

On getting to know your own inner workings



Comedian, writer, and podcast host Pat Regan discusses managing your brain's creative output, running for clarity, and the joy of making yourself laugh.

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As told to Madeline Howard, 2231 words.

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You write for a TV show, you have a podcast, and you perform stand-up. How does your creative process change when you're working with each medium?

Hacks is my first TV writing job, and I really wanted to write for TV for such a long time. Now that I have the job, it's interesting because I don't always feel the most creative outside of the writer's room. I feel like there's a finite amount of creative energy that you have, especially if you're me, and it gets really finite sometimes.

There was recently a six-week period where I was going to stand-up tour gigs every weekend and then working on *Hacks* during the day. It was hard. I'm always trying to figure out how to wrangle my brain and get it to do what I want it to do. For those six weeks I was really bummed, beating myself up. The dream is to have your own projects and your own show one day, and you feel like there's work that you want to do outside of your other work to try to develop those ideas. I get hard on myself when I feel like I'm not doing that work. I feel I'm sounding so stupid. Leave that in. [laughs]

Whatever I'm doing a lot of, my brain starts to work in a way where that's how it thinks. So when I'm writing on *Hacks*, I start thinking a lot in Deborah Vance jokes [laughs], or in things that Deborah Vance would say. When I'm doing lots of stand-up, I think in stand-up jokes. For instance, when the pandemic happened, I literally couldn't think of any stand-up jokes, and then even once shows started again, I still didn't think of any jokes for months because my brain had to get used to it again.

I'm not really the kind of stand-up that can go to a coffee shop with like the tiniest notebook you've ever seen in your life and sit down and write jokes with an expensive pen. I have to just be on stage and think of things. Two weekends ago, I was in Chicago and I did six hours of performing. You get so bored of your own material that you start to jazz it up a little bit. You think of more things to say where it becomes like an actual joke that you can tell, which is cool [laughs].

I feel like my life has been a lifelong process of figuring out what circumstances I need to set around my brain for it to have the creative output I would like it to have, and I'm still always kind of tweaking that formula. I do know that I have to have time on my own to let my brain get bored, and then it starts to think of ideas to entertain itself.

You're an avid long-distance runner. Does running help your creativity? What do you think about when you run?

Often when I'm running I just day dream. I have a rich inner world. I have the silliest little fantasies that will

start to play in my head in the shower, driving around, running. Any activities where your brain goes on autopilot, I start to have these very involved and detailed day dreams or fantasies. It's not cut-and-dry, where I'm on a run and this light bulb goes off, and then I come home and I have an idea. But there's something about running that unclenches my brain a little bit. I get very anesthetized by the world around me. My brain starts to feel cobwebby. Running is something that feels good for whatever reason. I even notice that when I run before work, I feel more productive and like I contribute more. It gives me more mental energy.

Another one of your interests is reality TV, particularly of the *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, or *Real Housewives* variety. What does reality TV, or TV in general, add to your life?

It's a place to unwind. It's a place to shut my brain off. With reality TV, even though I know it's heavily produced, you do see real people in these certain situations that are kind of complex. Even if it is being produced, they're still a real life human being that knows they're being perceived, and they have to make decisions in that context, and everyone wants to come off good. That's very interesting to me. I just rewatched the entirety of *The Real Housewives of New York* and it's, like, the funniest thing that's ever been created. I get such joy out of it. I think it influences my comedy.

When I see my *Hacks* bosses make this show that they created and is their special project, it inspires me to do something like that on my own. I'm trying to watch more scripted shows because that also makes me feel inspired. Scripted shows inspire me more than reality shows, but reality shows tickle me more. In a weird way, I think reality shows help with stand-up more, and scripted shows make me think I can write a scripted thing of my own.

What does your day-to-day creative process look like? Do you have a space that you go to do creative work? How do you get yourself to be creative?

It changes based on how good of a boy I'm being. Ideally, it could look like: I journal, run, come home, work. With *Hacks*, because I work LA hours, it starts at one, and it ends late enough in the day where I'm like, I'm actually not doing anything for the rest of the day [laughs].

Sometimes I can get my brain to go in this real hyper-focused place when I'm excited about something and the ball is rolling where it feels like it's flowing out and I can just really like working on it. And then sometimes there's a stoppage and I go through times where—maybe it's depression—I can't really get out of bed. I go to the things I have to go to, then outside of that, I don't do anything. I eat, and I watch TV, and I don't work on anything, and I kind of numb myself until I'm almost happy where I'm feeling in my life. I need to be in a place where I feel comfortable engaging with myself and sometimes I can't for some reason.

