

IMAGINABLE

During the height of COVID epidemic, terms like ‘unimaginable’ and ‘unthinkable’ were used at a startling rate. It seemed that everything coming at us was “unimaginable”, yet 10 years prior to the outbreak, Jane McGonigal and 28,000 people imagined a similar pandemic in a simulation. Their memories, imaginations, conversations and creative problem-solving skills from that experience helped them, and those around them, throughout the real crisis.

Now, Jane wants to help us prepare for the future. Not just in response to potential challenges, but to BUILD the better future – one where community cohesion is strong - so we are well-prepared to embrace upcoming opportunities and to address and mitigate risks.

This brief article offers just a small sample of her ideas and her work. I aim to share information and exercises that are useful now, but that also stimulate the desire to learn more. She has 3 TED talks, if you have access to watch them, and 3 books which I will list at the bottom of the page.

Jane McGonigal is the Director of Games Research & Development at the Institute for the Future. She describes herself as “a future forecaster and designer of reality games created to improve real lives and solve real problems.”

In her book “Imaginable,” McGonigal “draws on the latest scientific research in psychology and neuroscience to show us how to train our minds to think the unthinkable and imagine the unimaginable. But Imagination training, Jane says, “is more than just a skill set: it’s a creativity boost, a mindset shift, and an emotional uplift all rolled up in one.”

In her book, she states “professional game developers will tell you that if you want someone to stick with a game, you have to give them an opportunity to be successful in the first few minutes. A player who wanders around a new game without a clear sense of purpose...and no idea what actions they can take...is not going to stick around very long. The same thing is true for thinking about the future.”

When we remember how powerful our predictions are at shaping our experience (Anil Seth & Lisa Feldman-Barrett), we can understand how detailed images of future possibilities could increase our ability to see options and opportunities, while reducing bias, despair and even chronic pain.

McGonigal invites us to:

- “prepare our minds to adapt faster to new challenges”
- “develop the courage and vision to solve problems creatively”
- “take actions and make decisions today that will help shape the future we desire”
- “choose our future and feel more in control of what happens next”

She created the term ‘urgent optimism’ to describe a mindset that transforms anxiety about the future into motivation and strength. In a short video on Amazon (on the IMAGINABLE book page), she tells us “Urgent optimism is a uniquely motivating and resilient mindset made up of three key psychological strengths: mental flexibility, realistic hope and future power.

Let’s look more closely at each of the psychological strengths:

1. **Psychological flexibility.** It's the opposite of being "stuck" mentally. It's the ability to recognize that *anything* can become different in the future, even things that seem impossible to change today.
2. **Realistic hope.** It's a balance of positive and shadow imagination. It's knowing which risks and threats it makes sense to worry about – *and* which new solutions, technologies, ideas, and positive actions it makes sense to be excited and optimistic about.
3. **Future power.** It's a feeling of control and genuine agency to directly impact how the future turns out, by taking intentional action today.

Using these tools together, we can see challenges more clearly, while we remain realistically hopeful (vs over-confident). Jane says, "urgent optimism is not a 'fixed' personality trait. It changes over our lifetime, and it is changeable...we can purposefully build more urgent optimism when we need it most!"

She offers some exercises to 'seed our brain' with ideas that can turn into useful tools for use in the future!

IMAGINATION warm up:

First "imagine yourself waking up tomorrow morning and to envision it as vividly as you can. Even though it's only a day away, it's still mental time travel. Right? And you can ask yourself questions to make it really specific and vivid and detailed. 'Can you imagine about what time you would be waking up? Is it light or dark outside? What sound you might hear? Were you woken up by an alarm?' Make this as vivid as you can.

Now the trick is to do this for 10 years in the future. So now imagine it's 10 years from now and you're waking up... When you're thinking 10 years out, you have freedom to imagine. Can you picture a room you might wake up in 10 years from today? What kind of a pet might you have in 10 years? Will other people live with you or will you have your own place?

