

Are You Having Fun Yet?

If you're like most people, among your best childhood memories are the times you spent having fun. Maybe you chased butterflies in the garden or fireflies until bedtime. Maybe you played baseball under a hot sun, pickup hockey on a chilly morning or spent time with books, dolls or crafts.

If fun is missing from your life, it's time to get it back. Research shows that playing and having fun is important for good physical and mental health. As for our bodies, having fun relaxes the muscles and counters the physical tension that results from stress. Mentally, having fun reduces stress and worry and clears our minds for the tasks that may not be so fun.

Having fun also can work wonders for our most significant relationships. When couples first meet, having fun is easy. But as commitments like children and careers come on the scene, some couples lose sight of the importance of having fun together. That's one reason why therapists ask couples with relationship problems, "How did you used to have fun together?"

If you're overdue for some fun, try these tips.

Drop your prejudices about fun. Before you can have fun, you may have to drop certain beliefs. For instance, fun isn't just for children, it's for anyone of any age. Also, fun should have no strings attached — it should be its own reward. Finally, having fun doesn't mean being irresponsible. That you make time to do something that has so many proven benefits is perhaps the most responsible thing you could do.

Looking for something fun to do?

Search your memory. Maybe you once took great joy in baseball or swimming, theater or reading a good book. Try it again! There's a story of two couples who get together to create pictures with crayons, yarn, buttons and magazine clippings, much like pre-schoolers in art class. The couples look forward to an evening of talking, doing crafts and having fun. And a woman who remembered watching her grandmother have fun in a quilting bee started one of her own.

Do something you always thought would be fun. Put your dreams into action. Always wanted to sing in a group, take up a sport, write a book? Try it out for fun (if you're taking up a sport, you

may want to talk with your doctor first). One couple put their lives on hold to drive cross-country, stopping at sites along the way. The trip was something they had always wanted to do together.

Don't force your fun. If you start golfing or bowling or take up some other activity but find yourself thinking too much about your score or how others judge what you're doing, you're probably not having fun. To know whether you're having fun, ask yourself two questions: Did you lose track of time while you were doing it? Did it relax you? A yes to each is a pretty good indication that you're having fun.

If you just can't have fun no matter how hard you try, it may be a sign of something else. People with overwhelming stress might benefit from certain relaxation or stress management exercises that will help them enjoy fun activities. Others may experience depression. For helpful information on reducing stress or treating depression, contact your employee assistance program.

Sources: R.B. McNeilly, *Healing the Whole Person*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000. "Remember Fun?" Utne Reader, March/April 2001.

Think Different

Recognize this slogan from the computer maker? "Think Different" is sage advice (even though it's grammatically incorrect) for anyone who feels stress or upset due to life events. Here's why.

You can't have a feeling or emotion without first having a thought. So, if you want to feel differently about something, you should begin by thinking differently about that something.

Here's an example: You're driving down the freeway when, all of sudden, traffic stops. One moment you're at posted speeds. The next moment, you're at a standstill.

Many people would think of the traf-

fic jam as an inconvenience, which would normally lead to feelings of stress. But because thoughts come before feelings, if these people *thought* differently about the traffic jam, they would *feel* differently about it. For instance, they could think of the traffic jam as an opportunity to find a new music station or to think through a problem. (Of course others may simply get off the freeway and find a different route — more power to them!)

What this example shows is that, because everyone has control over his or her thoughts (except the severely mentally ill, of course), everyone has con-

trol over his or her feelings. This applies to everything in life: How you think about your job, marriage, children or relationships with co-workers determines how you feel about these things. Feel anger over events in your marriage? Then think of all the good things about your relationship and you'll start to feel differently about it. Feel stress from the many mistakes your co-workers make? Then think about all the mistakes they don't make and you'll start to feel differently.

You don't have to feel anger or stress if you don't want to. The choice is up to you.

Making A Relationship Last

What makes a marriage last? Judith Wallerstein, PhD, asked 50 couples that very question. The couples had been married for at least nine years, had children together and regarded their marriages as happy. To ensure that her findings were on the mark, she interviewed the same couples again two years later.

From her work, Wallerstein arrived at what she calls "The Nine Tasks Needed for A Good Marriage."

Task 1: Separate the expectations of married life from the expectations each partner learned from his/her family of origin.

Task 2: Build togetherness through intimacy and shared values. At the same time, allow room for each partner to pursue his/her own interests.

Task 3: Protect relationship intimacy

from the stress of family and career obligations.

Task 4: Protect relationship privacy when children come on the scene.

Task 5: Learn to work as a couple to confront and overcome life crises.

Task 6: Ensure that each partner has the ability to safely express differences, anger and conflict.

Task 7: Use humor and laughter to keep things in perspective and to keep the relationship from becoming boring.

Task 8: Learn to nurture, encourage and support each other.

Task 9: Keep alive the spirit and feelings of the early, romantic days of falling in love.

Source: American Psychological Association.

You're Not Getting Older, You're Getting Better

While the aging process may bring about physical aches and pains, a person's psychological health actually improves. That's the conclusion of a study conducted at the University of California at Berkeley. Researchers there have tracked the same group of people for 50 years, assessing their psychological health about every 10 years. They found that productivity, the qual-

ity of interpersonal relationships and the ability to behave compassionately toward others all improve with age. Even teenagers who had problems during adolescence (all subjects were first interviewed at 14) showed signs of improvement across the lifespan, suggesting that aging really isn't about getting older, but getting better. (American Psychological Association)

Hidden Signs of Stress

Sign: Sore biceps or thigh muscles (quadriceps)

Cause: During times of stress, the body releases the energy hormone, adrenaline. If adrenaline isn't used, it is stored in the body as cortisol. Cortisol causes the muscles to tighten and become sore, leading to soreness in the arms and legs.

What you can do: Exercise. It not only releases built up adrenaline and cortisol in the body, it releases other hormones that make you better prepared to handle stress.

Sign: Scattered thoughts

Cause: Stress affects the ability to concentrate, leading to such problems as bounced checks and missed assignments at work. Stress also can make you forgetful.

What you can do: Use lists and a schedule to keep track of things you need to do. End each day by writing out the things you need to do the next day. Do this both at work and at home. List-making will lead to fewer mistakes, which will lead to greater self-esteem and less stress.

Sign: Sleeping eight hours a night, but still feeling tired

Cause: Stress keeps your mind awake and unable to relax, even if you are getting an appropriate amount of sleep.

What you can do: Take a hot shower or bath right before bed. Doing so raises your body temperature, then rapidly lowers it. This will help put you into a deep sleep.



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