

BENEFITS OF BEING A BUG

By Leo Cardez

Do people call you a bug? Do you feel like you stand out or simply don't fit in? Good for you. A body of social-science research suggests that being a social reject, an outcast, or just plain weird can spark remarkable creativity.

Upon release to the community ex-offenders feel like strangers in a new world, but that may have some psychological benefits. As ex-cons we're often relegated to the fringes of society -- social pariahs -- forced to be more creative and persistent in our efforts to overcome and adjust. These are traits many of us honed in prison through side hustles and finessing of guards, teachers, and counselors. There are definite benefits to being an outcast.

In study after study its been proven that rejection and creativity are related. Social rejects do better at creative problem solving and out-of-the-box (aka non-linear) thinking; with an important caveat: the advantage was only seen by participants who already saw themselves as different. It seems feeling like an outcast uncorks the mind and allows one to think more freely. Translation: embrace your weirdness -- it's what makes you special.

But, I think it's important to step back and see a wider perspective. See, weird or outcast adults usually started as weird or outcast kids. In the book, *The Price of Greatness* by Brown University professor, Arnold M. Ludwig noted a common thread between eminent writers and artists: they were considered odd or peculiar as children and described (generously) as "different" as adults (most note they felt isolated as children). A child that was socially awkward in school may have a history of learning how to overcome challenges and barriers oftentimes in new, creative ways. I'm reminded of a classic movie scenario from the 80's and 90's where a nerd must overcome a bully. This experience is a deep, difficult social trauma for a child to overcome alone, but the success teaches the nerdy kid how to think creatively to persuade or manipulate people or circumstances to their advantage. Is this possibly why the CIA clandestine services actively recruits those that have had challenging childhoods? Have they learned that these individuals are more adept for their needs: high-level critical thinking, strong mental fortitude, ability to overcome situations through out-of-the-box reasoning, et cetera? In a word: probably.

Unusual or difficult childhoods aren't the only thing that can spur creativity. Being considered weird or different in whatever your culture (including, prison culture) one lives can enhance an element of creativity called, "integrative complexity." Could this be one of the factors that contribute to why so many inmates seemingly discover their artistic talent behind bars? The science is compelling.

Psychology predicts people on the periphery of society tend to feel freer to innovate and change social norms. Outsiders are less concerned with what's "in" -- so they have more lee-way to experiment. In the simplest terms, one could say, we just don't give a shit. I've often said, as a rebuttal to any possible future critique, "I'm already in prison, what more can they do to me?" And it's not just creativity and non-linear thinking that's improved by embracing what makes you strange.

Weirdos have been shown to handle uncertainty well and excel at reconciling conflicting information. Olga Khazan author of, "Weird: The Power of Being an Outsider in an Insider World" reports, "...people who don't fit neatly into a particular group have been found, over and over, to perform better...." Studies reveal a better understanding of various perspectives, better communicators overall and especially good at finding solutions to conceptual problems. A key finding is that these benefits can happen whenever one's life is upended and reset in an unusual frame of mind -- say, for example, when you're snatched from the streets and your normal life to live on planet prison. An existence that is beyond words to accurately convey -- the right words have yet to be created.

Many inmates have had to endure multiple "shifts in frame of mind" through multiple stretches incarcerated. Science theorizes that each of these unusual experiences can boost creative potential; and with each boost more likely to experience break-throughs and contemplate big ideas. I can attest to this from both my personal experiences and what I've witnessed while incarcerated. Inmates are hands down the most creative group of people I have ever known (and I worked closely with creative directors from elite global advertising agencies for almost a decade before my arrest). I've seen inmates create whole new languages, crafts, tools, and inventions that would boggle the mind while living in an ultra limited environment. They would put MacGyver to shame.

At first, I believed this creativity and resourcesfullness was simply because we had more time to contemplate and create or because, as the saying goes, "necessity is the mother of invention," but now I realize it's something deeper. What was meant to harm us, may very well be helping us.

But, of course, too much of anything can be a bad thing. If you keep coming in and out of prison just the trauma and drama of navigating the criminal justice system can use up all your mental capacity. You're not enjoying your newfound creativity when you're worried about a dozen guys waiting to stomp your ass in the shower. Also, don't lie to yourself now and say, hey, I'm special because I'm a con or ex-con; I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that, if you do feel weird or different either here in prison or on the outside upon release: that's ok. Actually, that's better than ok. That's good. When you reframe your thinking -- a process called cognitive reappraisal about what makes you an outlier it can help you manage the adversity that it often accompanies. And lastly, reframing what makes you different as being what gives you strength can, ultimately, make you happier and isn't that really what we're all after?

- L. C. -

2. Uncertainty - Sketches

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