



A Funfare to Fun: Why Fun Matters in Life and Work

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Starting with the case study of an individual who lost his zest for life, this article explores the multifaceted role of fun in human well-being. Through philosophical reflections, it compares fun as instant pleasure in hedonism and its role in existentialism as a path to freedom and authenticity. However, the article also cautions against over-reliance on fun as a means of escapism, which can lead to neglect of responsibilities.

Next, the physiological benefits of fun are examined. Fun activates neural systems related to pleasure and well-being, releasing neurotransmitters like dopamine and oxytocin, which enhance mood, reduce stress, and boost cognitive functioning. In this context, fun is presented as a healthy distraction that fosters resilience and aids recovery from adversity.

From a developmental perspective, fun is shown to be essential for growth at every life stage. In childhood, play fosters emotional, cognitive, and social development, while in adulthood, fun continues to shape identity, skills, and relationships.

Turning to the workplace, the article highlights how fun is often dismissed as a “dirty” three-letter word, deemed unproductive or frivolous. Yet, fun at work, offers significant benefits, improving morale, boosting productivity, and keeping employees engaged. Practical suggestions are provided to foster a culture of fun, demonstrating its value for both individual well-being and organisational success.

Lastly, the article explores how coaching can help individuals struggling with a “fun deficit.” By uncovering past sources of enjoyment and addressing psychological barriers, coaches can guide clients toward integrating fun into their lives, fostering self-awareness, emotional balance, and a greater sense of fulfilment.

Keywords: Fun; Playfulness; Philosophy; Pleasure Principle; Physiology; Neurotransmitter; Dopamine; Cortisol; Oxytocin; Developmental; Creativity; Organizational Life; Coaching.

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Enjoy life. There's plenty of time to be dead.

—*Hans Christian Andersen*

We come to recognize that playfulness, as a philosophical stance, can be very serious indeed; and moreover, that it possesses an unflinching capacity to arouse ridicule and hostility in those among us who crave certainty, reverence, and restraint.

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*

Having fun is the best way to learn.

—*Albert Einstein*

Introduction

Xavier felt lost, drained of energy, and disconnected from life. His marriage was at an all-time low. He rarely talked with his children, and his work held no joy. Colleagues avoided him, likening his gloomy outlook to Eeyore, the perpetually pessimistic donkey from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. His wife, exasperated, described him as no fun to be with. Looking back, Xavier could recall moments of fun in his past, but they felt distant and irretrievable. This reflection left him wondering: What had gone wrong? Was he depressed? If so, why? Most importantly, how could he rediscover the playfulness that had once made him so vibrant?

Xavier reflected on a recent conversation with an old friend about his mental state. Instead of finding the discussion uplifting, he felt pangs of envy hearing about the many fun activities his friend enjoyed. "Life is supposed to be fun," his friend had remarked, recounting moments spent with his grandchildren, outings with friends, and other

personal pastimes. From playing bridge and attending parties to visiting the cinema, reading books, and listening to concerts, his friend's vibrant life stood in stark contrast to Xavier's own dreary routine.

As they continued discussing fun, Xavier's friend emphasized the importance of play. To him, having fun seemed to be all about finding pleasure or joy in the moment. He described fun as an experience of lightheartedness, spontaneity, and humor—one where time seemed to fly by because he was so fully absorbed. For him, fun wasn't just a fleeting indulgence but a vital element of emotional stability and well-being, nurtured through connections with family, friends, and colleagues at work. He also noted that the essence of fun varies for each person, shaped by their interests, personality, and cultural background. "If you're missing out on this," he advised Xavier, "you need to do something about it."

Philosophical perspectives

Xavier's friend's comments raised questions about the nature, purpose, and value of fun. Philosophers have long debated its role in human life. In the classical hedonistic view, all human behavior is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Fun is a key part of this "pleasure principle." These theories focus on the importance of immediate gratification. The ancient Greek philosophers called this *hedonia*—a term we might equate with fun, pleasure, or simple happiness.