I am a creature of routine and I do my best when I have a set routine. I've gone through phases in my life where I have done that and I am the most creative. I feel like I am years out from the last time I was in that place. But routines or rituals I've had in the past have been waking up and immediately journaling for 20 to 30 minutes, running, and then sitting at a desk space that's at least somewhat neat, which is a huge struggle for me. I don't keep my space neat very often. And then just having a mindset of saying, "I'm gonna start and work on this for at least 20 minutes and then I don't have to work on it after that." Sometimes I just stop after 20 minutes and sometimes I'll want to keep going. Sometimes my brain feels like cats that are all wandering in different directions and you have to get them all to sit in a circle drawn in chalk on the floor. And sometimes I just don't even try and sometimes I do try.

When you say journaling, do you mean free-writing?

It's like morning page vibes. It's not interesting or anything, but it just gets the wheels turning. So humiliating, but in the new year, I think I want to do *The Artist's Way* in earnest again, which I've done twice. Both times I've stopped when they wanted me to be off my phone. I always make it to that media deprivation week and then I'm like, "Okay, maybe I'm done for this time." But I really want to fully do it, because it does help me. I go through long stretches of consuming to avoid, and I have to break free of that.

What do you think are the elements of a good podcast like *Seek Treatment*? It seems like you don't plan what

you're going to say in advance on the podcast. Is there something to be said for allowing yourself to be off-the-cuff and non-judgmental when it comes to putting creative work out there?

At the end of the day, it's like, it is just talking, you have to admit [laughs]. I think it feels best when you're making yourself laugh. Anytime I'm creating anything my goal is always just to make myself laugh. I think that when you are doing that is when you feel the best. You just have to entertain yourself and be as yourself as possible.

I don't listen to podcasts that much, and if I do it will be like true crime. Obviously what makes my podcast successful and true crime successful are very different things. When I'm doing the podcast, the creative vibe is almost morning pages, but make it talk. You freak out when you haven't made yourself laugh for 10 minutes, because you're like, "Well if I'm not laughing, then no one else has." But for me it's just opening your mouth and you start talking and you hope something funny comes out.

What role does collaboration play in your work? What are the benefits of collaboration when it comes to creativity?

Hacks is the thing I do with the most group writing, which is a learned skill. It's very helpful in that there are lots of conversations like, "I think it should be something like this." Or, "The bad version of what I think is this." And when we don't have the dialogue, we say what kind of vibe we're searching for.

What's hard is I have separate writing projects just on my own and I get envious of my bosses who are three showrunners. When you're alone with a project, honestly, the hardest thing is that you're alone with it. It's scary. You just wish you had someone to be scared with.

I think there's so much value in being able to ask, "Is that stupid?" And having someone earnestly reply. Because sometimes when you're alone with it, and you're not sure if it's stupid, it can be like a four-day-long paralysis of not being sure if what you just thought was stupid or good. Whereas when you have another person, sometimes they don't know either, but often they'll have an opinion on it. And that could be a nice confidence thing, where we're like, "Yeah we both think this is good, so let's move forward down this path."

Who are your creative inspirations and what do you think makes for a satisfactory creative life?

The creative things that appeal to me are doing stand-up and being good at it, writing prose like creative non-fiction, and writing for television.

For standup, I'm very inspired by Meg Stalter. There's nothing like watching her. I was never a stand-up comedy kid or nerd growing up. I had other concerns. I don't have anything that's like, "When I grew up I thought this was funny." But for some reason when I was growing up I watched Jessi Klein's Comedy Central special. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. I still go back and revisit it. That's a role model moment for me. Sometimes I try to be Jessi Klein on stage. Often in stand-up you can get to a place where you're like, "Why am I doing this?" And then you remember the time a stand up gave you so much joy and made you laugh.

For creative non-fiction, I really like David Sedaris, which is such a throwaway answer sometimes. I just want to be able to say things that are funny and also true. I write a lot of prose for myself, which I don't share, and it's satisfying to me in another way. I'd like my prose to feel funny. But also, I was a very sad and scared child. I like to think about that part of my life, and talk about what it was like for me in a way that is truly just for me.

Creatively, anyone who's ever made something that feels really honest to their experience is inspiring to me. I love Michaela Coel and *I May Destroy You*. That felt like such a testament to her lived experience that was very compelling to watch and also entertainment. I think you could say the same thing about Lena Dunham and *Girls*. That was an inspiration to me. This is so embarrassing, but I really look up to my bosses Paul Downs, Jen Statsky, and Lucia Aniello. I hope that's not cheugy to say [laughs].

Pat Regan Recommends:

Bad Sisters- Brett Baer Dave Finkel Sharon Horgan (Television series)

The Real Housewives of New York - Scott Dunlop (Reality television series)

The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron (Book)

Comedy Central Presents: Jessi Klein - (Comedy set)

Naomi Ekperigin - (Comedian)

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