

KEEPING YOUR SANITY WITH PLAYFULNESS

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A relationship can have complex

and unique needs at any given time, so there isn't really a one size fits all panacea for troubles. But of all the specific actions we can take to improve our relationships, I have found none that apply as often or as effectively as this:

Be playful.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But it's more challenging than meets the eye, and there are clear guidelines for it to work. Here's how to do it.

We have to play as an *ally*, as a member of the same team; we have to be *for* our spouse, our child, our friend; and the play must have a spirit of love, kindness and optimism, as opposed to cynicism or sarcasm. There cannot be bitterness or resentment clouding the play; it's the combination of creative, interactive flow and positive emotions that elevates us.

If you're up for the challenge, you're in for some pleasant surprises.

When we're feeling hurt, afraid, irritated, angry, worried, or anxious, our focus narrows, and our thinking constricts. We zero in on the acute source of our troubles, and there are times this is necessary; but more often we can get stuck in a kind of negative tunnel vision that limits our ability to connect, to love, to feel joy.

Play is energizing, and it can help to broaden our thinking and expand our focus, allowing us to see possibilities we may not have been aware of before.

Like exercise: it can be hard work to get ourselves to decide to play, but once we start, the fun of it can ease our stress, soothe our irritation, and quell our negative thinking toward others.

And, as Plato said, *You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.*

Once we've established playfulness as a habit, and built it into the culture of our relationships, it becomes more natural to go there, even when there's trouble or misunderstanding. Well worn paths are easier to follow. But what if we have not been playful in our relationships? How do we start?

There are two obstacles to overcome:

1. The momentum of our past habits – both our own and those we're with
2. The scary unknown place between where we are and where we'd like to be

We get good at whatever we practice, good or bad. If we've been practicing being grumpy and distrustful for a long time, we will be very good at being grumpy and distrustful. The feelings and self-concept that fit with our negativity will seem familiar and "right;" while the feelings that go with a more playful approach will seem unfamiliar and probably uncomfortable.

Initially we can mistake such discomfort as a message that the new behavior is somehow wrong or phony.

We have to be willing to go off-road for awhile – trying things that don't come naturally to us, and risking some potential hurt feelings and disappointments along the way. This involves something akin to a leap of faith.

We need to believe that something good enough awaits us on the other side of what's familiar to take a chance and try something new. We have to believe that being more playful will bring enough improvement to make it well worth facing our fears.

There are some common worries to being more playful:

- The people in our lives may react cynically or critically, judging what we're doing as silly or stupid
- It might not work, and then we may feel dumb or embarrassed
- We may have little or no experience with being playful, so we feel awkward
- It could make things worse – if we get a negative response, we may end up feeling hurt
- We may open ourselves up to more of our own feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, and this can be scary or uncomfortable

Any or all of these things could happen. And there could be other consequences, too. If the thought of being playful gives you the willies, I'm sure you can think of a lot more.

That said; there is so much upside to being more playful. Play is movement, creativity, and spontaneity. If we feel stagnant in a given relationship, we may have nothing to lose by being a little more playful. If it's done in a spirit of goodwill and love, it's not likely that we'll do any harm; and it's very likely that we'll be happier and closer for it.

What if you've never been very playful? It's just a skill, and with some practice, anyone can learn it.

A good first step is to find other people who are good at it, and watch what they do. Begin to pay attention to things your more playful friends or acquaintances do. Watch kids, kittens, and puppies, particularly for their energy and attitude. Look for characters in books, movies, or TV that seem to show a kind of benevolent playfulness.

And notice your reaction. If you find yourself mocking or criticizing playful people, you might consider what that's about. Maybe you've got some negative ideas about what being playful means that could bear some

scrutiny. Cynicism has a powerful social pressure to it; reflect on whether you're making yourself miserable by going along with a cynical culture by default.

The next step is to practice it yourself. If it's possible, I highly recommend taking a good comedy improvisation class. This is a big step... kind of like taking an immersion course in play. Comedy improvisation teaches the kind of spontaneity and openness that's central to playfulness.

Once you get used to the idea, practice being more playful a little bit each day. Start with people you're most comfortable with and expand from there; make it a creative project to find new ways to be playful. Even adding just 5% more playfulness to your day can make a world of difference.

Play, done with a kind and loving spirit, is the antidote to stagnation and hurt feelings; it is the antithesis of bitterness and contempt. It can be the way through a difficult time, and the way out of a negative self-concept

G.K. Chesterton said, *The true object of all human life is play. Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground.*

Simple as it may seem, a vital element of a successful relationship... is simply to play.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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