

Top Tips For Creative Sessions



MAPS OF
THE MIND



— Drugs have long been linked to creativity and their novel experiences and ability to make new connections are an obvious reason why. Using psychoactive drugs can also be one of the most fun ways to do creative work.

Here I will offer a bunch of tips on how to effectively use drugs for creative work. This will include how to choose the right drug, the dose, prepare self and setting, how to navigate the session, and how to review it afterwards.

As ever, I encourage you to experiment and find what works for you. Any practice is a living evolving thing, so adjust and refine as you move forward.—

Find Your Focus

Decide what type of creative session you would like. Two things to consider:

1. What will you be working on? The general area, project, or topic you'd like to focus on.
2. On what level? What aspects or parts of that project?

Some examples:

A professional problem; how to organise, outline or approach a project

A creative project; working on a written piece, a song or piece of art

A personal project: devising a new system for your workflow, creating a gift for a friend

What is personal, professional, or creative may well overlap, so don't get hung up on them fitting neatly into certain boxes.

Find Your Field

Maybe you would like to plan a creative session but aren't sure what you would like your area of focus to be. Here are some questions to consider:

- What would you like to have a creative approach on?
- What would you like to have some creative thinking about?
- Why is this important to you?
- What would you like to create?
- What creative project are you working on?

...But Stay Flexible

Retain a level of flexibility. What comes up in a session generally turns out to be relevant. Insights and ideas that are less obviously related may spring up and contribute to original intention in the long run.

When I intend to work on something specific but in the session my mind goes elsewhere, I go with that. It's something inside that is asking for attention. After I have reached some type of resolution with more pressing matters, I am usually able to redirect to my original intention and make progress on the creative project.

The higher the dose, the higher the level of flexibility needed. More on dose below.

Select Your Substance

It is possible to use all kinds of substances for creative work. This includes classic psychedelics like LSD, psilocybin and 2-CB, and non-classics like MDMA, ketamine and marijuana. You might even branch out and use the likes of kratom or yerba mate.

When selecting your substance, consider:

- your intention and what you will be working on
- the subjective effects of the drug
- your relationship with the drug

Your relationship with a drug includes what associations you have with it as well as the subjective effects that you experience. Different drugs affect us all differently, so be honest about how a drug makes you feel. Don't accept ideas of how you are expected to feel if they don't match your personal experience.

Influencing factors will include your prior experiences and the information you've digested. For example, if you associate a certain drug with partying, it might not be the best fit for serious creative work.

Different drugs will suit different creative purposes. Some are more suitable when your work requires steady hands or a certain level of coordination. For example, playing musical instruments or clay sculpting, as opposed to generating ideas or thinking.

Select Your Substance

If the problem has been that there is too much pressure involved with solving a problem, then a drug like MDMA might be more suitable. MDMA reduces the amygdala response, and this makes one feel more relaxed, accepting and therefore open-minded. It could also be that the emotional detachment that can come from a substance like ketamine is beneficial. Used as an anaesthetic in medicine, the distance from one's ordinary sense of self can allow one to look at problems in a different way. For myself, ketamine provides a heightened sense of reality when imagining future scenarios. This can be used to mentally 'rehearse' difficult situations, like the Stoic practice of negative visualisation.

Some general trends here, (but, find what works for you):

Marijuana - music, idea generation

LSD - logical problem solving

You should also consider what is not suitable for your purposes.

Shadow work often comes up when I use psilocybin so I prefer to use other substances for creative work.

All that said, remember that subjective effects are not fixed according to substance: set and setting influences them too.

Define The Dose

The dose should be well calibrated

It needs to be low enough that you are able to maintain your attention and use the tools relevant to your task. Just as if with alcohol or coffee, too high a dose will impair your ability to function optimally.

However, the dose should be high enough for your mind to be working or stimulated in novel ways. Your aim may just be that the activity becomes more of a good time or fun exploration than 'work'.

If you want to work specifically on something and don't want your mind to wander off, use lower doses. It is easier to decide a task and stick to it with micro or mini doses.