When we imagine 10 years out, we tend to imagine things that are really core to our most authentic values and hopes and needs. We choose things that relate to and the things that bring us joy.

IMAGINABLE EXERCISES These were found on creativityandeducation.com
And they reference Jane's 2016 youtube presentation: <https://youtu.be/BeoHGwBvXhY>

The prompts below were developed by Dr. Jane McGonigal. The exercises can stretch and grow three parts of your brain, in addition to building imagination and creativity skills.

1. **COUNTERFACTUAL MEMORY** Ask yourself: What if, in my past, I had done B instead of A? How might my life have turned out differently? Keep it personal. McGonigal states: "Trying to imagine how things could have been different in the past allows you to imagine how things could be different in the future."

Write your “What if” question at the top of a blank page, such as: “What if instead of (doing A...ex: moving to the mountains to be a ski bum), I (do B...ex: move to the city to join a jazz band)?

Next, describe as many details about the ways your life might have turned out differently if you had done B instead of A.

Finally, reflect on what arose in your imagination. Were you surprised? Did you think about one or multiple possible futures? Did any other insights come to mind?

In this exercise, three parts of the brain are activated by using logic, intuition and imagination. Apparently, research shows this exercise heightens ‘agency’ (your impact on your life), reduces depression and increases creativity. McGonigal reports that this exercise can “lead you to becoming a better creative problem solver.”

2: COUNTERFACTUAL FORESIGHT

Option A:

1. Imagine yourself in the future doing something you’ve never done before.
2. Describe the experience as vividly as you can.
3. Write your journal entry from the future - as if it already happened.
4. Imagine who is with you, how you got there, or other things that happened while you were there. Give your imagination free rein to go wild.
(Ex: I’ve never lived on a houseboat. I imagined adventures I had traveling that way.)

Option B: The X, Y, Z format

1. Imagine a physical activity (ie: cooking, biking) that you’ve done (X).
2. Imagine a person you care about who is alive and you could possibly have a future interaction with (Y).
3. Imagine traveling to a faraway place (Z).
4. Now imagine yourself doing this physical activity with the person you care about in this faraway place. Picture it for 10 seconds and imagine how you got there, and why you are doing this activity with the person you care about in a faraway place. Write an entry in your journal describing everything as if it already happened. Add as many details as possible.

Dr. McGonigal says: “Every time you remember a future that hasn’t happened, you rate that future as more likely. The more vivid details the details are, the more likely you are to start to believe it could totally happen.” This is a highly effective skill to practice and develop if you are interested in creating positive change in the world.

FLIP THE NARRATIVE:

Think of something that we definitely do not do today...such as wearing shoes in bed, for example. For this exercise, we will think: “How do I a narrative in which it makes sense that we are wearing shoes in our beds?” Possible reason: High fire danger days?

Remember, Urgent Optimism is made of 3 mini-mindsets:

- 1 Focus on the opportunity to rethink and reinvent how we do things.
future scenarios in detail.
2. Engage both positive and shadow imagination to see opportunities and prepare for risks.

3. Look for actionable ways to increase your ability to shape the future.

If you can watch TED talks, consider listening to Jane McGonigal. She's a game designer and a future forecaster. She's dynamic, powerful and funny.

*** Throughout this document the unattributed quotes are Jane's words...as found in her books, online and in videos. ***

Books by Jane McGonigal:

REALITY IS BROKEN: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World (2011)

SUPERBETTER: The Power of Living Gamefully (2016)

IMAGINABLE: How to See the Future Coming and Feel Ready for Anything, Even Things That Seem Impossible Today (2022)

Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children. - Sitting Bull

The future starts today, not tomorrow. - John Paul II

Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future. - Nelson Mandela

The future ain't what it used to be. - Yogi Berra

The distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.- Albert Einstein

I hope you'll find this article informative and invigorating!

Ubuntu, ~ sue