

How Hobbies Improve Mental Health

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Introduction

Mental health can be impacted by many different things, from life-changing events to everyday tasks. And while there are many strategies we can actively engage in to improve our mental health, an often-overlooked factor is spending time on an activity that you enjoy – otherwise known as a hobby.

What “counts” as a hobby?

A hobby can be any activity done regularly during spare or leisure time for pleasure. Whether you do something creative, athletic, academic, or something more individualized, what really matters is that it is something you find meaningful and enjoyable. Hobbies can range from spending quiet time alone, visiting or eating with others, communing with nature, playing sports, and even vacationing. When we dedicate time to voluntarily engage in pleasurable activities, research shows our mental health can flourish.

Some mental health benefits of hobbies:

- **Reduced stress:** participating in activities during leisure or spare time has been shown to reduce

stress levels. For instance, one study showed approximately 75% of participants' cortisol levels (one of the most widely studied hormonal markers of stress) were lowered after making art. Don't consider yourself to be an artistic person? That's okay! This study also showed that prior experience wasn't needed to reduce stress.

- **Enhanced well-being:** a study in New Zealand found that engaging in creative activities can lead to an improved sense of wellbeing that may have long lasting effects. Participants felt a higher positive affect or mood and a sense of flourishing after days where they engaged in a creative activity.
- **Improved social connection, decreases in depression and anxiety:** while there are many mental health benefits related to hobbies on your own, group or 'team' hobbies have also been shown to provide important opportunities for social connection, friendship and support. Research also shows that adults who regularly participate in some kind of team sport are less likely to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress.
- **Improved mental health:** hobbies that include physical activity have been linked to many health benefits including reduced stress, reduced blood pressure, and a lower heart rate. But if you take physical activity outside, there are many additional positive benefits. Experts agree that spending as little as 10 minutes in nature can lead to improved mood, focus, and overall wellbeing.

Tips to make time for hobbies:

A common barrier that seems to make it difficult to do the things we love is TIME. When it comes to how our lives are typically structured, work tends to come before play. And although many of us feel like there isn't enough time in the day for hobbies, there are changes we can make to help find and spend free time doing the things we love:

1. Rather than trying to find 'hobby time' every day, try thinking of time in weeks to discover extra time hidden in your schedule. Dedicate a few hours for something you enjoy each week. Still struggling to find time for fun? Take a step back and say 'no' (or delegate) to lighten your load and make space for hobbies.
2. There are many times during the day we may find ourselves in autopilot mode. It's easy to lose track of time doing mindless things like checking social media or watching television. Tune in to how you're spending down time, whether it's in the

- morning or evening, and consider how you might use that time to indulge in something you enjoy.
3. More and more research supports taking 'micro breaks' during the work day to increase overall productivity. Take advantage of these short breaks throughout the day to do something that brings you joy, like taking a walk outside, listening to your favorite podcast or music, reading a chapter or two of a good book, or visiting with others.

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