The higher the dose, the higher the level of flexibility you'll need as to where the session goes. More pressing issues may emerge that need to be dealt with. For your first creative sessions, set up so that you are able to remain flexible and there is not any pressure on yourself to achieve any specific result by the end. It's fine to prepare to work on a specific problem but once the session starts, be prepared to let go of that and follow the flow where it leads.

If you want flexibility on the dose, start low and prepare boosters ahead of time so you have the option to go deeper later.

Learning your functioning doses will take time, trial and error. Keeping a [drug journal](#) will be of help here.

Clear The Way

Clear schedule, clear mind, clear space.

Clear Schedule

Reserve undisturbed time. Block out enough time as you would if you were doing deep work. Allow yourself the ability to give your full attention to the task. Phone off, no emails, messages or other distractions.

Clear Mind

Make time for mental and emotional [clearing](#) beforehand.

A creative block may well be related to other areas in your life. As personal growth blogger Steve Pavlina has noted from his readers, when improving and moving forward in one area of life, solutions often pop up in another area. So unblock as much as you can on an emotional level.

On the day of the session itself, meditation and exercise can help to bring a clear mind.

Clear Space

Clear the physical space as you would if you were doing any type of focused work. Remove distractions and situations which may bring about confusion. Switch your phone off and put it out of sight.

Set The Setting

The setting should be optimised to your creative work for the session.

Workspaces should be:

- Well lit
- Comfortable
- Well laid out in terms of equipment

Make sure all working areas are sufficiently lit. For example, if you are drawing by hand, make sure you can see your work clearly. I usually like to keep the room at low light with the dosing and working [stations](#) lit by candles or lamps.

Warning: Take extreme caution when using candles and mixing with drugs.

Equip Yourself

Have the tools you'll need available. This will really depend on what it is you are working on and how you intend to work on it.

Often the best tools are simply a pen and paper. Set up so that you can catch ideas and they don't fly by to be forgotten.

Large sheets of paper can be useful. Ideas can come up in very non linear ways, so it's nice to be able to have a large space to throw ideas out on to. You can connect and put them in order later. The big open space is also good for brainstorming. You can rule large A1 sheets so you have different spaces for different themes. This makes reviewing and connecting ideas later easier.

You may also like to make audio or video recordings during the session that you can watch or listen back to later. Bear in mind that this requires a more lengthy review process afterwards.

When starting out, keep it simple and go analog as much as possible. Although elaborate setups and gizmos might seem appealing, dealing with technical things can be especially difficult and confusing when high. Technical problems can often derail the course of a session and the higher the dose, the more likely this is.

Once your [shamanic self](#) begins to stabilise and become more functional under the influence of different substances, you will become better able to handle more complex tools and technical systems.

Equip Yourself

When using technical equipment, it is of key importance to prepare as much as possible beforehand.

When I'm working in my home studio, my guitar is tuned beforehand and the project is open and ready on the computer. All sound levels are set and cables connected and ready. Sound settings are left open so I can tweak levels or switch between microphone and guitar when necessary. I have a warm up spotify playlist queued up and ready to jam along to.

Everything is ready so when the time comes, I can simply pick up and play.

Put Everything in its Place

Having a designated [place](#) for everything can help to remove confusion and waste time looking around for things. This can happen surprisingly often when you're high. OK, maybe it's not that surprising.

It can be helpful to set up so that at the beginning of each session you are able to say exactly where every important item that you will use is, without looking. When you want to write something down, you know exactly where your pen and notepad are. Wandering around looking for tools wastes valuable session time.

If you want to smoke marijuana, you know precisely where the pipe, lighter, and weed are. They are all in their specific place in the dosing station. The same applies to other things like headphones or plectrums.

This approach is about streamlining your process. It not only optimizes your workflow, but the structure and predictability it provides allows you to take larger doses than you otherwise might have. This will enable you to go deeper into states of feeling and thinking while still remaining functional.

“Chaos is the law of nature, order is the dream of man.”

As the session progresses, things will end up out of their places. Things get messy, it happens. Entropy is a natural force, and putting things in order is fighting nature.

The wilder the session, the more scattered things will get. That's OK. Strike the right balance between the convenience and the stress received from thinking about having everything in its place. Where this balance lies will be different for everyone. With trial and error, you'll find your sweet spot.

