Make play part of your day

A few weeks ago my sister, mother and I went bowling -- something I had done in recent years but my sister had not done in over 20 years. Needless to say, we had some great laughs as we attempted to reclaim our youthful bowling expertise and keep the ball out of the gutter. Our 84- year-old mom took on the role of bowling coach as she chuckled her way through the afternoon. We had so much fun, we promised ourselves we would bowl again very soon.

The following week, I treated myself to an Adult Art Camp at Chicken Tracks Art Ranch near Newborn. For three days, eight adults of various ages engaged in a variety of creative endeavors from playing with clay and painting on screens, to blacksmithing and jewelry making. All of us learned many new things and also had a great deal of fun in the process.

These experiences reminded me how important it is to add play into our everyday lives. Our society tends to dismiss play for adults. Play is perceived as unproductive, petty or even a guilty pleasure. The notion is that once we reach adulthood, with its many personal and professional responsibilities, there’s no time to play.

According to Dr. [Bowen F. White](http://www.bowenwhite.com/), a medical doctor and author of Why Normal Isn’t Healthy, “The only kind of play we honor is competitive play.” However, competitive play doesn’t have the health benefits that purposeless play does. When we compete, we continue to operate in a stress state – the win or lose scenario is much like fight or flight. When activities that should be play, like a golf game, are treated like a self- improvement program, they lose all the inherent benefits of authentic play.

What play researchers are discovering is that non-competitive, purposeless play is just as important for adults as it is for kids. Dr. Stuart Brown, in his book *Play,* says that although play is fun, it is anything but trivial. “It is a basic biological drive as integral to our health as sleep or nutrition,” says Brown. “It is like oxygen. Being playful has an important role in every sphere of our lives. The world needs play because it enables each person to live a good life. When someone doesn’t keep an element of play in their life, they experience a play deficit and their core being suffers.”

The familiar proverb “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” is true. Without play, we become bored and boring. As George Bernard Shaw put it “We don’t stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.” Dr. Brown calls play a “state of being, purposeless, fun and pleasurable. For the most part, it is a needless activity with the focus on the actual experience, not on accomplishing a goal. Play is art, books, movies, music, comedy, flirting, daydreaming and is the single most significant factor in determining our success and happiness.”

Playing with your romantic partner, co-workers, pets, friends, and children fuels your imagination, creativity, problem-solving abilities; helps you forge successful relationships and improves your mental and physical health. Here are some suggestions on how to reintroduce play in your life:

1. **Give yourself permission to play!** As children, we needed permission to do just about everything and couldn’t wait to become adults so we could escape the need for permission. Now as adults, we have to learn the art of giving ourselves permission to do what came naturally as a child. Play! Write yourself a play permission slip and post it where you can see it every day as a reminder, and then DO IT!
2. **Expose yourself to playful experiences.** Spend some time thinking about what you did as a child that excited you and gave you joy. Then do some of that. Play can be something as small as noticing and appreciating nature, throwing a ball for a dog or pulling a string for a kitten. If you need an excuse, then grab your children or grandchildren and let them be your guide into a more playful day.
3. **Discover play that works for you.** We don’t all find the same activities fun. For some people, knitting is pure pleasure; for others, it’s pure torture. There may be activities that bring you joy but also include a little work. Don’t just look for easy fun, look for soul-satisfying fun. For instance, one of the things I love is riding horses but they don’t just feed, brush and saddle themselves. There is work involved -- but it’s work I don’t mind doing because it is part of a total experience that brings me bliss.
4. **Be active in your play.** Motion is the most basic form of play. One of the quickest ways to jump-start your play is to do something physical. Just move! Unplug from technology. Walk, jog, do jumping jacks, dance, skip, twirl, shoot baskets just for fun. Movement produces pleasure and makes us feel alive.
5. **Nourish your mode of play by joining a group of likeminded people or start one of your own.** Play is more fun when shared with others. Additionally, there is safety in numbers. Having play partners helps reduce the fear and resistance you may experience as you engage in purposeless play.

It is never too late to correct your play deficit. Be spontaneous, set aside your inhibitions and give yourself a happy, healthy boost by adding a little play to every day.

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