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Experts say play time can relieve stress in bad times

By [Janice Lloyd](#), USA TODAY

Stuart Brown appears to be lighthearted and hooked on playing. He made his office in a treehouse in Carmel Valley, Calif. He is tan and fit. The 76-year-old psychiatrist plays tennis with his buddies every week and recently took a cross-country ski vacation with his adult sons and older brother in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

But his message could not be any more serious, especially during these difficult economic times.

Find regular time to play — or else, he warns in his new book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* (Penguin, \$24.95).

Or else what?

A life of rigidity, lacking in creativity. A life without joy, minus sustained pleasure. The opposite of play isn't work, he adds, but depression. During his 40-year career, Brown has peered into the bubbling inferno, studying what goes wrong when people do not play. He has conducted more than 6,000 play studies on everyone from serial killers to substance abusers to career-driven CEOs.

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And he is worried many adults are not finding time to play now as the economy forces them to work harder in offices with smaller staffs, then head home to help with chores and rest before starting it all over again. He writes that when we are in peril, "the drive to play will disappear." These are perilous times.

POLL: [Mental stress spirals with economy](#)

"Play is particularly important during periods that are sustainedly stressful, like now where we don't see an end to this economic downturn," says Brown, founder of the National Institute of Play in Carmel. The non-profit institute compiles research on play and provides speakers to discuss the importance of play with educational organizations and Fortune 500 companies.

"If we're going to adapt to changing economic and personal circumstances the way that nature armed us to do, then we have to find ourselves having some play time virtually every day," Brown says.

So for the play-challenged, Brown has advice on how to get back into the swing (maybe even the backyard swing).

Experiment, Brown says. Go back to thinking about how you played as a child. He writes about a woman who basically had a "turbocharged" day taking care of her family and her job as the CEO of a real estate company. Up at 5 a.m., she ran 4 or 5 miles on odd days and swam and lifted weights on even days.

She started to dread life. She set out to find a solution and remembered some of her fondest memories as a child involved horses. Now, she rides one day a week and is happier and more productive.

A state of mind

Matthew Calabria of Washington, D.C., has always loved playing hoops. He got tired of working out at the gym and paying his gym fees but did not want to go without exercise. It helps him blow off steam after days spent working at the State Department.

He posted an item on Craigslist in February looking for people to play pickup games.

"We're playing on a small court outside with 10-foot rims, but it suffices," he says. "It's really a kids' court, but we're just doing it for fun. I played in high school and missed it."

Brown lives near Pebble Beach and says he has played a few rounds of golf there. For most people, he says, it's "the highlight of a life, a special moment to play" on the famed course. But for others? "I've seen golfers who are ticked off when they tee off and are no different after 18 holes."

That's not play, he says. Nor is it play when a runner has high fitness goals or strives for fast times. That adds too much stress. Running for the pure joy of it or running with a friend and socializing is fun and relaxing.

There are all kinds of play; what's important is to find out what kind of play is right for you. Some are as simple as *really* playing with and enjoying the dog when you are walking it, rather than begrudgingly taking it outside. Play is not being cutthroat or winning at all costs. That's about domination, he says. And play can and ought to be involved at work.

A big part of the solution, he says, is opening up to the idea that play is a state of mind. Every day, there are opportunities to play, which he defines as "an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time."

But society pushes adults away from play, teaching them to think playful activities are for children, a frivolous luxury and immoral. Plus, Brown says, the economy has made it hard for adults to think they deserve to have fun or can afford fun.

Mental health professionals say that kind of thinking is a serious red flag — and they're seeing more of it.

"People say, 'I can't have fun when my 401(k) is down or I lost my job,' " says Nadine Kaslow, family psychologist and professor at Emory University in Atlanta. "What I say to people is you're probably not going to have as much pleasure as you did when things were better, but play is something that can make us feel better about ourselves and more engaged with other people."

One of play's benefits, says Penny Donnefeld, a clinical psychologist in Manhattan, is it reduces stress hormones in the bloodstream. Because continuously high stress levels wreak havoc on our bodies, she says, the health benefits alone should give adults motivation to play.

"If this is going to keep your arteries clear and keep you alive longer, maybe it's worth considering," Donnefeld says.

Not sure which kinds of recreation are right for you? Michael Otto has a tip.

No watch, no cellphone

"All of us end up being better at tracking what is going poorly than what goes well," says Otto, director of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University. "One intervention is to ask people to keep a diary of moments of well-being. If you do that, you end up with a diary and collection of moments that helps you feel good, and it's a diary about what to pursue next week."

Ken Silverstein, 49, knows what works for him. The anesthesiologist lives in Wilmington, Del., and goes on a mountain biking trek every year with Escape Adventures. This will be his 10th year. "It's the last thing I'd give up if I had to save money," Silverstein says. "It's like oxygen, it's so important to me. There's nothing more liberating in the world than being on the bike. We take no cellphones, and you have to leave your watch behind."

Silverstein says he also takes time during the week to ride "almost no matter what. I'm very busy, work very hard and cycling is my outlet."

Sex is a refuge, too

Brown says it is no coincidence that people who stay sharp as they age are those who keep working and playing. And couples who stay together also play together, he says, especially when they have different play personalities that might lead them in different directions.

"I encourage couples to have a weekly date," Kaslow says. "They put something on a piece of paper that would be fun for them to do into a love jar and take turns pulling it out of there and doing whatever it is."