Some philosophers expanded on the pleasure principle by distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures. Higher pleasures are more intellectual, while lower ones are sensual. Fun, they argued, is a blend of both. It provides immediate pleasure while

also fostering a state of serene and permanent happiness. Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, or flourishing, illustrates this idea. He described it as the highest good humans can pursue. For Aristotle, a life well lived included activities that brought both joy and meaning.

Existential philosophers built on Aristotle's ideas. French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, argued that finding fun in life is essential to individual freedom and authenticity. Fun, he suggested, is a radical choice. It allows people to confront life's absurdity and create personal meaning through enjoyable experiences. Hence, engaging in fun activities is a form of self-expression—a way of defining one's identity.

Reflecting on these philosophical ideas raises an important question: Is the constant pursuit of fun a superficial indulgence or an essential part of a fulfilling life? Always chasing fun could become a form of escapism. In fact, over-reliance on fun might prevent people from addressing deeper issues, leading to unhealthy behaviors or neglecting responsibilities. In addition, the commercialization of leisure and entertainment risks turning fun into a hollow, consumer-driven activity, diminishing its authenticity.

The physiology of having fun

As we shift our focus from philosophy to physiology, we see that fun has a powerful impact on the brain.¹ Fun activities, especially those that feel rewarding or exciting,

¹ Paulette Guitard, Francine Ferland and Élisabeth Dutil (2005). Toward a better understanding of playfulness in adults, *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health* 25, (1), 9–22; Cale D. Magnuson and Lynn Barnett (2013). The playful advantage: How playfulness enhances coping with stress, *Leisure Sciences*, 35, (2), 129–144; Brandon M. Savage, Heidi L. Lujan, Raghavendar R. Thipparthi and Stephen E. DiCarlo (2017). Humor, laughter, learning, and health! A brief review, *Advances in Physiology Education*, 41, (3), 341-347.

trigger the release of dopamine. This neurotransmitter is linked to pleasure, motivation, and the reinforcement of enjoyable behaviors. Dopamine makes us feel good and encourages us to seek more positive experiences. Fun also lowers stress by reducing cortisol levels, the stress hormone. This creates a sense of relaxation by balancing the body's fight-or-flight and rest-and-digest systems.

Fun activities may also boost cognitive functioning. Playful or unstructured activities activate the brain's creativity centers, such as the prefrontal cortex. This nurtures divergent thinking, promoting innovative and flexible approaches to challenges. In addition, fun enhances memory. When we're emotionally engaged, the brain encodes experiences more effectively, making them easier to recall. Partaking in novel, enjoyable activities also fosters neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to form new neural connections—further supporting learning and growth.

Socially enjoyable activities also enhance these physiological benefits. They trigger the release of oxytocin, often called the "love hormone," which strengthens relationships and builds trust and connection. Physical forms of fun, such as dancing or playing sports, release endorphins—the body's natural painkillers. These endorphins improve mood and reduce physical discomfort, adding to our overall sense of well-being.

From a mental health perspective, fun plays a vital role in buffering stress. It often acts as a healthy distraction from life's challenges, helping us to recover more effectively from adversity. Fun helps combat negative emotions and can alleviate symptoms of

depression and anxiety by shifting focus and perspective. Regularly engaging in enjoyable activities creates a positive mindset, enhancing resilience against life's stressors.

Fun also influences the work-life balance equation. It reminds us to take breaks and prioritize personal happiness alongside life's responsibilities. From a physiological perspective, fun isn't just a luxury—it's a crucial aspect of mental health, releasing "feel-good" chemicals that enhance our overall quality of life.

A developmental perspective

From a developmental standpoint, fun is a vital component of human growth throughout life. Through play, children learn to exercise control over their environment, which improves their abilities to explore, experiment, and solve problems. This not only allows children to express their fantasies but also helps them confront and overcome their fears. Fun activities like hide-and-seek and other forms of creative play foster understanding of rules, boundaries, and social norms. They also support cognitive development by encouraging abstract thinking, decision-making, and moral reasoning. Thus, far from being a superficial activity, fun is fundamental to children's emotional, cognitive, and social growth.

