

# How the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic changed our creativity

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COVID-19 took us by surprise, and the exceptional situation of the first lockdown required great capacities of adaptation, in particular for our

brains. A study conducted at the Paris Brain Institute (Inserm/CNRS/Sorbonne University/AP-HP) has just revealed how our creativity evolved during this periods and the factors that may have influenced it. Despite the lockdown, our creativity increased, and focused on activities mainly related to the issues of the situation.

Creativity is one of the cognitive functions that allows us to be flexible in new environments and to find solutions in new situations. The unusual conditions of the first COVID-19 pandemic containment forced us to rethink our habits, imposed new constraints, and forced us to adapt; in short, to be creative.

A group of researchers from the Frontlab at the Paris Brain Institute conducted an online survey to assess the impact of lockdown on [creativity](#), using a two-part questionnaire. The first part consisted of questions aimed at understanding the situation in which the participants found themselves in March-April 2020 (Were you confined alone or with others? Did you have more work or free time than before?); their mental states at that time (Did you feel more motivated? Did you feel a decrease or increase in your mood or stress?); and finally, whether they felt more or less creative than before. The second part asked participants about creative activities carried out during confinement, their frequency, their domain, their degree of success and valorization, and the reasons that motivated or prevented these activities. The researchers collected almost 400 analyzable responses.

## **Stressed but more creative**

"Our first observation is that the lockdown was psychologically distressing for the majority of participants, which other studies have shown, but that on average they felt more creative," says Théophile Bieth (AP-HP), co-first author of the study. "By correlating the two pieces of information, we showed that the better people felt, the more creative

they thought they were."

In contrast, when the researchers asked about the number of obstacles respondents had encountered, they observed a non-linear relationship. Whether the changes in creativity were positive or negative, participants felt they had encountered many obstacles. Indeed, many people encountered obstacles in their usual activities, which forced them to be creative in order to accomplish them, and conversely, some individuals felt that they were not creative because they faced too many problems to be creative.

## **More creative activities related to the issues of the situation**

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 30 different activities, most of which are part of the international standards used in creativity research (Inventory Creativity Activities and Achievements). These included cooking, painting, sewing, gardening, decorating and music. Participants were asked whether they had engaged in these activities in the past five years, whether their practice had increased during the lockdown, why and how often, and if not, why it had decreased.

"This section of the questionnaire tried to measure more objectively the quantitative and qualitative changes in creative behavior, whereas the first part was based on a subjective report of the situation," explains Emmanuelle Volle (Inserm), the last author of the study. "Our results show that this measure of creative behavior is in line with the measure of subjective change reported by the subjects. In both cases, the changes observed were related to free time and emotional feelings."

The five activities that increased the most during the lockdown were

cooking, sports and dance programs, self-help initiatives and gardening. On average, among the 28 activities investigated, which also included—for example—interior design, sewing, creating, or diverting objects, about 40% of those already practiced in the five years prior to confinement increased their practice.

## A positive correlation between mood and creativity

The results of this study highlight an overall increase in creativity during the first [lockdown](#). This positive change could be linked to having more free time, feeling more motivated, the need to solve a problem, or the need to adapt to a new situation. However, when negative changes in creativity were experienced, they were related to negative emotions, such as stress or anxiety, feeling pressured, or a lack of material resources or opportunities.

The correlation between positive mood and creativity is quite debated. "There is some evidence in the scientific literature that you need to feel good to be creative, while other evidence points the other way. Also, it is not known in which direction this process takes place: Do we feel good because we are creative or does being creative make us happier?" concludes Alizée Lopez-Persem (Inserm), co-first author of the study, "Here, one of our analyses suggests that creative expression enabled individuals to better manage their negative emotions linked to confinement and therefore to feel better during this difficult period."

**More information:** Through Thick and Thin: Changes in Creativity During the First Lockdown of the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.821550](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.821550)

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