Start Your Work Beforehand

Do some research on your project or problem and develop a connection to it ahead of time. Bring it to mind and mull it over when cooking or walking. The subconscious works effortlessly compared to our conscious mind, so plant the problem there and allow it to start working ahead of the session.

You may also want to develop your technical skill outside of sessions so that you have more ability for your expression. Writing a song when inspiration hits is a nice idea, but if you've never played a chord before, picking up a guitar for the first time in a session and expecting a masterpiece to flow out is unrealistic.

Allow For Flexibility

Allow for a period of personal content to come up and be worked out at the start of the session.

If this happens, you might journal or you may just be with certain feelings. After a period of personal work, the session should transition nicely. You can then find your creative station and go where the flow wants to go. Whilst in this flow, the direction may change many times. You will have to decide how you want to steer the course and guide your exploration.

For example, you might be halfway through a sentence when an idea piques your interest and calls for your attention. You can decide then if you want to go with it or stay with the original line of thought. Over time you might mix and match open ended free flowing exploration with more structure and limited areas of focus.

Take Breaks

As with working on anything, it's important to step away from the problem from time to time. Don't be too needy with the solution. Loosening the grip allows for flexibility. There is often a dynamic of push and pull. Pushing and working towards something, then letting it go. That is often when the solution comes. This is why breakthroughs often come to us when we're not actively working on them, like in the shower, or going for a walk. If you're Newton, in the bathtub.

Stepping away from the problem during the session may seem counterintuitive, but in the intensified process facilitated by psychoactive drugs, it's akin to going out and taking a walk during your work day. You'll return to the problem with a fresher perspective.

Keep a healthy flow during a session by moving around or changing things up. Maybe lie down and listen to some relaxing music. Or get some fresh air, drink a cup of tea, and stretch. Check in with yourself, use the bathroom when needed and stay hydrated. Be kind and take care of yourself.

Trigger Yourself

“Stop thinking about artworks as objects, and start thinking about them as triggers for experiences.” - Brian Eno

Consider having carefully selected items or pieces of art around the space. If you place them in locations where they will catch your eye or where you will pass them on your way to the bathroom, for example, you can use them as a reminder. When you encounter them, they act as triggers to provoke thoughts or connections to specific ideas or themes. For example, you might have an image of an artistic hero. If you glimpse Hendrix in a music session, you might consider, what would Jimi do? You might be encouraged to experiment with new sounds or feel inspired to use the wah wah pedal. If you are in the company of Huxley, you might try to write in a literal, observational, almost scientific style. In this way you can infuse your space with influences and channel them consciously.

Dress for the Best

Take thought to the clothing that is best suited to your session. You may consider:

- Functionality
- Comfort
- Meaning
- Style

Different clothes can elicit different feelings in ourselves. Consider how you want to feel for your session.

I always wear my long sleeved Ty Segall top when recording guitars. I got it at a show of his which was one of my all time favourite concerts. It reignited my passion for music and thumping guitars. It's also one of the most comfortable items of clothing I own. Stepping out of the shower and putting it on at the start of a session is part of my ritual and starts getting me in the mood to shred.

Maybe you have a favourite item of clothing or something that is meaningful in your own way. Perhaps some socks that were a gift from someone, or something else that symbolises a value that is important to you.

Select Music Mindfully

As well as setting the mood, music can help direct the session.

Music can give a flavour to the types of ideas that come up. I listened to MC5 on a previous MDMA session, and the sounds of the ranting countercultural proto-punks gave a passionate revolutionary vibe to the ideas that came up.

A couple more examples:

- Chimes, bells and chants for a spiritual session
- Beats and grooves for a driving flowing session

You will want to find something that gives you the right level of stimulation. Too little and there's no fuel for the fire. Too much and it may overly dominate your attention.

Unless you want music to be the focus of a session, it generally helps to think of it as a backdrop. Familiar or catchy music may be distracting - if you know a song really well, it may lead you to sing or tap along, and this will pull your focus away from your work. It might also be that music with any kind of understandable lyrics is distracting. This can, however, change depending on the substance, and certain tracks might actually be chosen specifically because of their lyrical content. Words can be read through a youtube lyrics video, or they can be printed off ahead of time and read whilst listening.

