

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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The Healthy Pursuit of Pleasure

Engaging in Simple, Healthy Pleasures Can Restore Balance to our Hectic Lives

Pleasure guides us to better health. When experiences are enjoyable, we want more of them. Our bodies tell us that sleep, reproduction, eating, companionship, and exercise — to name just a few of our more common daily activities — are enjoyable. Our survival depends on engaging in these activities. The brain has several pleasure centers which are activated by chemicals which speed satisfying sensations from one nerve to the next. Children the world over, when they are left alone to do what they choose, engage in endless hours of play. They pursue fun. Childhood may be the time in life when our brains are trained to experience pleasure. If we accomplish this task well as children, we may have healthier lives as adults — as long as we don't lose the ability to play that we acquired in childhood.

Think about what children do when they play. They lose themselves in the pleasure of the moment. We have all observed children at play. They glow with pleasure — they shout, smile, and move their bodies. Engrossed in their world of play, they are aware of neither the past nor the future. There is only the moment. As adults, we also need this ability to shift our awareness from rational and logical concerns to a level which is freer and centered on the moment. People who can shift appropriately between the “there and then” to the “here and now” are good at reality testing and adapting to the demands of the world. They



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can draw on both their thought processes and their ability to take effective action. What would happen if these behaviors were not pleasurable? Eating would disappear and sleep would vanish. We could no longer survive.

Balance is the key to understanding the role of having fun vs. meeting real-world obligations in our lives. We can't really appreciate fun without the counterbalance of work and the responsibilities of living. And we can't truly value our work until we incorporate fun into our lives. For example, we may appreciate eating ice cream as a real source of pleasure, but what if our diets consisted of nothing but ice cream? We would quickly tire of this source of pleasure and may even come to see it as noxious. Or to take another example, a vacation is pleasurable, but only if we have a job to go back to at the end of the vacation. A permanent vacation quickly loses its appeal as a source of pleasure, which is one reason why retirement is difficult for many people. The healthy life consists of a good balance between fun and everyday responsibilities.

Unfortunately, we live in an era when fewer of us seem to have time for fun. The work ethic reigns supreme for most of us. We put in overtime on the job, often without compensation, and two-income families have become the norm. What little time we have for ourselves is devoted to the chores of daily living. Our ancestors in the past lacked our labor-saving tools and technological advances, but they had more leisure time. It has been estimated that hunters/gatherers and those who practiced simple agriculture could provide for all of their necessities of living by working only four hours per day. The rest of their time was spent napping, chatting, relaxing, entertaining, and playing. For us today, leisure is a luxury. We seldom have time for ourselves or other people. While we may be more efficient, productive and organized today, we are less joyful, spontaneous and connected to other people.

Medical opinions these days have done a great deal to destroy our sense of fun. We know that we are supposed to exercise, so we join a gym or walk half an hour a day — but there may be no fun in it. It can become just another chore added to our already busy schedules. We deprive ourselves of the pleasures of eating — no salt, few fats, no sweets, fewer carbohydrates — when in truth we can enjoy many of these foods in moderation with no ill effects. The latest health prescriptions are often premature alarms which are not based on solid scientific thinking. Many of the studies are current for the moment, but the

recommendations are later reversed by other evidence. For example, it is known that people who are not at risk for hypertension or heart disease can safely enjoy a reasonable amount of salt on their food. And some types of cholesterol are good for us, as well as some types of fat (like fish oil). What we seem to forget is that incorporating pleasure into our lives is as healthy as most of the scientific recommendations based on depriving us of pleasure.


Adulthood is seen by many as that time in life when pleasure should be reduced. After all, we have responsibilities — to the world, to our work, to our families. What we forget is that fun brings balance into our lives. We can work better when we can take a break and have a good time. And we can enjoy pleasurable activities better when they are special and outside of the ordinary routine of everyday life. Therapy is one way to examine why we may have lost our ability to play and how we can regain those special skills that we may have spent so many years developing during childhood. To achieve a healthy balance between work and play is to affirm the wholeness of life.

Some Healthy Pleasures

Healthy pleasures have two characteristics:

- 1.) **Balance.** Pleasures lose their meaning if they are not counterbalanced by attending to life's other responsibilities. Fun can happen when one takes a break from the normal routine. For example, eating delicious food, even "unhealthy" food, can be a healthy pleasure if it is done in moderation and on occasion. To base one's entire diet on rich and calorie-laden foods, however, suggests possible addictive tendencies — and addictive behaviors fall outside of the realm of healthy pleasures. Addictions are self-destructive, while the aim of engaging in healthy pleasures is to enhance the diversity and enjoyment of life's experiences.
- 2.) **The Experience of the Moment.** People who worry a lot, who are depressed, or who have difficulty with trust may find it hard to abandon themselves to pleasure. They may need to develop the ability to let go of worry and outside concerns in favor of

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immersing themselves in the moment. This is a skill that can be learned.

