

PLAN  
to





by Kirsten Milliken, PhD

**D**O YOU FIND YOURSELF procrastinating or getting stuck on tasks at work that seem easy? Do you ever look at your partner and remember when you used to have fun? Are you serious? Bored or boring? Unhappy? Even depressed? If someone suggested to you that you should “play” more, what would you tell them?

- “Play is for kids.”
- “Grownups aren’t supposed to play.”
- “I’m too busy.”
- “I have more important things to do.”

When did play move to the bottom of your priority list? Probably about the time that being happy became second to being productive. Ironically, it may interest you to learn that play may be the cure to low productivity, unhappy relationships, boredom, and depression. Research shows that when you’re stressed, the brain’s activated emotional hub, the amygdala, suppresses positive mood, fueling a self-perpetuating cycle of negativity. Yuk! Play can break you out of that straitjacket.

When you are playing your brain gets a rush of dopamine—the “feel-good” neurotransmitter. Do-

pamine is also one of the neurotransmitters linked to ADHD. Dopamine production that accompanies a playful mood leads to improved executive functioning, including increased attention, motivation, ability to persevere, better problem solving, and resiliency. Studies show that playfulness can increase performance on the job and stoke creativity by breaking up the mental set that keeps us stuck. It resets the brain.

Adults with ADHD can find many sources on how diet, exercise, food, and medication impact symptoms. There is also much written about the impact of play on early development and adult well-being, the neurochemical impact of play on the brain, and the neurobiology of ADHD. There is little written about the connection between ADHD and play, however. While all this information might lead one conclude that connecting play to ADHD is a no-brainer, until now, only Jaak Panksepp, PhD, has looked directly at play as a way to manage ADHD. He has done this through his research with rats, which suggested that ADHD-type rats that were allowed to play were able to function better as adults than those that were prevented from playing.



## ADHD and play

To me, these are the perfect marriage. Before you read on, stop for a moment and think about a recent time when you were playful. Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing? What did you see? How did you feel? What did you notice? How long did you continue the activity? Did ADHD symptoms pose a problem for you during this time?

Most people with ADHD will notice that when they are playful their symptoms of ADHD are consistently minimal if not nonexistent. Play is the antidote to the challenges of ADHD: interest, attention, and motivation.

What do I mean by play? Kicking a ball, running around, playing tag, trying to avoid cooties? No! (unless you're into that). So, what is play, really? Stuart Brown, MD, describes play as "an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time." He says that play is also something you are drawn to doing repeatedly, not something that you feel you must do.

Play can take many different forms, including humor, adventure, physical, competition, creativity, storytelling, collecting, and performing. It can happen at home, at work, outside, inside, with other people, or by yourself. While propriety may require that you "take things seriously" in some settings, there is no end to the possibilities for how, where and when to play.

The bottom line is that play really is about mindset. It is not only what you do, but how and what you pay attention to. It's taking an ordinary conversation and seeing the fun in it. Sometimes the play is internal.

When I was young, I often had reading assignments that were boring textbook stuff. I would play a game with the clock and the book: I would start by agreeing to myself that I would read to the end of a page. Once I got to the end of the page I would look at the clock. If the hands were not all on a five-minute increment I would bargain with myself to read until a certain time. Once that time came, if I was not at the end of a page I would go back to the clock. Just by playing a simple mind game, I was able to keep my attention on my reading and get more of it done than if I just tried to persevere for the sake of getting the reading done. Approaching a daunting task or event with a playful mindset can totally change the experience and the outcome.

## Work and play

Some people (both with and without ADHD) are fortunate enough to find the way they love to play in life and make that their job. Thankfully, I am one of them. Can you imagine having to focus on play every day? Noticing it in others, looking for it in seemingly boring places, pursuing it, writing about it, thinking about it—and playing?!

# Time for PLAY!

I challenge you to take another step in mastering your ability to manage your ADHD by incorporating a playful mindset in all areas of your life. Start now by being intentional and writing down your plan to play. Here are some suggestions to get you on your way.

**Practice being mindful.** Spend two to ten minutes just paying attention to your surroundings and experiences. Listen to other people's conversations and notice the playfulness of their interactions (sometimes referred to as eavesdropping). Notice colors, patterns, smells, and sounds that are pleasant, fun, and interesting.

**Practice being silly.** Stop worrying about what other people think. Take a risk and really express your joy in an unrestrained manner.

**Have a laugh.** See the humor in a seemingly serious situation. Tell a joke or laugh at someone else's joke.

**Challenge yourself physically.** How high do you think you can jump? As high as that picnic table? Over a friend's head? Think you can parkour roll down that hill? Try something new—surfing, snowboarding, trampolining, or rock climbing.

**Be spontaneous.** Sometimes referred to as impulsive! Don't be afraid to stray from the plan and go with the flow. Plans are



great but being able to adapt to changes can be more fun.

**Be friendly.** You can play more games, and you have more ideas. You have someone to talk to and joke with.



## Play is the antidote to the challenges of ADHD: interest, attention, and motivation.

In the process of creating this terrific job for myself, I have realized that there are a lot of people with ADHD who don't have it as good as I do: the clients, friends, family members, and acquaintances with ADHD who have become stuck in a job that is no longer interesting or fun. While this is unpleasant for anyone, when you have ADHD it can be the kiss of death. Boredom can feed into depression. Or it can lead to "creative conflict creation" in an effort to liven things up at work. Many people with ADHD can describe their cycle of ability to remain interested in a job, because they have quit, been fired, or otherwise "checked out" from numerous jobs in their lifetime once the fun was gone.

The same people who have found out how to play at work typically have also found that being playful in their personal lives is a smart strategy. Whether people have a playful personality or make a concerted effort to engage in playful activities with their partner, kids, friends and family members, play leads to richer, more connected relationships and more vibrant memories for everyone.

There is a movement to encourage kids and adults alike to incorporate more play in their day.—whether it is being in nature, connecting with kids, having fun at work, or just taking a break once in a while. But if you are an adult with ADHD, you may struggle to find the time to have fun. With a seemingly endless list of projects and the feeling that you never have enough time to do it all, you may find that taking a break and having fun always makes its way off the list of things you intend to do each day.

Many of my friends or clients initially rolled their eyes at me when I suggested that they might enjoy life more, be more efficient at work, have more energy, feel more inspired, and just be happier if they were more playful. Today, most of them have come to realize the value of play in their lives. And so can you! 🎮



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**Do things you're not supposed to do.** Make a scene. Drive one of those little electric cart things around the grocery store. Wear your pajamas to work. Indulge the rebel in you.

**Go outside.** Being in green improves your mood. You can take it one step further by rolling down a hill, climbing a tree, or building a treehouse.

**Make something.** You need a new desk? Try building it yourself. You have a guitar? Write a song. Someone special's birthday is coming up? Make them the coolest card you can. You wonder why

people behave a certain way in a certain situation? Develop a hypothesis, design an experiment, and gather some pilot data. Have a cool idea for an iPhone app? Learn to code, and build it.

**Hang out with people who are more playful than you.** Just seeing how a playful person thinks or behaves will help you figure out how you like to play, and how you want to be playful.

**Start doing little things you don't ordinarily do.** If you see someone



walking a fun dog, stop and ask if you can pet it. If you see workmen operating an awesome crane or other piece of equipment, stop and ask how it works and what they are doing. If you see an empty lot or an interesting nook in a park, go and explore it.

**Sign up for a class.** Learn a new skill or something outrageous to you. (Psychic readings?)

**Make a plan for something random or out of the ordinary during the day.** This gives you something to look forward to. In the middle of the day it can also help you to recharge.