Music is very subjective so as with anything, try different things out. You may like jazz, you might like rock. You can make notes in your journal on different selections or simply consider how they make you feel.

Select Music Mindfully

For creative sessions, you don't need preset playlists for the full arc of the trip like you might use with other styles of sessions. It can be enough to have a couple albums in mind, or a general playlist or bank of music based on a specific theme, mood, or emotion. Having a 'chill' selection ready is advisable in case the experience is becoming too intense. This can also be used during the onset, and then once the effects fully land, you can move on to whatever you're in the mood for or have primed yourself to explore.

Know Your Creative Time Zone

I work best in idea generation sessions after sunset. There is something about drawing the curtains, shutting out the world and working by low light that gets my juices flowing.

You might work better in the morning, you may work better at night. Find your creative time zone and use it.

Work with Others

Friends or colleagues can bring new perspectives to a problem. You might bring your problem to a friend and ask them questions concerning your situation. Or you might do a round robin, mastermind style session. You can even do a warm up session without any substances to brainstorm and figure out how you will handle your psychedelic creative session. I got the notes for this section from one such sober session with two friends, asking them questions and taking notes.

When working with others, it can be helpful to think through any possible [agreements](#) and guidelines for interaction beforehand. Consider how you might divide roles and responsibilities. Who will take notes? Who will control the music? Who will ask questions? These tasks can also often be collaborative.

This kind of thing can also be done in a more spontaneous way, but keep in mind that this can lead to certain people unintentionally dominating the session. For example, some people may end up having more influence on the music. The reason for this might be as simple as the host knowing how the sound system works, or the music being played through a certain person's device which has a passcode lock on it. It is also common that more extroverted people will have more input to a group collaborative task.

You can also do a session on your own, and get feedback from others as part of your review.

Review Your Work

After the session itself, conduct a review to sift through your ideas. This is to see what holds up in the sober light of day and what were the crazy ramblings of a person high on drugs. The review acts as an important part of the integration process.

Different substances will deactivate different filters. In general, psychedelics will allow a wider spectrum of information to flow in and this means more ideas: more good ideas, but also more throwaway ideas. In general I've found that the insights that come from classic psychedelics hold up afterwards, and ideas from non classics need more careful scrutiny.

A good general rule of thumb is:
Get ideas high, work them out sober.

Sometimes the Solution is Ordinary

It may be that the answer to your problem is very straightforward or ordinary. This might be disappointing if you were expecting something exotic, a huge perspective shift, or a radical breakthrough.

Your next steps may require a fair amount of tedious work or an exercise of commitment or patience. If you know you want to learn and develop a certain skill, this might mean signing up for a class or workshop or setting up a regular practice schedule. The solution may mean taking some basic steps like sending emails or doing administrative work.

Your smarts will be required in making a conscious decision about how to approach this process and the next steps. Utilise other basics of long term integration: develop mindset and an intuition for when to seek support.

Mismatched Expectations

You may experience a feeling of disappointment if you have a results oriented mindset and feel that you didn't come away with anything concrete from your session. It can be helpful to view a session as a success if you learned just one thing. You can always find one takeaway or lesson. Even if it is something as small as a tweak on how to set up for sessions in the future, that counts.

It might feel like what happened hasn't helped or contributed to your process at all, but some problems may require you to hit a wall before you are able to move forward. Escalating problems might bring up a sense of desperation or crisis. Though uncomfortable, this can force us to think in new ways and consider other possibilities. In this way, a crisis can be seen as an opportunity. Sometimes a breakdown is what is needed before we are able to advance.

Final Thoughts

I hope that this guide has given you a base to work from and some inspiration about how to develop and individualise your approach. The best approach will be personalised to you, your character and your unique situation. This will require your creativity to adapt your approach to best fit your unique situation and needs. You might even plan a creative session to think about the best ways to personalise a creative practice. Too meta? OK time to wrap up.

I wish you the very best in bringing your unique character and creations into the world!

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Special Thanks to Tim B.



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