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A GUIDE FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO ENHANCE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Wellness Files Spring-Summer - 2015
For our valued employees & families
Credit Union Benefits Trust

A serious look at

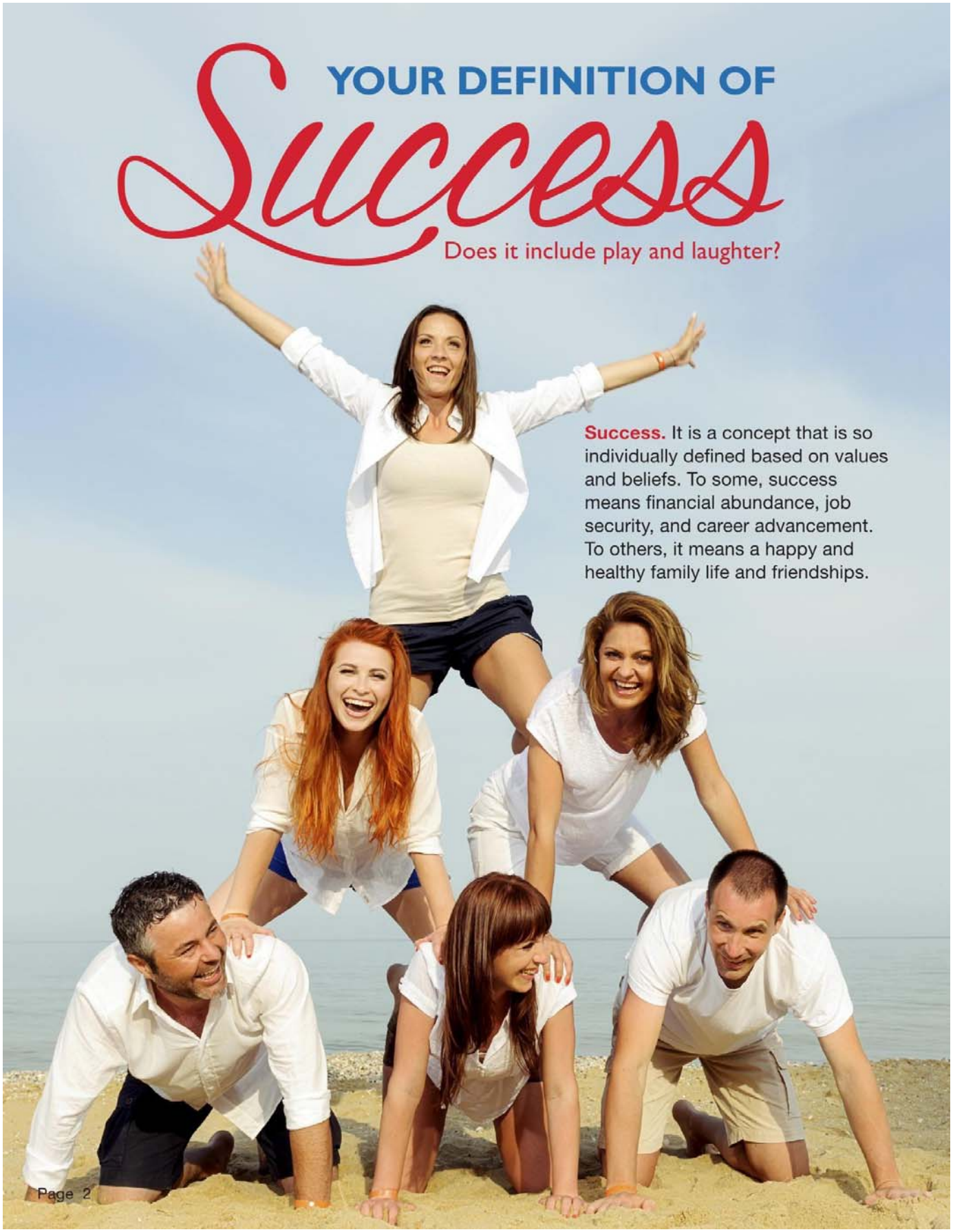
Play & Laughter

YOUR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS
Does it include play and laughter?

WHY IS LAUGHTER AND PLAY SO IMPORTANT?