Fun activities also play an important role in building peer relationships. They foster a sense of community and social integration. Through imaginative and social play, children learn essential skills like sharing, taking turns, and interacting with others—skills critical for forming and maintaining friendships. Group games, team sports, and collaborative projects also promote belonging, teamwork, and shared identity. In

addition, these activities help children navigate social hierarchies and improve their ability to handle conflicts effectively.

Having fun through play also fosters emotional regulation. Play provides a safe space for children to express a range of emotions, including joy, fear, sadness, disgust, and anger. When children genuinely enjoy themselves, their enthusiasm often draws others in. After all, emotions can be very contagious. Thus, through playful activities, children develop empathy, compassion, and a sense of competence.

In addition, fun makes complex concepts more accessible and enjoyable. Fun activities enable children to explore their individual interests and hobbies. Play allows them to express themselves in artistic pursuits, sports, or academic challenges. It becomes a tool for discovering different aspects of identity, including social roles, personal interests, and future goals.

In summary, from a developmental perspective, fun is far more than leisure. It fosters emotional, social, and cognitive growth in children. At every stage of life, different types of fun activities contribute to the development of identity, skills, and relationships, making fun vital to overall well-being. Importantly, fun is not just for children—there is much to learn from playing with them. Even as adults, we should never stop having fun. It is one of the most important—and often underrated—ingredients in any activity. If what we're doing lacks fun, it might be time to try something new.

Fun at work

Despite its importance to well-being, many organizational leaders fail to recognize the value of fun. In too many workplaces, fun is treated as a “dirty” word. Unfortunately, all too often, leaders take things far too seriously. Since most people spend a large portion of their lives at work, it’s essential to include fun in daily activities. Therefore, as suggested before, fun isn’t frivolous—it’s a powerful tool that improves morale and boosts productivity. When workplaces lack fun, focus and motivation suffer.

If organizational leaders recognize the importance of fun in the workplace, they can find creative ways to incorporate it. First, they should focus on creating an attractive work environment—one that employees look forward to being in. It should be the kind of workspace that engages its employees, fostering a sense of purpose. Leaders should also position the workplace as a center for learning and growth, where employees can develop and expand their skills.

Furthermore, to get the best out of their employees, leaders should make it also a space for authentic self-expression. This requires creating a culture of trust where employees feel relatively safe. A key part of this cultural design is normalizing mistakes as a natural part of the learning process. With this kind of mindset, organizations can reduce stress and avoid becoming environments ridden with anxiety and negativity.

In addition, leaders should allow their employees to personalize their workspaces in the office. Also, they should encourage the sharing of fun content, such as memes, cartoons, or inspiring stories in team chats, could contribute to a positive atmosphere.

Birthdays should also be more than acknowledged—they should be celebrated, adding a touch of joy to the work environment.

Small wins should be celebrated. Team lunches or virtual gatherings can be meaningful ways to celebrate project completions and personal achievements. Such activities build a culture of positive regard, where people are more supportive of one another. After all, time flies when people are having fun, fully immersed in, and enjoying their work.

To inspire creativity, leaders should also encourage their employees to experiment with new ways of working and find ways to make tasks more enjoyable. Providing opportunities for “play time” can help build a true learning culture. Fun breaks between tasks can improve attention spans and boost productivity when employees return to their work. By blending playfulness, creativity, and connection into the workday, people can transform even mundane tasks into enjoyable and rewarding experiences. This approach not only enhances engagement but also makes the work environment more fulfilling.

To cultivate a fun culture, leaders could introduce team challenges, such as friendly competitions during brainstorming sessions or problem-solving games. Lunch-and-learn sessions with entertaining speakers can combine learning with enjoyment, making information easier to retain and employees more motivated. Regular off-site workshops could also break the routine and encourage creative problem-solving. These activities promote out-of-the-box thinking, which is essential for generating fresh ideas.

