

# Prioritize Fun: Any Way You Do it!

What exactly is fun? It's different for everyone but research shows that for most people, fun consists of three elements: connection, playfulness, and flow.<sup>i</sup> Fun is an important tool in managing stress and all three of the elements of fun have been shown to decrease a person's perceived level of stress.

**Connection with others**, social connection, is especially important now, when isolation and loneliness are on the rise. For many people, in-person connections are not possible and virtual connections don't feel like second-best, they feel worse than nothing. But interaction with others is key to well-being; it even supports our immune function. So, as with so much in life these days, connecting with others needs to become a priority. How? In person if it is safe to do so; virtually through phone or apps; or casually. We all have opportunities to strike up a conversation with someone we are in line with or do a random act of kindness. "Only connect," is a phrase used by novelist E.M. Forster in 1910 and it could well become a motto for us this year.

Other forms of connection are also healthy for us. Interacting with pets has been shown to have significant benefits for our mental health.<sup>ii</sup> Many people "connect" with activities they enjoy and certainly many of us "connect" to the natural world. What may add benefit is thinking about these forms of connection as ways we have fun.

**Playfulness** is often associated with children but adults can be playful too...and we would probably be better off if we were. Playfulness contributes to resilience and may even support positive coping strategies when facing adversities. There are many ways people can experience playfulness. Some people find their playfulness with others; some by taking life less seriously, choosing a lighthearted approach to most things. Some people are just the opposite. Their playfulness comes from engaging in complexity and "toying" with ideas. And still others are good at whimsy, finding novel ways to engage with just about anything that arises. Any degree of playfulness is probably good for us.

**Flow** is the third element of fun. Flow is the enjoyable experience of being so lost in what we are doing that we lose track of time and everything else. What will trigger a flow state is different for all of us but we can usually recognize when we have been in flow and when others are in it. We can achieve flow with others or on our own.

## CREATING FUN

The issue today is how to create fun when so many ways we might have done so in the past are blocked or less accessible. One important step may be to drop preconceived ideas about what "fun" is supposed to be and let ourselves think about our own experiences of fun. I did this myself and realized that reading, writing and thinking about how to put ideas into handouts like

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this one actually is how I have fun! It made a difference to me to realize this; I enjoyed that realization!

Here are some questions that may help you find your ways of having fun.

1. First, remember times you had fun. What did they have in common?
2. If you accepted that you might have to scale back your previous experiences of fun to retain some piece of what was fun, do you come up with some ideas of things you can do?
3. What happens if you think about the three elements of fun separately? What connections with others are enjoyable? What's playful for you? What activities induce flow for you?
4. Is there somebody whose way of having fun you enjoy? Can you enjoy vicarious fun?

Finally, when in doubt there are always videos of people laughing. I have a video on my desk of an orangutan laughing and it never fails to make me laugh...and let's me know that no matter what, I can always have fun!

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/well/mind/having-fun-succeeding-coronavirus-pandemic.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>ii</sup> Walsh F. (2009). Human-animal bonds I: the relational significance of companion animals. *Family Process*, 48(4), 462–480. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2009.01296.x>