

# The Psychology of Fun, Play and Full Engagement

*“Creativity is intelligence having fun.” -Albert Einstein, Physicist.*

 By James Mapes



**D**o you think fun is frivolous? If so, perhaps you should think again.

Pause at the end of this paragraph – just for a few seconds - to recall a very happy, joyful, engaging moment from your life. Please stop and reflect now.

Odds are that you just remembered a time that involved some sort of play. There’s a good chance that memory was from your childhood. If so, how do you compare that feeling with your adult self?

What does play mean? It might be a sport or a game of charades or playing a musical instrument. It can be gaming or going to an amusement park. There are no limitations. When I was a child, our family played board games and card games, along with physical games, like baseball, horseshoes, Ping-Pong and badminton. We flew kites (still do), camped out (still do), built model airplanes and

acted out our fantasies pretending to be knights and soldiers. We improvised and invented, often packing knapsacks with snacks to go hiking and exploring in the woods.

In this hectic, fast-paced world, you want to learn not only to control negative stress but, even more importantly, how to renew and recharge. Play is the answer. In fact, it should be considered as integral to every organization as innovation, productivity and – work. While we have the imagination, creativity and flexibility to play throughout life, we often shut down our playfulness because, as motivational speaker Zig Ziglar called it, “stinkin thinkin.” As adults, we seem to need proof that having fun helps us maintain a well-balanced and healthy life, along with the willingness and commitment to play.

Having fun might just save your sanity, improve your health and

explode your creativity. Indeed, the benefits of having fun are just beginning to be discovered by brain science. And, if you need a personal tutor, you can learn a lot about having fun from children. Play is how children prepare for adulthood. It's how they acquire the skills to cooperate, solve problems and express their feelings in a responsible way.

Strong evidence suggests that play contributes heavily to a child's physical and mental health. Play can influence a child's resilience – his or her ability to handle challenges, overcome adversity and manage stress. For example, the fundamentals of play, such as make-believe, risk, uncertainty and problem-solving, can boost the development of a child's emotional range while developing strategies for courage, teamwork, and sociability.

In both children and adults, nothing makes the brain spark like play. Research demonstrates that play lights up the brain in the areas of clarity and memory.

Dr. Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist and pioneer clinical researcher on the importance of play, states:

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**Humor, games, roughhousing, flirtation and fantasy are more than just fun. Plenty of play in childhood makes for happy, smart adults -- and keeping it up can make us smarter at any age.”**

Brown's studies through the National Institute for Play show that play is not just joyful and energizing - it's deeply involved with human development and intelligence.

Researchers have also found that the happiest couples have a great deal of fun together. Drs. John & Julie Gottman of the Gottman Institute stipulate that people are much happier in their relationships if - for every one disagreement or hurt feeling – they create five loving, positive and fun interactions to counter it.

Psychiatrist /writer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes play as “a flow state” - that requires just the right balance of challenge and opportunity. If the game is too hard or too easy, it loses its sense of pleasure and fun. You want to feel challenged but not overwhelmed.

Play is NOT an inconsequential luxury. It's an absolute necessity for living an exceptional life. Why?

### 1. **Play increases high performance and productivity.**

In athletics, play is called – “being in the zone.” This mental laser-like focus happens when you are fully engaged to the exclusion of everything else. One of the greatest misconceptions is that working longer and harder increases performance and productivity, but those behaviors only result in feeling stressed and chronically overwhelmed. Without some recreation, we eventually burn out.

Taking the time to recharge is one of the best things you can do for your career. It refreshes the mind and body, gives you distance from problems and perspective for solving them. Research has shown that being in a state of total engagement makes people 50% more productive, creates inner clarity, confidence and motivation, resulting in success in the workplace and in life.

### 2. **Play gives you a natural high.**

When you're having fun, you smile. When you smile, you change your emotional state and release endorphins. Endorphins are mood enhancers which send messages of satisfaction and confidence to the brain. Smiling immediately reduces stress levels and improves tolerance for pain. Amazingly, this physiological reaction takes place even when the smile you put on is 'fake.'

### 3. **Play improves health.**

When you're stressed, your immune system weakens, increasing your chances of getting sick. Being in a stressful situation triggers the body's natural 'fight-or-flight' response, causing physical changes - from a rapid heartbeat to an increase in blood pressure. While this response helps you to successfully cope with the situation at hand, prolonged anxiety overextends the stress response, eventually causing the body harm.

When you approach life with the attitude of having fun and a sense of playfulness - even in tough situations - you lower your stress levels, think more clearly and make better decisions. Choosing to have fun, laugh and play in the face of adversity is not about being naïve or in denial. It's about emotional maturity. Choosing an attitude of fun and playfulness is like wearing a bubble of protection that wards off negativity, isolation, loneliness, depression and fear.

### 4. **Fun-loving, optimistic people live longer.**

In *Play, Creativity and Lifelong Learning: Why Play Matters for both Kids and Adults*, game designer/theorist Bernie DeKoven and psychologist Dr. Jeanne Segal reference the discovery that positive thinkers live 7.5 years longer than pessimists. Constant worrying puts a burden on the heart, increasing one's chances of giving in to the negative effects of stress.

Dr. Becca Levy, director of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Division of Yale University, says, “Having an optimistic attitude towards aging is better than having low blood pressure and cholesterol levels. In other words, staying positive is better than dropping the butter and chicken liver from your diet!”

I hope I've convinced you of the value of fun and play. Now, it is your turn: **GIVE YOURSELF THE PERMISSION TO PLAY. PE**



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