



## Stanford eCorner

### Work Those Mental Muscles

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Judah Pollack, co-author of “The Net and the Butterfly: The Art and Practice of Breakthrough Thinking,” shares two mental exercises for enhancing your imagination and exploring how you feel about such open-ended thinking. He describes how new ideas are the result of new neural pathways forming in the brain, and how the mind’s plasticity is core to having more breakthrough ideas.



#### Transcript

Your brain is rewiring itself every second of every day. For you to have a new idea, you have to literally build new neural connections between your neurons. Physical structures. When you have a breakthrough idea, there is a physical corollary in your brain. You can literally look and see the new neural loop that has been created to create this breakthrough. Now the exercises I'm gonna share with you right now are not necessarily going to create breakthroughs for you. But what they are going to do, is build up your muscle. It's kind of like doing cardio and strength training if you're an athlete. So here's the first one. And this one we tend to do with teams a lot before getting to a larger question with them, it sort of pops their brains open.

So, I want you all to close your eyes. And, if you're listening to this on a podcast and driving right now, please don't close your eyes. And, don't look at your phone. But for the rest of you please close your eyes. And I want you to imagine this thought experiment. What would our world look like if gravity stopped working at 10 p.m. and then started working again at 7 a.m., how has our culture evolved if that is the situation? Are their nets over everyone's homes? Are the people who own the nets the richest people on the planet? Do people put their beds on the ceilings? And then put mats on the floor in case they fall? And over sleep? How do teenagers decide to rebel and get in trouble? Do they grab a bottle of alcohol and cut a hole in the net and just float off somewhere? Depending on who you ask, you get different answers. Designers start designing whole houses to be careful for this. Artists start depicting all the beautiful art that could be created in zero G. Okay, you can open your eyes.

One of the things to look for is how was that experience for you? Was it exhilarating? Was it exhausting? Was it frightening? Was it a lot of fun? How comfortable are you in engaging in these wide open things? And when you came upon an idea you've never come upon before, you had to build the structure in your brain to actually visualize it, that's plasticity. Here's another one you can play with at home. Turn on a foreign movie with no subtitles for twenty minutes and try and figure out what's going on. Notice what you pay attention to. You might start paying attention to the tone of voice, or the way the camera is angled. Or what people are doing with their faces or their bodies. You start taking in completely different information which is forcing you to build a completely different connection. Again, it might seem like very far a feel from having a breakthrough, but it's building the muscle towards those breakthroughs. That's the important part.