The Science of Why You Have Great Ideas in the Shower

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If you’ve ever emerged from the shower or returned from walking your dog with a clever idea or a solution to a problem you’d been struggling with, it may not be a fluke.

Rather than constantly grinding away at a problem or desperately seeking a flash of inspiration, research from the last 15 years suggests that people may be more likely to have creative breakthroughs or epiphanies when they’re doing a habitual task that doesn’t require much thought—an activity in which you’re basically on autopilot. This lets your mind wander or engage in spontaneous cognition or “stream of consciousness” thinking, which experts believe helps retrieve unusual memories and generate new ideas.

“People always get surprised when they realise they get interesting, novel ideas at unexpected times because our cultural narrative tells us we should do it through hard work,” says Kalina Christoff, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. “It’s a pretty universal human experience.”

Now we’re beginning to understand why these clever thoughts occur during more passive activities and what’s happening in the brain, says Christoff. The key, according to the latest research, is a pattern of brain activity—within what’s called the default mode network—that occurs while an individual is resting or performing habitual tasks that don’t require much attention.

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