Here are some suggestions for engaging in healthy pleasures, although this list is by no means complete. All of these sources of pleasure have been shown to result in benefits to our health.

- Indulge in chocolate or a scrumptious meal from time to time.
- Did you know that moderate consumers of alcohol (one or two drinks per day) live longer and have healthier hearts than heavy drinkers (which is not surprising) and total abstainers (which is perhaps a surprise)?
- Go on a shopping spree on occasion (as long as you can afford it and don't fall into compulsive shopping).
- Take a day off from work just to indulge yourself in whatever you want to do.
- Laugh whenever you can and surround yourself with people who like to laugh.
- When you need a good cry, indulge in one — this is one of life's greatest pleasures.
- Take a sauna or a steam bath (if your blood pressure is fairly normal).
- Go out into nature and spend some time alone. Treat yourself to a view of water, mountains or natural vegetation.
- Spend an hour listening to your favorite kind of music — with no other distractions.
- Expose yourself to different smells and notice how they affect your mood.
- Give a close friend or your partner a massage, and then take your turn. Foot massages are wonderful.
- Take a half-hour walk outside — breathe fully, move your body vigorously and think about little else.
- Have you ever danced alone in your living room when nobody else is around?
- Gardening is one of life's greatest pleasures — immerse yourself in growth and beauty.

- Spend a couple of hours playing cards or board games with a close friend.
- On a stressed out day, take a half hour nap.
- Buy or pick a bouquet of flowers and put them in a prominent place in your living area.
- Learn a craft — pottery, painting, furniture refinishing, sculpture, holiday gifts, etc.
- Learn from the masters — children and pets. Play with a child or an animal...at their level, not yours.
- Go to a movie, a play, a concert or the opera.
- Do some volunteer work in the community.

Access Your Pleasure Centers

You can tap into the pleasure centers of your brain through your imagination...and this can be done without any external aids like alcohol or drugs. This simple exercise can be done by anybody and at any time of the day.

If you have difficulty with this exercise, a therapy consultation can help you learn how to do it appropriately and at your own pace.

Find a quiet spot with no distractions. Close your eyes and breathe slowly ten times. With every breath, imagine your body becoming more and more relaxed. Imagine that every inhalation bathes you in relaxation and every exhalation releases the tension you have stored up in your body. After ten breaths imagine yourself in a beautiful, tranquil and pleasurable place, probably a place you have actually been to before. Focus only on the experience of this place. If other thoughts intrude, just let them go. Be totally in this place for the moment. Now tell yourself that you are feeling pleasure. Become aware of the warm and vibrant feeling that accompanies pleasure. Increase the intensity of this feeling and then let it come down again. When you have spent a few minutes in this imaginary place, open your eyes and resume your normal business of the day. You may notice that you have a smile on your face — and that others do too.

THE BACK PAGE

LEARNING TO BRING PLEASURE INTO YOUR LIFE —AN EXERCISE

Many of us set aside little time in our lives for pleasure. We use the excuse that we simply don't have the time to have a good time. In fact, we take more than just a touch of pride in letting others know how busy we are — this is a way of telling people that we are productive and vital. Unfortunately, a life which is always busy is also a stressed out life.

This exercise consists of two parts. First, make a list of all of your activities in a typical day and note how much time you spend on each activity. This allows you to see how you spend your days. What you learn may come as a surprise. Now go through the list and find a way to cut half an hour per day out of your normal routine.

Second, spend half an hour per day in an activity which brings you pleasure. There are a couple of rules to follow in coming up with ways to have fun.

1.) Be sure that you do this pleasure exercise alone. The idea is not to depend on someone else for your pleasure, but to rediscover your own sense of play. Look within yourself and find those activities which nurture your own inner nature.

2.) And make sure that the activities you

choose are different everyday. This is an exercise in self-discovery, and you might find that there are ways to have fun that you have never considered before. The idea is to lighten up, relax, lose yourself in pleasure and activate the pleasure centers in your brain. This is the perfect antidote to the routinized and stressful existence that many of us live these days.

So, go ahead. Enjoy a banana split. Try on a cashmere sweater. Take a walk. Look at a view. Play the drums along with music. Read a short story. Sketch a self-portrait. Take a bubble bath.

Be creative in the ways you find pleasure. Try to find ways of having fun that are close to home. You don't necessarily want to have to drive somewhere or take out too much time from your daily routine to do this (or else it just becomes another task and may serve to increase stress!). And as you engage in the activity, tell yourself that this is pleasurable. Allow yourself to feel self-nurtured, free and lost in the moment. Let yourself feel like a child again.

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