

Strategy: Indulge yourself sometimes (e.g., treat yourself to a nap, jog, favourite dinner, bubble bath).

Have you ever heard the old proverb, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy?” That’s a pretty good way to kick off our discussion about how indulging yourself can improve your self-regard. But, actually, the proverb doesn’t quite get it right.

Allowing yourself to “play” – do things you enjoy – doesn’t just make you more interesting, it’s also a way of looking after, or in effect, loving yourself. To some of us, the idea of “self-love” may seem like selfishness or conceit, but self-love and conceit are not the same at all. Valuing, prizing, honouring and loving yourself are closely related to your ability to love others. Erich Fromm, author of “The Art of Loving,” notes that the love for oneself is inseparably connected with the love for any other being.

In addition, taking the time out to reward ourselves, engage in enjoyable activities, and indulge ourselves in appropriate ways at appropriate times, are all beneficial to our mental and physical health. Doing this:

- Gives us a break from hard work and stress
- Helps us to mentally and physically relax
- Lets us experience pleasurable feelings that help us maintain a positive outlook on life
- Allows us to express ourselves
- Reinforces feelings of worthiness
- Increases our self-confidence and self-esteem
- Builds healthier relationships with others

Treating Yourself with Self-Regard

When you allow yourself time to do the things you delight in, you are actually treating yourself with high self-regard. In effect, you are saying to yourself, “Hey, I must be a worthwhile person if I think I deserve time for enjoyment.” We tend to think that if we feel good about ourselves, we’ll naturally let ourselves have some fun. That can be true, but the opposite is also true. Sometimes we need to make a conscious effort to encourage ourselves to pursue the things we love to do.

We can get confused about the place of pleasure in our lives for two reasons. One is that we get such strong messages to be responsible and work hard, so having fun can sometimes seem like an irresponsible waste of time. Secondly, we’ve all seen situations where devoting too much time to “fun and games” can cause people to neglect their responsibilities, and we may be trying to avoid this pitfall as well.

It’s a question of balance, of course. In fact, being able to “delay gratification” – that is, being able to wait to experience pleasure – is an important life skill. Numerous studies have shown that people who can delay gratification are generally more successful in life. In one famous study, children who were able to wait two minutes to eat a marshmallow, rather than eat it right away, were found to do better in school years later, compared to kids who just couldn’t wait to eat that marshmallow (Michel, 1989).

So, self-discipline is an important skill. But people can overdo it with self-discipline, even to the point where they cause themselves harm from too much stress and exhaustion.

If you lead a very busy life, or you're the type of person who thinks, "Okay, I've got a free Saturday afternoon so I've got to find something productive to do," the first thing to remember is that *having fun is productive* because it's part of a healthy lifestyle!

Giving ourselves permission to have fun is also one way we can make our own good feelings happen. Much of the time we look to other people for permission to feel good about ourselves (e.g., praise from our boss/ co-workers, attention from people we like, someone doing something nice for us). Those experiences are important, but we can't always control when good feelings come from external sources. Our friends don't always have time for us, our co-workers could be in a bad mood, and even loved ones don't always treat us the way we want to be treated.

When you indulge yourself, you decide what to do and when to do it. You are in control. If you've had a rough day and you wait around for someone else to make you feel better, it may or may not happen. But if you do something you enjoy, like reading a book, seeing a movie, going out with friends or going for a run – whatever that may be – you're in control.

Some people enjoy running, which generates good feelings partly because it results in a release of endorphins, which are the brain chemicals that give us that physical "I feel great!" feeling (Boecker, 2008). Other kinds of pleasurable activities can have a similar physiological impact. Meditation, massage and even laughter have also been shown to get people's endorphins flowing.

Bottom Line

Play, fun and laughter are good for us. By all means, be responsible, work hard and do what needs to get done, but remember that enjoyment is not irresponsible! It's good for your health and it can help you maintain and even improve your self-regard.

References

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