides that she's been riddled with insecurity on nearly every design she's ever attempted. "Anything that you can name that I have designed—the Public Theater, every identity, anything you can think of—I've felt that way before I began designing," she says. Even Sagmeister, known around the world for his groundbreaking designs, typography and rockin' album covers for musicians like The Rolling Stones and Lou Reed, shares that as a young designer he questioned and doubted his talent all the time.

But rather than getting caught up in the ocean of self-loathing, these designers have continuously channeled their motivation into overcoming their weaknesses and improving their skills. Raye, co-founder of the acclaimed Seattle design firm Modern Dog and trailblazer of poster art, believes it's totally normal to question our talent and ability. "I don't think I'm naturally talented, and that's what drives me," she says. Raye has been designing her annual neighborhood Art Walk poster for 16 years and constantly self-imposes a high standard: She wants each year to be better than the previous. She concedes, "Sometimes I succeed, many times I don't. But I would much rather fail than be mediocre."

Kidd agrees: "When I was in school, I was much more interested in having my weaknesses pointed out and then working to improve them, rather than coasting on my strengths," he says. "I think just enough of it [self-doubt] is healthy, actually, just so it's not so much that it keeps you from getting any work done at all."

He adds that after 24 years (and counting) of designing book covers, he still gets work rejected, "with a fair amount of regularity." While this is frustrating, he frames it as an opportunity to make the work better rather than spiraling into negative self-talk. On the flip side, Kidd notes the opposite danger in believing everything you do is great, which inevitably leads to laziness, "designing on auto-pilot" and creating solutions that look phoned-in. "You have to constantly challenge yourself, or what's the point?" he muses.

Working hard and building design confidence with each successful project is key to finding and creating

THE WORLD'S WORST PIECE OF DESIGN ADVICE

Nearly every designer is familiar with the phrase, "You're only as good as your last piece of work." In fact, some live and breathe by this sentiment. Frankly, it's the single worst piece of design advice ever given. Although it comes from the well-intentioned place of wanting designers to exceed their absolute best on each new project, the statement is not only wrong and discouraging, it leads to self-doubt.

If the way to build design confidence is through the accretion of successful design projects over time, yet we're told that everything we've ever created in the past is irrelevant and we're only to be judged on our performance in the present, how can designers ever expect to gain confidence in their ability? The truth is, you're as good as your best piece of work because that's proof positive of what you're capable of accomplishing. And the challenge throughout your design career is to keep creating that new best piece of work (with as little self-torture as possible).

The bottom line: You gotta love it. "You know, that is the secret of everything wonderful that is accomplished by anyone," design legend Paula Scher explains. "You have to love it. You have to want to succeed enough. It makes you rise to the occasion and overcome all the fear and self-doubt. Any serious creative person who is inspirational got that way because they really, really wanted to do it. They wanted to do it in the face of all adversity, even adversity of their own making."

the right balance within yourself. Sagmeister affirms, "As I went along and had completed a couple of jobs I was reasonably happy with, I got more confident." He adds, "I don't know exactly where design confidence comes from, but I do know, like any other kind of confidence, it comes and it goes. I have seen rock stars on days where their self-confidence was low—it truly just happens to everybody."

GETTING CREATIVELY UNSTUCK

So what's the best way to get creatively unstuck when that critical monster inside your brain starts ranting and raving? Listen up, work-at-home freelancers: One suggestion these designers recommend is arming yourself with go-to creative buddies to tame the I-need-another-opinion angst. Sagmeister found his struggles with self-doubt were much more pronounced in his earlier years when he was working by himself. But that changed dramatically when he began collaborating with other like-minded creatives. Simply by having someone right there, on the spot, to brainstorm ideas with and to weigh in on the small, immediate decisions, decreased his endless cycles of doubt. Raye couldn't agree more. "When I'm really stuck, I find that talking about it with my office mates helps," she says.

DIY DESIGNER THERAPY

If you find yourself behaving like a critical, constipated, overbearing boss ("I should be able to solve this design problem right now! I suck! I'm no good at design!"), clinical psychologist Dr. Ellen Kenner has some DIY Designer Therapy tips and insights to help screw your creative head back on straight.

