



Rich handed me a decades old photograph showing him swinging over a lake on a rope tethered to an overhanging tree. His face bore a look of utter glee.

“Today, nobody would believe that I once knew how to play,” he told me. “I’d have to show them pictures like this to prove it.”

A successful businessman with his hunk of the American Dream, Rich said he’d “forgotten how to play,” that he could no longer find that part of himself that dropped joyfully into the water that day in his 20’s. And that’s a lot to lose. Until it evaporates, many of us don’t fully appreciate how vital playfulness is for easing our worries, unburdening our heavy hearts and making life more worthwhile.

Psychology tells us there are two primary modes of play. First is “active play,” and involves using one’s body, senses and mind to playfully interact with the environment, materials or other animals, including people. The other we call “adventurous play.” Here, we explore new experiences and roles. “Make believe” and “dress up”, as we called them in my youth, are examples.

Given a safe and sensory rich environment, children learn to play spontaneously. It is the primary means through which they learn, particularly in areas related to social and interpersonal functioning (playing with others), and sensory-motor skills. Because the world is new to them, there is much to learn and explore. Play expedites this process.

In adults, play can serve similar functions. Humans learn primarily from experiences, not information, and when those experiences are playful, these learnings imprint on the brain. Research shows that in school or other venues of learning, if we have fun, we absorb more and retain it longer.

If we remain playful as we age, we continue learning, acquiring new behaviors, and enriching our lives. The phrase “young at heart” usually refers to someone older who still knows how to play. However, like almost two-thirds of adults, Rich spent most of his leisure time watching television, and that ain’t play.

Meaning he lived an experientially impoverished existence. He stopped learning, letting go, taking risks and laughing. His life became a joyless forced march through existence.

“When was the last time you had fun?” I asked him.

“I think it was at one of those water parks with my kids when they were pretty young. Best I can remember.”

“What changed?” I pressed.

“I guess I did. Everything at work got intense and my youngest was diagnosed with diabetes and the dog . . . well, a lot of bad stuff came my way, it seemed like all at once.”

The psychological weight of personal losses and challenges can crush a person’s capacity for play. Emotional states like depression, anxiety, obsessive worry and burnout often do the same.

“How do I learn to play again?” Rich asked.

“Play with your grandchildren, but be sure to do it the right way,” I replied.

That right way means learning from the kids. They know how to play. He didn’t, and he needed them to teach him and role model the necessary behaviors and attitude.

“Follow their lead,” I told him. “If you start taking charge or try to manage the whole thing, forget about it.”

So, he did, resulting in plenty of sandbox time, plying monkey bars, swinging, playing house and imaginary tea parties. Before long, this morphed into playing video games with his teenage son, Scrabble with his collegiate daughters and, eventually, swinging on a rope into the water once again.

When immersed in true play, we are happy, and in those interludes, it feels like we’ll never be unhappy again.

That’s the magic in play. And, when life gets gnarly, we can all use a little magic.