

PLAYTIME AND MENTAL HEALTH

So – what do you do for fun? Do you make room in your busy life to play? In order to be emotionally and mentally healthy you need to incorporate play into each aspect of your life whether it is work, relationships, physical activity or just plain daily life.

Somehow we have developed an entire ‘work ethic’ around our play time. We see ‘play time’ as synonymous with ‘vacation’ and we work harder on our vacations than we do on our jobs. How many times have you returned from vacation saying “I need to go back to work to rest up.”? The American Way is to cram more activities into a vacation than there is time available. What is not allowed is time to just kick back and relax. Doing ‘nothing’ is not acceptable and is especially not acceptable when on vacation!

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary says:

Play: to engage in recreation

Recreation: a refreshing of strength or spirit

According to the above dictionary definitions recreation is about recreating or re-creating; creating ourselves anew. Refreshing the spirit may mean spending time with people you care about – sharing stories, laughing, being silly and spontaneous. Playfulness is one of the key ingredients in maintaining a healthy and vibrant relationship. It helps strengthen the bonds between people. It helps us cope with the rough times of loss and disappointment and it enhances the good times of laughter and joy. If we allow ourselves playtime, - vacation – time for recreation – only once per year, (or so), we place enormous strain on ourselves and our families. Sometimes our vacation time is the time we set aside to visit our families on the Outside and that in itself can be the biggest stressor of all and not much fun to boot. This can happen when the visit is about obligation and expectation and not about relaxing and refreshing your strength or spirit.

Playing, as any child can tell you, also involves physical activity. Sports, hiking, swimming, chasing children or grandchildren can all be playful and fun. If you need any help playing or learning how to play, just watch how the kids do it. Physical activities required by your job do not count as play time as they are not geared to refresh your spirit just your pocketbook. Joyful and enjoyable physical activity stimulates the brain to release the “feel good” neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. This helps relieve stress and worry and lightens the mood.

Work is a source of tremendous stress for most people, whether it is from a physically demanding job, long hours, boredom, difficult work conditions or whether it is

from the office politics, different personalities or deadlines. Any work situation is made more bearable and stress lessened by playing. Playing at work takes many different forms. It can be something as simple as telling jokes during break times, going out to lunch with co-workers or having a pot-luck at work. Appropriate practical jokes are also a way to play at work – remember though, it is only a joke if both people are laughing.

Play time does not have to be weeks in length nor does it have to entail travel or loads of money. It can be something as simple as a 10 minute break to just enjoy the sunshine, or the rain or the rainbow, taking the kids to the PCR for 30 minutes of basketball or throwing a ball for your dog to chase. Taking small breaks on a daily basis will help refresh your spirit which encourages relaxation, rest, mental alertness, and reduce stress. This leads to a more fulfilling life and improved emotional and mental health.

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