

# What are YOU PLAYING AT?

BY ROBYN MACLARTY

**TIRED OF PRETENDING TO BE A SERIOUS, IMPORTANT ADULT? ME TOO. LET'S TAKE A BREAK AND EXPLORE WHY WE SHOULD TAKE PLAY MORE SERIOUSLY, SAYS ROBYN MACLARTY.**

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*We are inundated with more information in a day than people in the 1800s received in their entire lifetime. Look at the amazing works of art, architecture, and inventions that came from that time.*”



O

nce upon a time, when I was formally employed, I was given the role of ‘Chief Play Officer’ at the magazine

I was working at. In fact, it was the very magazine you hold in your hands. Yes, I was Chief Play Officer at FAIRLADY magazine circa 2007, where I was also a full-time features writer. It was one of the best jobs I ever had. Mostly, since I was also writing the monthly wine column, at the time my idea of ‘play’ only extended to office wine tastings on a Friday afternoon with music and snacks. It wasn’t much, but it was certainly fun and festive, and had a discernibly uplifting impact on the team. I loved every minute of it.

I consciously carried this mantle into my next job. I decorated my desk partitions with pictures of rainbows and forests. One year, I roped the entire office into filling my boss’s glass office with balloons for her birthday. I’d randomly show

up to work in a pink tutu and blow bubbles at our monthly planning meetings. It was a gas, and everyone loved it. Somewhere along the way, however, I lost it.

Things shifted. The agency lost a major client. Other clients became more demanding. There were retrenchments. A multi-national gobbled up the parent company, and the wonderfully light and creative culture was gradually replaced by a dour corporate obsession with the bottom line. More retrenchments. Workloads doubled, then quadrupled.

I forgot about play. Everyone did. And the general mood went from playful professionalism to resentful resignation. Many staff members were burnt out, myself included.

And then the pandemic hit, lockdown with it, and... Well, you know the rest. Those who thought things couldn't get worse were proven wrong. And those who were doing well were thrown into the roiling waters of uncertainty.

Hindsight is 20/20, as they say, and it's only recently that I've been able to look back and discern that the happiest, most secure times in my life were also the most playful, fun and harmonious. I'd like more of that, I decided. A *lot* more. And I am sure I'm not alone.



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the Child Ego State. We need to have a fair balance among all three in order to ensure good mental health. In my practice I'm seeing that the Child Ego State – especially what is known as the Free Child Ego State – is largely being ignored in favour of the Parent or Adult ego states. For good mental health and wellbeing, giving the Free Child time or energy to engage in positive pursuits like being playful and light-hearted is critically important.'

But what *is* this mysterious thing called play? What does it look like in adults? Is it a sign of immaturity, or a path to fulfilment? Is it as simple

as goofing off, or is there more to it? And finally – how do we get more of it when life keeps throwing anxiety bombs and grief grenades at us? Where does one even begin? Somehow, I felt toting a tutu wasn't going to cut it.

I decided to contact US play coach Jeff Harry after reading an interview with him in *The New York Times*. According to his bio, Jeff shows individuals how to tap into their 'true selves' through play, and helps

to spend a few weekends visiting parks and public open spaces to look for the best hill to roll down. When she had found it, she took her boyfriend (and a picnic) to that hill and they both rolled down the hill over and over again. One client had always wanted to go to bed with all her day-time clothes on. So she did – boots and all!

'I also remind my clients that it is a choice to "lighten up", and I encourage them to look on the bright side of life and to look for the humour in every situation.'

## Why play is important

'The past two years have been really tough because of the Covid-19 pandemic with its high levels of uncertainty and stress,' says Claire Newton, a KZN-based life coach and psychologist with a special interest in play. 'Because most of us have not easily been able to enjoy the usual things that make up a full and integrated life – physical exercise and activities, spiritual practices, socialising with friends and family, and so on – we have not been able to draw on our usual outlets for relief. As a result, many people are experiencing even higher levels of stress, fear, anxiety, depression and complicated grief than otherwise would have been the case.'

'Research is showing that people are working longer hours, and I'm seeing a lot more burnout in my practice as both psychologist and coach. Globally, we are seeing more frustration, exasperation and anger.'

There's less tolerance for people who may have a different opinion, and all of this is leading to higher levels of poor mental and physical health.'

Now, more than ever, Claire says, we need to cultivate playfulness and light-heartedness deliberately and consciously to help address the imbalance. 'Transactional analysis (TA), a theoretical approach I use a lot in my practice, propounds that we have three ego states: the Parent Ego State, the Adult Ego State and

### HOW TO PLAY

#### Claire Newton's inner child exercise

'I ask my clients to think about the fun and playful things they used to do in years gone by, or the fun and playful things they always wished they could do when they were children, and encourage them to create opportunities to do them now,' Claire says.

For example, one woman had always wanted to roll down a hill as a child but was never allowed to. 'I encouraged her



### HOW TO PLAY

#### Jeff Harry's 'get bored' exercise

##### 1 GET BORED

To start, stop binge-watching Netflix, looking at emails and doom-scrolling on social media for just 15–30 minutes. We are on our phones an average of 5 hours a day, so you can definitely find 15 minutes to allow yourself not to be stimulated by outside noise. Also, we must recognise that we are inundated with more information in a day than people in the 1800s received in their entire lifetime. Look at the amazing works of art, architecture and inventions that came from that time.

##### 2 LISTEN TO YOUR INNER CHILD/INTUITION

Once you get bored, your inner child will start to whisper ideas that make you 'nerv-cited' (nervous and excited). They may say, 'Start that blog, pick up that paintbrush, book that ticket abroad.' Whatever it whispers to you, if it makes you tingle, follow that curiosity.

