

# PLAY TIME

→ As scientists reveal the powerful effects of fun on our wellbeing, isn't it time we all took pure, simple enjoyment a bit more seriously?

WORDS **SALLY BROWN**

**H**ere is your official permission to never feel guilty about taking time out to simply have fun, or do something purely for enjoyment: it's a mental health necessity. Doing things you enjoy is as effective at treating the symptoms of depression as talking therapy, according to a new study from the University of Exeter. Known as 'behavioural activation', it involves identifying things that really make you smile (as opposed to things you think you ought to enjoy), then simply doing more of them, whether that's salsa dancing, gardening, karaoke, or cuddling your dog. Researchers found that having fun reduced symptoms of depression by 50 per cent in two thirds of people.

We know that children thrive on fun, but we're finally realising that pleasure is also vital for adults. 'Remembering

what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives is probably the most important factor in being a fulfilled human being,' says psychologist Dr Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute of Play in California. 'The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.'

Somewhere during the transition from childhood to adulthood we start to feel differently about fun, moving it down our priority list to 'when we have time'. But we're realising that a life without fun isn't, well, much fun, and we're actively trying to reintroduce it into our lives.

We're joining grown-up ►



summer camps, like Camp Grounded, and the Good Life Experience, to put down our devices and play on things like waterslides and zip lines, climb trees, or do crochet and make candles. Lego has brought out an adult range (David Beckham recently admitted it's his top way to relax), and grown-up colouring books continue to top the bestseller lists. We're even adding play to our nightlife – there are nightclubs with ball pools and soft play areas, and we love an adults-only bouncy castle. 'There's a trend for immersive theatre,' says Kate Johnson from trend analysts Stylus, 'like *You Me Bum Bum Train* – a staged version of the dressing up and play-acting you did as a child.'

Most of us have experienced that shift in mood, and the knock-on effect it has on our thoughts, after doing something that's genuinely fun. 'It's caused by a chemical reaction in the brain,' says Stephanie Davies, CEO of Laughology, specialists in the psychology of happiness. 'When we are low, there is a depletion of serotonin, the chemical that makes us happy, and an increase in stress hormones. This has an effect on our thinking and can put a negative filter on our thoughts. Doing something fun is both an effective distraction and a way of boosting levels of serotonin. This helps you view things from a new perspective. And it's accumulative, because the brain is like a muscle, so the more you do enjoyable activities, the more it becomes attuned to pleasure.'

'A truly fun activity is also a form of mindfulness,' says Karen Pine, professor of psychology at the University of Hertfordshire, and co-founder of Do Something Different (dtd.me). 'It grounds you in the present, and stops you ruminating on the past, or worrying about the future. In some ways it's more effective than mindfulness as it's less introspective. Getting immersed in fun can also create a sense of time slowing, which is an effective antidote to stress.'

But it's not just your mood that benefits from fun – it's also good for relationships. In the early days of a relationship, we instinctively look for ways to experience fun together, often doing things that are



out of character, whether it's ice skating, picnics or bungee jumping, as if we recognise that it's a great way to connect and get to know each other. 'But that gets neglected further down the line,' says psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd, co-author of *This Book Will Make You Happy* (Quercus, £7.99). 'Our conversation becomes dominated by tasks – what needs doing, who is going to do it. But planning a fun activity can get you out of a rut.'

Research shows that sharing an enjoyable activity with another person enhances the experience and helps us connect. 'The reason corporate team building days include activities like circus skills is because we know that having fun in a group is a fast way to feel connected,' says Pine.

There's nothing wrong with a go-to way of having fun – whether that's a Zumba class or watching a comedy, but you get extra benefits from looking for new activities, according to Pine. 'It's good for the brain because it creates new neural pathways. I recently got a potter's wheel and I've started throwing pots – it's creative, tactile, meditative, but also very messy and reminds me of making mud pies as a child!'

Of course, 'having fun' shouldn't be something you put on your to-do list, as turning it into another task defeats the object. But we do have to make an effort to include fun when life gets busy, according to Davies: 'My business is about happiness, yet I still have to remind myself to make time for fun. Don't overthink it, but do look out for it – fun can be as simple as a light-hearted conversation.' **h**

**“ A TRULY FUN ACTIVITY IS ALSO A FORM OF MINDFULNESS ”**

## TAPPING INTO THE FUN FACTOR

- **Make a mood map.** Print out a weekly activity planner (free from psychology.tools), then record exactly how much of what you did was pleasurable. If there is a lack of fun, you can look at where to introduce it. If you do things you enjoy, ask, how can I fit in more of them?
- **Start small.** When you're low, schedule one fun activity a day, even if it's just going out for coffee. Make it a specific time, and involve another person – it will be an added push to do it.
- **Do some time travelling.** Thinking back to your childhood can be a good steer of what is authentically fun for you, whether that's getting out on your bike, tap dancing or sketching.
- **Prime for fun.** Create a mood board of pictures that make you laugh, or of you doing something fun, and put it next to your desk.
- **Use cat power.** When you have a free minute, don't check emails, watch a funny cat video. It's good for your mental health, according to a US study. **h**