

Using Fun to Combat Stress

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Author Catherine Price in her book *The Power of Fun* suggests that “true fun” has three components: playfulness, connection and flow. According to Price, you are experiencing true fun when you have an experience where all three of these factors are present. Each of these components by themselves can also have positive impacts on our mental health and are worth pursuing individually as well as collectively.

Let’s first look at playfulness. Playfulness is any activity that you do with the intent to have fun, feel uninhibited—meaning you are not worried about judgement or failure, and often is spontaneous in some way. Research shows that engaging in playful activities facilitates healing, improves morale, and increases motivation. Playful activities contribute to psychological, cognitive, and physical well being and contributes to healthy aging. Experiences where you provide yourself (and/or possibly others) with humor, amusement or entertainment is another way to think about play.

The second component of fun is connection. Dr. Vivek Murthy, United States Surgeon General described loneliness as an epidemic and identifies a myriad of negative health outcomes associated with isolation including sleep disruption, cognitive decline, diminished self-regulation, increased cardiovascular health risks, and depression. We all need human connection and we can gain more of this feeling of connection by improving

our relationships and engaging in service. One way to increase feeling connected with others is to remove distractions while spending quality time. For example, if you are talking on the phone with a friend, avoid checking your email during the conversation.

Lastly let’s talk about flow. When was the last time you were so engaged in an activity that you lost track of time? If you have had this experience, you have experienced flow. Flow is being fully present and engaged. This reduces stress because you are fully present and not distracted with other worries or stressors. Flow is also associated with feelings of fulfillment and pleasure. This pleasure is also reinforcing and long lasting and it is not associated with negative feelings. One way to help get into a flow state is to eliminate distractions and practice not multitasking. Research has shown that our brain can only focus on one task at a time and when we think we are multitasking we are really just shifting our attention rapidly between two tasks. By focusing on one task at a time we facilitate being fully present and engaged.

To experience more moments of fun, Price recommends starting with thinking of something that you have always wanted to do, but say you don’t have time for. Then, actually do it. Another suggestion is to take some time over the next few weeks and notice during the day when you have feelings of playfulness, connection or flow (or any combination of these experiences) and write them down. This will help you identify what draws you to these moments of fun and you can be proactive about having more of them.

References:

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