Sex counts big time in the world of play, Brown says, when partners try to draw each other out, they are in effect freeing themselves and relaxing.

ROMANCE: [Nearly 80% says economy hasn't slowed frequency of sex](#)

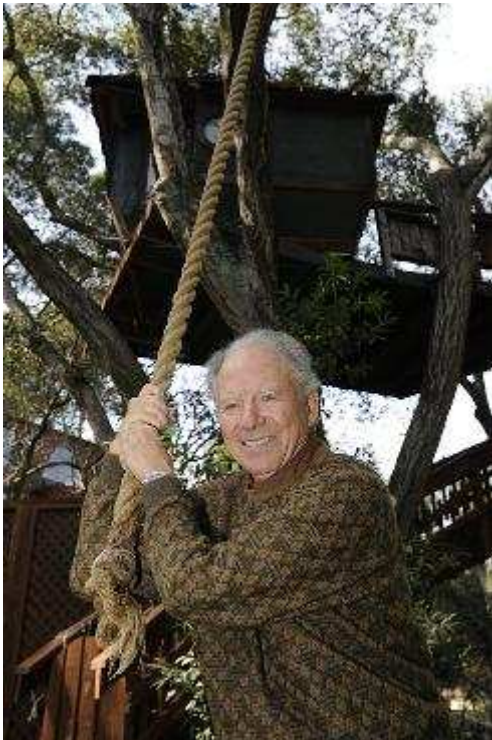
"Lovers can be so involved they shut out the rest of the world," Brown says. "For them, there is nothing but each other, the essential dyad."

Above all else, Brown says, remember play is not perfect. It has its trying moments, too. To sail, you need to take care of the boat. To ride your bike, you need to strengthen muscles.

Toward the end of his book, he mentions a bike ride along a steep winding road lined with redwoods and laurel near his home. He calls the ride up Robinson Canyon "play bliss."

"The uphill slog is slow, physically demanding, and my aching thighs and lungs beg for relief.

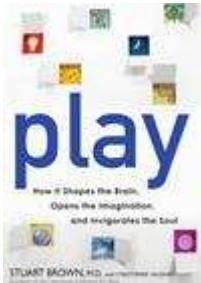
"The road opens to a panorama of ocean and woodlands. The light is different on every ride, the push worth it, and on the glide home my spirit is clear, happy, at one with body, nature, spirit."



By Fred Mertz, for USA TODAY

Stuart Brown enjoys the treehouse built in the trees off his home and office in Carmel Valley, Calif., where he founded the National Institute of Play. "Play is particularly important during

periods that are sustainedly stressful, like now where we don't see an end to this economic downturn," he says.



8 WAYS: FIND YOUR PLAY STYLE

Stuart Brown, the psychiatrist with a new book on the subject of play, says there are eight play personalities:

Joking. Some of the earliest forms of play begin when a parent is foolish with an infant, blowing raspberries or making sounds.

Moving. This includes athletes but involves anyone who is happiest moving, whether it's dancing, swimming or walking.

Exploring. We entered the world exploring it, Brown says. This can be physical or emotional, searching for a new feeling or deepening what is known through music, movement or flirtation.

Competing. If playing games and keeping score is up your alley, you already know this category. You might have a high score in a video game. You can be on the field or get the same benefits off the field as a fan. Maybe it's time to consider fielding a fantasy baseball team.

Directing. These people love to plan parties or vacations, or execute great scenes, whether it's Oprah Winfrey or Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire*).

Collecting. This could be gathering music or wine or comic books. Everything is fair game. He mentions Jay Leno's penchant for collecting cars. Some women have their handbags.

Storytelling. Imagination rules this mode of play. This can be as loony as having an imagined cooking show in your kitchen one night, or sending funny short video clips off to YouTube. Reading and watching movies falls into this category.

Creating art. Maybe you draw or paint. Maybe you like redecorating a room. Or, Brown says, maybe you just like taking things apart and making them new again.

First up, play your stress away/ why should kids have all the fun? Your boss might not let everyone out for recess, but you can find 15 minutes every day to do something you really enjoy. Go to a driving range. Play ping pong, cards, or board games. Just keep it friendly. Remember, winning isn't everything. Neither have we. Interacting with animals has been proven to lower stress in almost everyone. Simply petting a dog or a cat lowers your blood pressure considerably and reduces levels of the stress-causing hormone cortisol. So pet your pooch. Don't have a pet? You don't need a spa weekend or a retreat. Each of these stress-relieving tips can get you from OMG to om in less than 15 minutes.

1. Meditate. A few minutes of practice per day can help ease anxiety. Stress has been shown to decrease time spent in light and deep sleep, and increase time spent in REM sleep. REM is an important sleep stage for restoring mental function, a phase when the brain processes emotions and memories. These changes to your normal sleep architecture cause disruptions to the normal patterns of brain waves that occur during REM and the other stages of sleep. Stress can cause the brain waves related to concentration, creativity, and dreaming to change. These sleep-driven cognitive impairments can give rise to stress in any number of ways, from creating difficulty in relationships to causing problems with job performance. SleepScore Store. Explore top rated sleep products. Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges. It's what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV. But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, mood, productivity, relationships, and your quality of life. If you frequently find yourself feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself and improve