

Six Reasons to Get a Hobby

As a get-to-know-you exercise, I recently asked a new crop of college students what their hobbies were. Some were taken aback. Hobbies?! What a frivolous thing! Who has the time?

They're not alone. Nowadays, we are just unbearably, painfully, overwhelmingly busy! Between running the kids from piano to soccer to math tutoring, keeping a tidy house, and staying on top of a constant influx of emails, how can there be time for anything fun?

It wasn't always like this. In his influential book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documents a sweeping decline in civic engagement, from PTA memberships to neighborhood potlucks to, yes, bowling leagues. Over a couple of generations, Americans have somehow misplaced their free time.

Various things contribute to this, but for many of us, being legitimately busy simply isn't one of them. Instead, we habitually waste time, creating the *illusion* of busyness. Facebook, email, Netflix – pick your poison. If you're like me, you don't wake up in the morning with the goal of squandering so many precious moments on social media, but it often happens, and this is unaccounted for time that can be better spent elsewhere.

Consider the possibility that you're not as busy as you think. In her recent book *Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time*, Brigid Schulte argues that "I'm too busy" has become a badge of honor, a sign of virtue and importance. We have done a bang-up job of convincing ourselves that we're super-busy. Don't buy into it. You have time for a hobby...or two!

Why you need hobbies:

Hobbies help you structure your time. According to Parkinson's law, "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." More simply, things

take as much time as you have. So, when the evening stretches out before you, unscheduled, you might find yourself laboring over that work project or answering emails into the wee hours. Chances are, if you had choir practice or a book club meeting that night, you would get those tasks done much more quickly. So, hobbies can seem to *create more time* by encouraging efficiency.

Hobbies promote flow. Left to our own devices, we often opt for passive leisure—TV and web surfing are at the top of most people’s lists. And, sure, we all need to veg out from time to time. But we are so much more invigorated by *active leisure*, the sort of thing psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow activities. If you’ve ever lost yourself in a sport, art project, or other challenging, absorbing activity, you’ve experienced flow. Time flies, self-consciousness disappears, and you are fully immersed in the activity at hand. Hobbies, especially those that stretch our skills, foster this desirable and increasingly elusive state.

Hobbies can foster new social connections. While some hobbies are solitary endeavors, many get us out in our communities, meeting people we otherwise wouldn’t, sharing our passions, and forming new bonds. Countless studies have found that social connection is a key component of happiness and a meaningful life, and hobbies have the potential to create precious new ties.

Hobbies make you interesting. Hobbies give you something to talk about at parties and around the water cooler. They add layers to your identity, richness to your self-concept. People want to be around those with passions, with a sense of curiosity, with stories to tell. You not only feel more inspired when you have a rich and active life, but you will inspire others as well.

Hobbies help you cope with stress. Imagine a rough day at the office, where you were harshly criticized by your boss. Coming home and turning on the TV may provide a brief distraction, but it doesn’t address your damaged ego head-on. Now imagine that after work you head out to your soccer league or pottery

class. These activities are more than merely distracting. They remind you that there are many facets to your self-concept. Employee, yes, but also athlete or artist. As such, a blow to one aspect of your identity is less damaging. Simply put, your eggs aren't all in one basket.

And the benefits can spill over into other aspects of your life. If you can designate an hour a day or even a few hours a week for something you feel truly inspired and enlivened by, don't be surprised if some of that newfound zest carries over into your work and family life!

So, what should you choose as your new hobby? Maybe there's something you've always wanted to do, like learning to knit, garden or play the piano. Maybe there's something you used to love that you've stopped doing. Perhaps you could reach out to a new organization: a community choir, softball team, or book club. If you're feeling really open-minded, you could browse the local newspaper and pick something on a whim: "Beekeeping! Now THAT sounds interesting." Just don't follow that phrase with, "Ah well. Maybe someday, when the kids leave the house or when I retire." Carve out the time and find a hobby now! You have more time than you think you do.