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Wholehearted Living: Cultivating Play and Rest and Letting Go of Exhaustion as a Status Symbol and Productivity as Self Worth

Ecclesiastes 3:13 (Good News Translation)

Proverbs 17:22 (Amplified Bible)

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While conducting research on wholehearted living, Brene Brown said to a colleague, “those wholehearted people do a lot of fooling around. The colleague asked, “Fool around? How?” She responded, “they do things like hobbies, crafts and sports, but not so organized.” She ended by saying, “I’m going to have to dig around some more.”

Later, she reflected on how she did not see it. How she failed to recognize what was so plainly there – Play. Play as a critically important part the Wholehearted Living.

Dr. Stuart Brown (psychiatrist, clinical researcher and founder of the National Institute of Play) has shown that play shapes our brain, helps us foster empathy, helps us navigate complex social groups, and is at the core of creativity and innovation.

So what is play? It’s first component can be identified as purposeless. In other words, we play for the sake of play. We do it because it’s fun and we want to. In our day and culture, this poses a problem, because it is hard to be purposeless and do something just for the sake of fun when our culture bases your worthiness on productivity and net worth. When we have what seem like an endless “to do” list and we take time doing something unrelated to that list we feel stressed. We even go to the extreme and say that sleep is a waste of time.

Play is a “state of being” purposeless, fun, pleasurable and needless. . For the most part the focus is on the actual experience, not on accomplishing a goal. Thus, play is art, books, movies, music, comedy, games, sports, and daydreaming

We have long known play is pivotal and essential for children. Yet, not until a flood of research did we know play is essential and necessary for adults too. Play is as pivotal for adults as it is for kids - for play brings joy. And it's vital for problem solving, creativity, and relationships. Yet even in light of that, many adults still do not see play as an option.

So, what does play look like in adults? Not all adults play alike. In a study published in April in the journal of *Personality and Individual Difference*, researchers identified four types of playful adults:

1. Those who outwardly enjoy fooling around with friends, colleagues, relatives and acquaintances.
2. Those who are generally lighthearted and not preoccupied by the future consequences of their behavior.
3. Those who play with thought and ideas.
4. Those who are whimsical, exhibiting interest in the strange and unusual and are amused by small, everyday observations.

The good news according to lead researcher Rene Proyer, professor of psychology at Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg, Germany is that a less playful person can learn to be more playful, much like an introvert can learn to be a better speaker by observing techniques extroverts use.

Play is a basic human need as essential to our well-being as sleep, so when we're low on play, our minds and bodies notice.

Over time, play deprivations can reveal itself in certain patterns of behavior. We might get cranky, rigid, feel stuck in a rut or feel victimized by life.

To benefit most from the rejuvenating effects of play, we need to incorporate it into our everyday lives, and not just wait for that two-week vacation every year.

So then, how do we identify the kind of play that would be most meaningful for us? Dr. Stuart Brown suggests thinking back to the play you enjoyed as a child and trying to connect to that to your life now. For example, a person who was very active as a child may be wise to engage in a recreational sport as an adult.

One way to increase your likelihood having more play in your life is to review your play history. In others words mine your life to reconnect with play by recalling play memories. Ask yourself:

1. What did you do as a child that excited you?
2. Did you engage in activities alone or with others? Or both?
3. Given the answer to those questions, ask yourself how can you recreate that today?

A little bit of play can go a long way toward boosting our productivity and happiness.

Dr. Brown has found five archetypes of play in his years of working on the subject.

1. Rough-and-Tumble Play – such as tug-of-war, capture the flag, scavenger hunts, kickball, dodge ball.
2. Ritual Play – chess, board games, activities or sports with set rules and structures.

3. Imaginative Play – storytelling, acting, crafting, drawing, painting, comedy, and improv classes.
4. Body Play – getting ourselves out of gravity such as yoga, Pilates, hiking, white water rafting, mountain climbing, surfing, snorkeling, riding roller coaster.
5. Object Play – bringing us back to our childhoods with the manipulation of objects, building and designing such a building fortresses, snowball fights, and Jenga blocks.

On my day off, this Monday, I went to the dentist. While sitting in the dentist chair waiting for the tech and the dentist, a technician walked by and asked me if I wanted a magazine. I told her I was just relaxing. Actually, I was consciously enjoying the not doing, and hoping for a little boredom (which I know research says leads to creativity).

Do you remember the last time you were bored? Or took a nap in the middle of the day? Or spent time in our favorite chair doing “nothing”?

Exhaustion has become a status symbol. The busier someone appears, the more important they must be. We are all overcommitted. Few of us have any white space or margin in our lives. And thus, we end up exhausted, frustrated, overextended, tired, and swimming in drama, we are no fun, and our relationships feel the strain.

The question is not “should I play”, but rather should be “am I playing enough.”

According to Ecclesiastes, “All of us should eat, drink and enjoy what we have worked for. It’s God’s gift.”

Play is the royal road to childhood happiness and adult brilliance. Given that and everything else we talked about this morning, “Don’t forget to play.”