

How to Add More Play to Your Grown-Up Life, Even Now

Play can feel silly, unproductive and time consuming. And that's precisely the point.

By Kristin Wong
The New York Times

"Let's play!" my friend's 4-year-old squealed, tugging on my arm. I was tired, so I told her, "I'm too lazy to play." But I wasn't allowed to be lazy because I'm big, she said. Unable to come up with a convincing rebuttal, I found a place to hide while she counted to 20. Fred Rogers said that play is "the work of childhood." Kids take this work seriously, they're good at it, and they can teach us a thing or two about why play is important — especially now.

But what, exactly, is play? [Generally speaking](#), play is something that's imaginative, self-directed, intrinsically motivated and guided by rules that leave room for creativity.

"One way to think about play is an action you do that brings you a significant amount of joy without offering a specific result," said Jeff Harry, a [positive play coach](#) who works with businesses, schools and organizations to use applied positive psychology in day-to-day routines. That means taking a bike ride because it's fun, not because you're trying to lose five pounds. "A lot of us do everything hoping for a result," Mr. Harry added. "It's always, 'What am I getting out of this?' Play has no result."

At a time when jobs are precarious, livelihoods are at stake and we're still fighting a deadly pandemic, play is low on our list of priorities. We're living in a world that's more conducive to anxiety than playfulness. In the never-ending to-do list of adulthood, play can feel like a waste of time. We exhaust ourselves with tasks we should or have to do, but we rarely have time or energy for activities we want to do.

Play offers a reprieve from the chaos, and it challenges us to connect with a key part of ourselves that gets lost in the responsibilities of adulthood, especially during a crisis.

"As we get older, our egos grow. We become more self-conscious," said Meredith Sinclair, a former schoolteacher and author of "[Well Played: The Ultimate Guide to Awakening Your Family's Playful Spirit](#)." Play feels silly, unproductive and time-consuming. "But this is precisely why we should make more time for it," Ms. Sinclair said.

There are a number of benefits to play for adults, including [improved stress management](#) and an improvement in [our overall well-being](#) — benefits we could certainly use right now.

“People are feeling really overwhelmed,” Mr. Harry said. “I’m not asking you to embrace a [toxic positivity](#) mind-set or let go of your worries forever.”

He added: “My suggestion is, take a small break from worrying and do something that channels your inner kid and just brings you a little bit of happiness.”

So how do we do it?

Make friends with your inner critic

You may have a hard time letting go of the serious, grown-up version of yourself, at least at first. Mr. Harry suggests an exercise to channel the critical, discouraging voice in your head, which is probably on overdrive lately.

“I tell people to actually write down what your inner critic is saying to you. Write down all the thoughts that come up: *You’re a loser, you’ll never be a writer, everyone hates your guts, you’re an impostor.* Write it all down,” he said. “Then look at it and ask yourself: Is any of this actually true? Or is it just the scared little kid in me trying to protect myself?”

Our inner critic is a survival mechanism that buffers ourselves from failure. Failing feels bad, so our inner critic discourages us from doing things that feel silly, uncomfortable or risky. As Kristen Neff, a self-compassion researcher, has [said](#): “Don’t beat yourself up for beating yourself up. We need to learn to make friends with our inner critic.” The exercise is a good first step because it reveals how harsh we can be to ourselves without realizing it, which keeps us from embracing the more playful, creative parts of ourselves.

Borrow your memories

Adults often seek fun through novelty, whether it’s traveling to new places, exploring new hobbies or buying new gadgets.

“We have access to so much stuff that we’re not even enjoying it anymore,” Mr. Harry said. Sure, novelty can be fun, but play allows you to tap into that feeling without traveling or buying a new toy. “Play isn’t something new that you have to do. It’s tapping back to something that is personal and fulfilling.”

To discover what that means for you, experts suggest reflecting on childhood memories.

“When you were a child, what were your favorite ways to play?” Ms. Sinclair said. “And when was the last time you had these same types of feelings as an adult? What current activities bring you close to that same unabashed feeling you had as a youngster?”

List the activities you enjoyed as a kid, then brainstorm the grown-up version. If you liked climbing trees, maybe you can try indoor rock climbing. If you loved Play-Doh, maybe you could take a pottery class or make bread from scratch. You don’t always need

a new version of a childhood pastime, though. Climbing trees can still be pretty fun as an adult.

Do something without sharing it

“Social media makes it easy to buy into this notion that if you don’t post it, did it really happen? Was it important?” Ms. Sinclair said. “Sharing makes it valid.” In other words, social media can inspire people to do things for the purpose of sharing, as the platforms themselves encourage external validation. Since play is supposed to be intrinsically motivated, you might have more fun keeping it to yourself.

“It’s very important that we have moments of play all for ourselves that we don’t tell anyone about and we don’t post about,” Ms. Sinclair added. Whether it’s kneading dough in the kitchen or riding your bike around the neighborhood, next time you do something fun, don’t share the activity online. This can help you focus on the pure joy of doing something fun for yourself.

Know your play type

People play in different ways — karaoke sounds like a blast to one person and a nightmare to another. A [study](#) published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* identified four categories of playful personality traits: other-directed, lighthearted, intellectual and whimsical.

Other-directed play is when you enjoy playing with other people. Lighthearted play generally means you don’t take life too seriously, and you like to improvise. Intellectual play has to do with ideas and thoughts, like wordplay and problem-solving. And whimsical players like doing odd or unusual things in everyday life.

Knowing your style can help you figure out which activities you like, but it can also help you eliminate activities that you don’t necessarily enjoy. If you like intellectual play, a dance party might not be fun for you. If you take a lighthearted approach to play, you might not enjoy long, strategic board games with your family. Of course, you can have more than one play style, so maybe you enjoy dance parties, board games, karaoke and crossword puzzles all the same.

Find micro-moments of play

Ms. Sinclair recommends leaving room for spontaneity in your calendar.

“There is something innately whimsical about being spontaneous,” she said. “Even the word sounds playful.” Schedule blocks of time throughout the week for the possibility of random playful activities. “It sounds crazy, like you’re planning to be spontaneous,” she said. “But you kind of have to as an adult.”

With this time blocked, it's easier to say no when someone asks if you're free for a work task or social obligation. You can decline, telling them you have something to do that night, even if you don't know what it is yet.

Of course, most of us don't feel we have the luxury of free time. It's hard to find extra time in our already packed schedules. In that case, Ms. Sinclair recommends finding quick opportunities to play throughout the day. It could be dancing in the kitchen while you cook dinner or reading something that makes you laugh while you're in the grocery line. Belting out a song during your drive home.

"It's about doing something for yourself that's in the moment," Ms. Sinclair said. "Most everything we do is for other people."

Play is similar to meditation in that it helps you focus on where you're at in the moment and reset your busy, perpetually exhausted adult mind. "Adults spend a ton of time ruminating," Mr. Harry said. "Whether it's thinking about the dumb thing you said at a party or worrying just for the sake of worrying."

Being present doesn't come easy for most of us, but play forces you to focus on the present so you can take a break from ruminating. "We're all dealing with something right now, and you need to be able to fully feel your fear and sadness and anger and let it out," he said.

Play requires you to ditch the limiting, binary way we think about our feelings, Mr. Harry added. In other words, we have to let go of the idea that we can't feel both playful in the moment and anxious about the state of the world. The idea isn't to ignore your negative feelings but to give yourself permission to feel joy alongside the negativity.

"Think about how kids are excited all the time," Mr. Harry said. "That's basically what we're all trying to get back to."