##### 3 TAKE ACTION

Listening to your intuition and taking action is a huge step. It may feel like a risk, yet it expands who you are and what you believe you are capable of. If you just write the first rough draft of a blog post, for example, whether you post it or not, notice how you felt writing it, whether you felt absorbed, stimulated and gratified. Follow that feeling.

Each play leap expands what's possible. Follow your play and it will take you on adventures you never thought possible.

organisations (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, to name a few) harness the power of play for happier, more productive employees.

'I believe play is as vital as eating, breathing, sleeping and love,' he says. 'Play in many ways is self-love and one of the most powerful paths to understanding who you are. So it only makes sense that one would use play as a way to rediscover who you are.'

Jeff says he felt the need to take on this role because of the number of adults he met who had stopped playing. 'There was a moment in their childhood when they visited the playground for the last time as a kid, and they didn't know it would be the last time. With playing less, I've seen many have lost that joy, that sense of awe and wonder in the world, and I want to help people rediscover it within themselves. That is why I called my organisation Rediscover Your Play.'

He describes play as the opposite of perfection: 'Perfection is rooted in ego, shame and fear of failure. Play is built on curiosity, experimentation, and embracing failure and uncertainty. I define play as any

joyful act where you forget about time. Play has no purpose or result. You are simply in the moment. You are in flow, tapping into your zone of genius.'

Ah. This is my first real clue that there are levels of playfulness. On the surface, you've got the frivolous fun of balloons in a glass office, tutus and rainbow wallpaper. At a deeper level, play can refer to a state of being that is profoundly creative, restorative and fulfilling.

'Flow' is a state identified and popularised by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1970s, who described it as being 'fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity'. It's been posited that this state is a prerequisite for achievements to which we might apply the label 'genius'.

Doesn't it sound wonderful?

One of the qualities of flow that feels particularly pertinent to this exploration of play is that the experience is 'intrinsically rewarding'. In other words, you aren't doing it because of an expected reward in return – the



**HOW TO PLAY**

**Julia Cameron's Artist Date**

You don't have to be an artist at all to benefit from this fun and frivolous weekly activity. Sure, it forms part of her 12-step creative recovery programme known as *The Artist's Way*, but really it's simply a way to give yourself permission to do something enjoyable for its own sake.

Here it is in her own words: 'The Artist Date is a once-weekly festive solo expedition to explore something that interests you. The Artist Date need not be overtly 'artistic'— think mischief more than mastery. Artist Dates fire up the imagination. They spark whimsy. They encourage play.' An Artist Date could involve visiting a gallery, finger painting, attending a wine tasting, baking bread (yes) or visiting a trampoline park and bouncing yourself silly. I've done that last one; it's the most fun I ever had by myself.

experience itself is the reward.

How many of us can say we spend a meaningful amount of time in this state? Not many.

And yet 'play is what got many of us through the pandemic,' says Jeff, whether you were baking bread, binge-watching Netflix (which is simply watching other people play), picking up a new hobby or refreshing an old one, starting household projects, getting outside more, or spending quality time with family. 'When we are at play, we are in flow, thus making us 500% more productive. If we can increase the time we spend in flow by 15–20%, overall productivity almost doubles.'

Well, that certainly explains why burnout – a distinctly unplayful condition – is characterised by reduced productivity, even when one feels one is working harder.

But surely there's more to it than baking bread or watching Netflix?

I scratch a bit deeper and discover

the work of psychiatrist and clinical researcher Dr Stuart Brown, founder of the Institute of Play in the US, who came to the study of play quite by accident. He'd been researching a group of homicidal young men to discover what characteristics they shared, and one glaring commonality was the absence of spontaneous play in their lives.

**Play shapes the brain**

The most obvious effect of play is that it releases endorphins, which not only feels great but also promotes wellbeing and better brain function. Moreover, research has found that it can boost memory.

There are screeds of studies confirming the importance of play in early-childhood development for all kinds of psychological benefits in adulthood, from problem-solving to language skills. Playful adults are, naturally, also happier.

But does that mean that if you didn't experience enough playfulness in childhood, or didn't carry it through to adulthood, it's too late? Not according to the results of a study released in August 2020 by Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in Germany. It found that playfulness can be learnt: merely by focusing on playful experiences over the course of a week, self-described 'serious' individuals experienced short-term improvements in wellbeing and depression. It stands to reason that cultivating this state in the long term would have long-term benefits, not only for ourselves but also for our communities and society at large.

Dr Brown found that social play in adults is essential for our sense of connection – something we should all be mindful of considering how isolating the pandemic has been. This could be playing board games, watching sport events or simply

hiking in nature with friends.

Play is also essential for adult learning. Forgive the parlance, but it's a no-brainer. You're far more likely to remain motivated and retain information if you're enjoying what you're doing.

**T**he question of what constitutes adult play is tricky to answer because it is so multi-dimensional. While it seems there are obvious benefits to cultivating a sense of humour and a more playful approach to life, there is perhaps more to be said for finding an avenue of exploration that presents opportunities to access a state of 'flow', or 'deep play'.

In retrospect, I can see that rediscovering my love of art in the past year is a form of deep play. It's something I loved doing as a child (tick) but abandoned when I started working. I completely lose track of time and the outside world when I'm doing it (tick). It's creative (tick) and I do it because I love doing it, not for money or rewards (tick).

Tutus and balloons are all well and good, but it's this kind of play – immersive, exploratory abstract painting – that was missing from my adult life, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to have rediscovered and reclaimed this passion. It is as if a missing piece of me was restored.

'To quote Dr Brown,' Jeff says, 'The opposite of play is not work. The opposite of play is depression. You lose a sense of self by not playing, thus harming yourself and the community around you. Play fosters connection, understanding, empathy and psychological safety. We need all these skills now more than ever in such a polarising society to bridge the divide and build empathy for one another.' ♦