Incorporating playful interactions at work—with humour used as a social lubricant—can help reduce conflicts and defensiveness. Social fun also strengthens group identity, minimising feelings of loneliness and isolation. Regular participation in enjoyable activities will nurture a positive mindset, while reducing fatigue and boosting energy levels.

Coaching for fun

Let's now return to Xavier, our case study from the beginning. Although Xavier had mixed feelings about his conversation with his friend, it made him think and realize the importance of fun in both his personal and professional life. Xavier saw that his personal life was in disarray, and his productivity at work had declined. One suggestion from his friend stood out: He had to seek help to improve his mindset. Recognizing the need for change was a crucial first step.

At first, the idea of seeking help didn't sit well with Xavier. However, on reflection, he realized it was necessary. This led him to seek out an executive coach.

Following his coach's suggestion, Xavier spent an initial period building trust before discussing the activities that had once brought him a sense of fun. At first, this was difficult for him. Over time, however, he realized that his reaction to this topic revealed deeper unconscious conflicts and past traumas. Gradually, Xavier developed the courage to confront and process repressed memories, which helped him understand why fun had become such a troublesome concept for him. He discovered that "shadowy" parental figures from his past had discouraged him from enjoying life. This

had eventually pushed him toward workaholism as a distraction. For much of his life, he had been like a hamster on a wheel, endlessly striving to please people from his past.

Xavier's coach also reminded him that he needed to strike a balance between pursuing fun and meeting life's practical demands. While fun is important, an excessive focus on it can hinder the ability to handle responsibilities. Xavier had to learn to integrate the pleasure principle with the reality principle in a healthy way.

Gradually, Xavier became more self-forgiving and less demanding of himself. He began to reclaim his sense of adventure and curiosity, paying more attention to the fun elements of life. He became willing to embrace his "inner lunatic" and started enjoying life's small moments. He saw that having fun wasn't a diversion from a life well lived—it was an essential part of self-care.

Experimenting with fun activities proved to be deeply therapeutic for Xavier. It helped him adopt a more positive state of mind, which in turn improved his relationships with both his family and colleagues. Much later, he would tell his coach that he had learned "to return to the sandbox." He accepted his playful tendencies as a natural and important part of his personality. In doing so, he discovered that the little things in life often turn out to be the big things.

Through these coaching sessions, Xavier finally understood that his earlier negative state of mind had been a warning sign—the outcome of a complex interplay of

unconscious desires, defense mechanisms, and social expectations. Depressive feelings, however, had been telling him that something needed to change.

Over time, Xavier's growing ability to embrace fun in his daily life led to greater emotional balance. By learning to say yes to life and project positivity, he became a more agreeable and enjoyable person to be around—a change his family and colleagues deeply appreciated. These shifts made Xavier's quality of life immeasurably better. With his coach's guidance, he came to understand that life wasn't something to be endured. Life, he realized, was what he chose to make of it.

Coming full circle

This discussion has highlighted the essential role fun plays in our physical, emotional, and social well-being. Providing rich soil for personal growth, fun enhances our cognitive abilities. It makes life more vibrant and meaningful. It provides purpose, sharpens the mind, and brings emotional happiness. Fun also offers a space for authentic self-expression, encouraging us to try new things, expand our horizons, and discover our passions. In many ways, fun provides a mental and physical reset, enabling us to tackle responsibilities with renewed energy. Furthermore, incorporating fun into daily life prevents burnout and supports a healthier work-life balance.

When combined with work, responsibilities, and relationships, fun will act as the glue that holds a well-rounded life together. It connects us to others, enhances our mental and physical health, and enriches our experiences. Yet, many people become so focused on making a living that they have forgotten how to truly live. Ultimately, what

they need to realize is that fun is not a luxury or a trivial pursuit—it is a fundamental part of a balanced and fulfilling life.