When we attack our own minds with negative self-talk, in essence, we're changing our mental focus. We're no longer curious and fascinated about solving the design problem. Instead, we've shunted our focus to a new line of thought: Am I adequate or not? We beat up on ourselves. It's no wonder we experience mental paralysis and can't find answers when we need them—we're attacking our own character and talents. We end up feeling inadequate, depressed, anxious, guilty, ashamed and angry with ourselves. This is certainly not a conducive working environment for fostering creativity. Dr. Kenner warns, "Motivating oneself by shame, duty, guilt and fear backfires.

"First and foremost," she says, "avoid expecting answers to just come to you without being armed with the best methods to achieve the solution." If you passively daydream and hope the answers will just come, be prepared for disappointment and frustration. The creative process requires not only time to play and fail, but also a healthy mindset:

1. Keep an accurate perspective.
If you find yourself being hyper-critical, take a short break and spend a few minutes jotting down some of your past successes. You need to keep the perspective that you're talented and that you enjoy the work.

2. Talk back to your critical voice.
If you hear yourself saying, "I suck as a designer," defend yourself! Perhaps you can tell yourself, "I don't suck. I know I'm talented. I'm a bit tired now. I need to let my mind rest since I'm trying to force an answer. Maybe I can take a short walk (or nap) and return more refreshed with new ideas."

3. Use the Best Friend Technique.
Ask yourself, "If my best friend were stuck on a design challenge, what words of encouragement would I give him or her?" Most likely, you would not look at your friend and abrasively say, "You suck. You should quit the design business." You would more likely respond, "We all have rough moments like this." You also may remind your friend of how she solved one or two difficult problems in the past. And, as mentioned above, you might suggest she take a break to refresh her mind.

4. Do a brain dump.
Sometimes we put too many demands on our subconscious and overload it. When you find that your mind is all over the map (thinking about what to cook for dinner, how to deal with your mother-in-law when she visits, what bills need to be paid and the design itself), write down all the stray thoughts.

Another piece of advice the designers offer: Step away from the work. When Scher finds herself struggling with a tough design challenge, she'll "procrastinate, read e-mails, put on lipstick, pet my dog, Google myself, do stupid chores, then attempt the design," she says. Similarly, Kidd uses what he refers to as the "crossword puzzle approach." When this crossword aficionado gets stumped on a particularly challenging clue, he'll set it aside for awhile and concentrate on something else entirely. Then, a couple hours later, when he comes back to the puzzle with a fresh head, he almost always sees answers to clues he hadn't seen before. "I think that the mind works on such things subconsciously, and design problems aren't much different. If you have the luxury of time, put whatever it is that's stumping you aside and work on something else, take a walk, go to the gym or otherwise occupy your mind. When you return to it, you'll probably see it anew," Kidd says.

Likewise, Sagmeister typically works on three or four projects simultaneously. If he's stuck on one, he doesn't stress. He simply puts it aside and switches to another. "One job that has nothing to do with the other might trigger a new thought or direction," he says.

Another technique for digging yourself out of a rut is one Sagmeister adopted from film director Steven Soderbergh. He goes to a busy café with nobody to meet and nothing to read. The only thing he brings is pen and paper. "Sitting there all by himself, all lonely," Sagmeister explains, "he finds himself looking so stupid that he shames himself into looking busy and working." The idea is to get away from all your distractions, focus your mind and just do it.

Furthermore, when he's truly shoe-in-gum stuck on a design problem, Sagmeister uses a recommendation from James W. Young, author of "A Technique for Producing Ideas." First, you get a bunch of index cards and write every single thought about the project down, one thought per card. These can be new ideas, old ideas or simply anything. Next, you spread all the cards around a big table and see if any relationships or connections emerge among the separate thoughts. Then you forget about the whole thing and the idea will strike when you least expect it. "Because it is so methodical," Sagmeister notes, "I can still use it even if I'm already in a bad mood."

When all else fails, get away—far away. To arm herself with coping skills for those super stressful times, Raye makes it a point to do something non-design related on a consistent basis. For example, while relaxing in Mexico with her toes in the sand, Raye contributed her thoughts to this article. ■

Stephanie Orma is a San Francisco-based graphic designer and writer. She's principal/creative director of Orma Design & Communications and creator of the card and gift line She's SO Creative. www.shesocreative.com; www.ormadesign.com

CHIP KIDD NEW YORK CITY www.goodisdead.com
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