

Give “Play” a Chance: 10 Best Practices

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Time out! It used to be so simple. The bell rang at the end of math and you and your pals took off to the playground for twenty minutes. It all stopped about 6th grade. You were too old. You didn't need recess anymore...not for the rest of your life!

The two-year-old sits in “time out”, vowing, “I'll never have ‘time out’ when I get big.” No wonder, as adults, many of us are pining, paying, praying, pleading for a little time out. Add to the mix, the reality that technology and the revolution in medicine puts more in front of you to respond and accomplish than at any other time in history.

In the past, “times out” were part of the natural flow of things. Agrarian societies slowed the pace during certain seasons. Working on either days of the weekend was one of the top ten “do-nots” of a stronger Judeo-Christian American culture. Those days are gone. The small town physician's patients took longer to get to the office, did not get faxed insurance form problems, or have five little league games to attend in one week and five committee member meetings.

Technology has changed these natural down times forever. From this point on, time out or playtime will be something you have to plan, prioritize, and even pay for.

Healthcare professionals knew the “I never have to be off-call” existence long before the rest of the professions. The beeper, pager, answering service, car phone, and voice mail were standard issue for most clinical staff. Now mobile office technologies produce equipment to mount your laptop to the space between the driver and passenger seat, a passenger full service desk, and multiple outlets for electronic equipment in your car. Some luxury SUVs come with five appliance plug-ins. Your car, too, can be your office. The choice is yours. You can become the 7-11 professional...available 24 hours a day, seven days a week or a balanced human being.

For many of you, the question about embracing guilt-free play is a done issue. “I don't do guilt,” you might say. One has to be at peace with self and the world around in order to relax. Guilty play is as counterproductive as no play at all.

Ben Franklin, as wise as he was, may have misled us when he proposed that “Free time is for doing something useful.” Of course, that is open to interpretation.

How do you create a lifelong habit of guilt-free play? It takes P & P to enhance your R & R.

Perspective

Play for play's sake

So much is written about the value of recreation and its direct effect on increased productivity. No one will argue that. All work and no play makes Jack and Jill really dull and poor outputters! How about play for other reasons? How about play and leisure being strictly for pleasure...rejuvenating both mind and spirit. “A lot of literature purports the importance of “realizing the direct relationship of play and leisure

for good health.” Mae West said what many of us have forgotten; “Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.”

Every November, articles begin to appear in periodicals with titles like, “Reduce Holiday Stress.” Isn’t ‘holiday stress’ an oxymoron? What can you do now to make the holidays more playful? Question traditions and routines for their real value to you and your family.

Create the time of your life

As a time management consultant, I am constantly being asked, “How can I create more time in my life?” Answer, “You can’t.” However, when I ask people to think about the times when they were having the *time of their lives*, a smile comes to their faces.

“I had no sense of time or work or stress,” they say. Think about creating the time of your life. What will you be doing? Keep that in mind when you plan to play or take time out. Maybe you will end up doing something very different than expected.

Stop thinking time is money

This age old, universal teaching about time is so detrimental to guilt-free play. Same-old message. Work is valuable. Time is used for work. Time has a price. It keeps you in the same mentality. It’ll wear you out. Your professional skill and talent can be exchanged for money. Your time is your resource...you can use it to play or make money or do whatever you want. The ‘time is money’ mentality produces workaholics and a lot of busy vacations trying to get all your money’s worth at Disneyland.

Supreme Court Justice Wm. Rehnquist observed, “Being a good vacationer takes practice.” You might consider these simple practices on your way to guilt-free play.

Practice

Go for habit-forming

Plan weekly what you want to do for play. Plan it first. Put it in writing, on the calendar, announce it to your family, staff, and yourself. Don’t get crushed by the “block of time” mentality. If you wait for a block of time to come along to play, you probably won’t be playing much. A physician once told me, “I set priorities--even for my rest.”

Get lost!

