THINKING CREATIVELY

Define the problem/consider alternative explanations

Critical thinking is akin to creative thinking. Thinking creatively means viewing problems or questions in novel, unusual, or untypical ways. It means looking at things from a different perspective, "seeing" in ways that are not bound by custom, norms, or habit. Thinking critically about behavior may benefit from any effort we make to expand our creative thinking abilities.

The exercises below are most valuable when we first consider them on our own, then discuss them or share them with others in a group to see how others have defined the problem or have taken a different view. To make it a little more interesting, eliminate all of the ideas that are duplicated or common to at least one other person and determine the most creative contributor by tallying who has the most unduplicated ideas.

1. Draw a circle (or a square, or a triangle, or a squiggly line, etc.) on a piece of paper or a blackboard. Given five minutes, list all the things that you can think of that this picture could represent.

2. Consider a common object, such as a rubber band, tennis ball, newspaper, video cassette case, empty soft drink or beer can, Styrofoam "peanuts", plastic milk carton, brick, paper clip, etc. Given five minutes, list all the things that you can think of that this thing, by itself or in quantity, could be used for.

3. List all the things that you can think of that come in pairs (harder: sets of three, four, five, or more)

4. Starting with a polysyllabic word like "incorrigible", "transparency", "understanding", or "compassionate", make as many words as you can from the letters contained in the chosen word.

5. Imagine that you own a very valuable diamond that you refuse to turn over to a bank or other agency for safekeeping. Where would you hide it so that it is difficult for anyone to find it?

6. Traffic jams in your city, particularly at rush hours with commuters going to work, have gotten horrible. What are some ways you can think of to alleviate these traffic problems?

7. A friend of yours is a real cheapskate, a relentless penny-pincher. Then one day, he starts behaving just the opposite, spending money recklessly, buying lavish gifts for all around him, etc. Think of explanations that might account for this change of behavior.

8. Start with a word that describes something abstract and intangible, such as consciousness, infinity, or pride. Without using the word or any variation of the word, how would you describe what the word means to someone who is unfamiliar with it.
9. Think of a common object or plant, such as a light bulb, pencil, apple, potato, etc. Now list as many adjectives as you can think of that could be used to describe this thing.

10. List as many improvements as you can think of for some common device: automobile, VCR, airport, shopping cart, computer, etc.

11. Start with something that people normally throw away. (Examples: the hair on the barber shop/beauty salon floor, grass clippings, newspapers, plastic six-pack retainers, used staples, fish scales, etc...) What are some useful things that could be done with this "trash"?

12. List all the means of transportation that you can think of.

13. A psychotherapist has a patient who is afraid of ___________. (Suggestions: worms, butterflies, scotch tape, flies, fish, the color pink, silk clothing, the smell of mown grass, etc.) Think of as many possible explanations as you can for the patients fear.

14. If we had at least one eye in the back of our heads, as well as the normal two in front, what would some implications be of that?

15. You have good reason to believe that you may soon be abducted by aliens. You want to convey to them the essential elements of life on earth and its people. Since books might not be useful if the aliens can't read our languages, what could you pack in a suitcase that would be useful to convey what we earthlings are like?

16. If you were going on a trip in the wilderness, and you were concerned that you might get lost and have to survive indefinitely on your own, what would you take with you other than clothes and food?

17. What can we do to reduce the amount of trash that is generated in the world everyday?

18. You lose your voice, perhaps permanently. Think of as many potentially good things about this as you can think of. Substitutions: you suddenly go irreversibly bald; you lose your job; you wake up having been transformed into a member of the opposite sex; you wake up ten years older (or younger); you have no memory of anything in your life.

19. Make as many four-word sentences as you can in which all the words in the sentence start with the same letter of the alphabet.

20. This one takes some preparation: Cut some little pieces of cardboard, about 1/2 inch high and 1 1/2 inches long. About fifty to a hundred will do. Write some common parts of speech on each card, being sure to include some nouns, verbs, articles, adjectives, adverbs, etc. When finished, use the words to compose poems or make sentences. For extra difficulty, require that the poem or sentence relate to some selected topic or theme.
21. Think of as many ways as possible to promote creative thinking processes. Write them down, find a publisher, make a million dollars, and retire early.