

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting on a large, plush orange sofa. The man is lying back, looking towards the camera, while the woman is seen from behind, looking at him. The title 'Trick the BLOCK!' is overlaid in large white letters.

Trick the BLOCK!

Author and personal development trainer **Robbie Steinhouse** offers some tips from psychology to help overcome writer's block

If writers are allowed to use their imagination in writing – what stops us from also using our imagination to manage our emotions and boost our creativity?

Sometimes writer's block has a positive purpose, telling us to rest or pause for a while. Other times, it requires discipline to press on even if we are not blessed by a visit from the muse that day. At those times, I have found it useful to use my experience in personal development upon myself – effectively becoming my own coach. In this article I hope to share some practical suggestions that have worked for me.

Using awareness to manage my emotional state

I have learnt that the 'process' of how I structure my inner-words, rather than the 'content' of those words, is useful in-of-itself. CBT – cognitive behavioural therapy – asks us to notice how certain words negatively affect our emotional state. Overgeneralising words such as *always*, *never*, *must*, *should* or *can't*, inevitably move me into a negative state. The psychologist Albert Ellis also broke this down into three unhelpful 'musts':

1. I must do well or else I am worthless.
2. Others must treat me well or they are awful and should be punished.
3. Life must be easy and fair or I am desperately unhappy.

I find number 3 most relatable. I often say to myself during a time when I have writer's block that the effort involved in writing feels huge and far from easy. Why am I doing something so tough, when

life is meant to be easy and fun? CBT has taught me to replace this with a more useful and truthful thought: 'Writing can be tough at times and immensely satisfying at others. Put this into perspective and stop catastrophising!'

Mindfulness

However, to be able to make all these judgements about the type of thinking I am doing, I also need to become a detached observer of my thoughts – that is where the skill of mindfulness comes in. Otherwise, I become fully immersed in my thoughts and unaware that I am actually thinking. I practice mindfulness by counting my breaths; after a while, my thoughts interrupt me and I then lose the count. I become aware that this has happened and then deliberately return to the counting. That is mindfulness in a nutshell: focus, distraction, awareness of the distraction and then refocus. This practice has helped me become more disciplined about my thinking – I can choose to either remain present or allow more creative thoughts to come to the fore. I don't have to be lost in thought.

The 'why', the 'who', and the 'how'

Friedrich Nietzsche famously said, 'He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.' I write because I want to impart my knowledge and make a difference to peoples' lives. That is my purpose or my 'why'. I have also learnt that it is hugely important to differentiate between the 'who' and the 'why'. When I was sixteen, my

teachers told me I had talent at science rather than art or English. I therefore identified as a scientist and importantly created an identity as not a writer. Part of writer's block for me has been an ongoing struggle with 'imposter syndrome'. Nietzsche's saying provided me with the keys to escape this trap. Writing is also a capability – a skill that can be enhanced by practice. So, feeling I am not a writer is a confusion between a belief about my identity (the 'who') and a belief about my capabilities (the 'how'). I find these distinctions helpful. I have written enough to know that I do have a capability as a writer, so a negative belief about who I am is then not only a choice but also puzzling. To continue believing that I am somehow not allowed to identify as a writer is clearly self-destructive. I, therefore, gave myself permission to 'be a writer'. I decided to stop undermining my sense of purpose by identifying with memories of erroneous judgements made by my teachers.

Who is the who?

The Transactional Analysis model breaks down the human psyche into the following three component parts: the inner parent, adult and child (based on Freud's superego, ego and id). I believe that self-talk is not just coming from 'me' but coming from a 'part of me'. When I hear myself say a phrase like, 'I can't do it!' I try and be aware of these words and then replace them with something like, 'My inner child feels he can't do it; my inner