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SOUND MIND

Shower power

By Carey Goldberg, Globe Staff, 6/10/2003

I was sudsing up the other day when I had a great idea for a column: Why is it that so many great ideas come to us in the shower? And if you want to have more great ideas, is there a way to do it without ending up with skin wrinkled as a prune?

My initial premise quickly sprang some leaks. No neuroscientist or psychologist I contacted had heard of any hard data on the inspirational power of the shower.

But there has long been talk of the three B's for inspiration -- bed, bath, and bus -- said professor Robert W. Weisberg, director of Temple University's Graduate Program in Brain, Behavior and Cognition. The argument goes, he said, that in a half-sleeping or daydreaming state, ideas can pop effortlessly into your mind.

He doesn't buy it, himself. Weisberg argues that tales of highly creative people getting ideas in the shower reflect little about the experience of showering and a whole lot more about those people's propensity for prolonged, intense interest.

"I think the crucial thing is that the people who make creative advances are always thinking about what they're working on," he said.

The key to generating ideas, he said, is that "You need something that catches you and grabs you and then you have to keep working on it. Don't expect it to just happen in the shower one day."

Michael S. Gazzaniga, a neuroscientist at Dartmouth, added that inspiration may sometimes seem like it arrives from nowhere, but in fact it can come from an earlier experience or a crossover concept from another field.

For example, he said in an e-mail, "Gutenberg invented the single-letter print stamp and couldn't figure out how to make it useful for full-page printing. Then one weekend he visited a country inn that had a wine press. Voila!"

Still, though the reports may be purely anecdotal, shower power seems widespread. Warren Edwardes, CEO of Delphi Risk Management Ltd. in London and a specialist on financial product innovation, reports that his best ideas seem to come in the shower, while driving, and, best of all, while listening to stultifying speeches at conferences.

"Perhaps the secret to idea-time is to generate idle-time," he e-mailed, "maybe in the bus or train looking out of the window; maybe jogging in the park or on an exercise bike; certainly not in one of those oh-so-contrived brainstorming sessions."

And why might idle time lead to idea time? Allen Bragdon, co-author of the upcoming "Building Mental Muscle," suggests that there may be special advantages to performing rote tasks, like showering or shaving.

Physical tasks, he notes, are known to reduce stress. And stress "decreases the ability to focus on anything except the source of the stress."

It helps to have that sort of singular focus when, for example, being charged by a musk ox. But for productive thought, stress reduction can help.

It may also help, he and others said, that a shower offers a sort of license to daydream, which could allow you to consolidate bits of data that have been floating around in your mind.

So how to get more of the shower effect? Bragdon recommends routine physical activity, like working in the garden, painting a boat, or going for a bike ride, all for long enough "for your brain to start gathering up the ends of the yarn."

Of course, there is a whole innovation industry that works on questions like these for business leaders, and another whole flavor of psychology that studies creativity.

A new text called *The International Handbook on Innovation* fills 1,208 pages with chapters like *The Neurophysiological Nature of Innovation* and *The Effect of Mood on Creativity in the Innovative Process*.

But though the field itself seems to be booming, my own particular shower theory still has some skeptics.

Asks Harvard psychologist Stephen M. Kosslyn: "Are you sure we really do get great ideas in the shower? Or do we just *think* our ideas are great?"

He continued, in an e-mail: "My suspicion is that in this situation we are distracted from linear, critical thinking, being absorbed (so to speak) by taking the shower. Our thoughts wander; we engage in "divergent thinking." And this leads us to the unexpected, to rather remote associations. And because we are not in critical thinking mode, we often find the unexpected more interesting than is actually warranted . . ."

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