People who are having the time of their lives say, “I lost track of time.” Athletes call it, “being in the zone.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls it, “going with the flow.” In his book, *Timelock*, Ralph Keyes calls it, “annulling time.” You know it by this description, when you are doing something and you are totally in the moment. You have lost all sense of time because you aren’t thinking of anything but what you are doing. Go for these activities when you consider taking time out. They are worth your time and make life worth living.

Think small

Not all play demands a lot of time, money, or calories. Brainstorm a list of little play activities. Make the number of activities on your list equal your age. Simplicity is not only the new buzzword, but also a way out of the “overwhelm mentality” of the information age. Reviving the “Sunday drive” is a simple way to have fun...even with the price of gasoline, the payoff is greater.

Add more foreplay

Many of you may find that you don't feel guilty during vacation or extended periods of time, but you feel pressed to be busy, or doing something, for several days until you unwind. It's common to cram every possible “to-do” before vacation. Try the opposite. A week before vacation take twenty minutes extra playtime, maybe a related activity like watching a video. Add ten minutes of this type of “foreplay” to your day. Get the high priorities done, but wind down before vacation begins. Mentally “punch your time clock” when you leave the office the last day. Get used to being on vacation before it starts.

Buy some Rx for guilt

One way to relieve guilt during play is pay someone else to do the tasks that might be haunting you. Time saving services are on the rise. Personal assistants, professional organizers, and personal chefs have national organizations---a sign that we are outsourcing personal to-dos in order to “buy ourselves” some time.

Get out of balance

The Law of Imbalance promises to make the biggest difference in your life. Vilfredo Pareto “discovered” the 80/20 principle about 100 years ago. He simply said that 20% of the people in England owned 80% of the land. This mysterious universal theory proves itself in every industry and endeavor.

What is a definition of your 20%? It is those activities which produce 80% of the results you want from using your three most valuable resources—time, money, and energy (physical and creative). Many time you don't feel like you get much done because you are doing the 80%.

Think of your own life. Isn't it true that out of 100% of your clothing, you tend to wear the same 20%? Why? You like these clothes. They serve a purpose—comfort, compliments, or maybe you don't know. Think of your favorite restaurant. Is it surprising that from the whole menu, you probably order around the same 20%? When asked by a friend, “What should I order?” Remember, you are really a limited resource!

Less is more here. Finding the 20% in all your life activities can produce 80% of the results you want—wealth, happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction, making a difference, etc. Richard Koch in his book *The 80/20 Principle* proposes that “80/20 thinking is most valuable encouraging people to pursue high-value/satisfaction activities in both work and play periods, rather than stimulating an exchange of work for play. How can the Law of Imbalance be applied in your personal life to create the feeling of balance? What play produces 80% of the results you desire? Decide today to schedule one of your favorite 20% activities and do it within the week.

You are in your 20% when you are engaged in:

1. Activities that advance your overall purpose in life (this assumes you know what that is)
2. Things you have always wanted to do.
3. Activities that make you feel about yourself.
4. Hiring people to do the tasks you are not good at or don't like doing.
5. Smiling a lot.

As the holidays approach, think of the 20% that gives you the greatest pleasure-even at work. This is a gift to yourself. It might mean letting go of some traditions for simpler activities that bring you more playfulness.

Doing what you love and loving what you do

Hopefully you already enjoy this high form of play--having a freely chosen profession you love. "Unless you do what you like to do, it's not real leisure," says a 1936 Home Economics book for girls. Going to the office and mentally showing up to each staff person, each customer, client, patient or each other, is often a form of relaxation and time out from other concerns. As the adage goes, "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life."

Pam Vaccaro, CSP is a professional speaker whose expertise in managing time and attention brings her before audiences internationally. She is a Certified Speaking Professional, the highest earned designation by the National Speakers Association. Her company Designs on Time challenges companies and associations to rethink traditional time management. She is most known for tailored programs and innovative ideas.

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