How to Play & Laugh MORE

WHY Did We Stop Playing?


YOUR DEFINITION OF
Success
Does it include play and laughter?
Success. It is a concept that is so individually defined based on values and beliefs. To some, success means financial abundance, job security, and career advancement. To others, it means a happy and healthy family life and friendships.
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Whatever our definition of success, having play and laughter as part of it should be something that we include in our personal definition.

Imagine what your life could be like if you won the lottery. For many of us, with financial burdens released, play and laughter and the pursuit of more recreational activities would be part of that vision. How does your vision of success change when you imagine your life this way?

Think of someone you know who is easy going and easily playful. Those people have an attractive energy and enthusiasm that draws us in and makes us want to be close to them. Likewise, when you hear people laughing, there is a natural curiosity that grabs your attention and makes you want to be part of it.

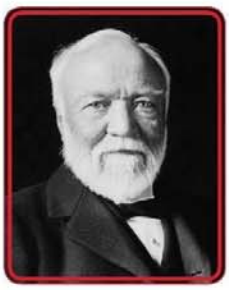
Play and laughter have been important parts of a balanced life for centuries and a natural connecting point for people.

A strong body of science exists that validates why laughter and play benefits us in so many ways. There are many theories seeking to address why we play and laugh less as adults than we did as children, or why some people play and laugh more than others.

The purpose of this mental health guide is not to necessarily examine this science or observe these theories, but to help you gain some new insights into how play and laughter can contribute to strong mental health.

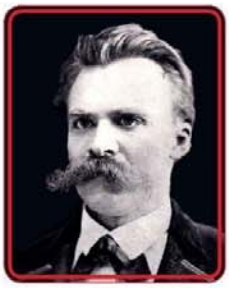
Adopting more play and laughter can improve your quality of life. Would it have value to you if your life could feel a little easier, a little lighter? Incorporating more play and laughter can increase awareness and gratitude while increasing your social engagement and enhancing connections with others.

When our team assembled to write this guide, our hope was that you would not view it as just more reading material, but that you would adopt it as a personal challenge to bring more playfulness and laughter into your life.



"There is little success where there is little laughter."

Andrew Carnegie



"In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play."

Friedrich Nietzsch

"If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane."

Robert Frost

WHY IS LAUGHTER & PLAY SO IMPORTANT?

...and the benefits

While often intertwined, laughter and play have important roles not only in childhood development and our developing brain but also in our emotional, mental, social, physical and workplace health. Both a symptom and indicator of overall health and resiliency, play and laughter have become topics of social and psychological research. Play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith says " the opposite of play is not work, it is depression."

Laughter and play are common to all mammals, from infancy on, and are an important part of integrating and connecting our mental, emotional, and physical states.

Play: A state of engagement or participation in an activity for pleasure or recreation.

Play often begins by participating in a pleasure-seeking activity or something "fun". In conjunction with laughter, it can also include a part of a person's temperament or personality - people we consider to be "playful" might be called "Fun Makers". Play often connects our imagination with experience and stimulates brain development, creativity, relationship building, trust, and emotional regulation.

Whether social, competitive, or imaginative play - alone or in groups - the mind is stimulated by play. We are, in fact, designed to play at all stages of our lives. The experience of play is just as important in adulthood as it is as part of our childhood development.

Laughter: An inner quality or expression of amusement.

We know that laughter can be both spontaneous and scripted. From internal thoughts

and memories or externally stimulated, laughter is an experience of pleasure that has been shown to decrease stress hormones, increase immune system function, increase learning and retention, decrease anxiety and increase self esteem.

Laughter is more than humour or responding to things that are funny. It is an individual response and expression to circumstances or states. It can be elicited from a state of relaxation or can be used specifically to relieve tension.

Laughter is a way we can diffuse tension and disarm awkward moments and it is contagious. Other times, laughter is less strategic, coming out spontaneously as a response to humor or shared experiences.

Random Thoughts

VIDEO INTERVIEWS ON PLAY & LAUGHTER

TO VIEW THIS VIDEO IN DIGITAL FORMAT:

1. Download this guide from Plan-it Health at www.cutrust.com. From the menu, select your Dashboard, Wellness Files Archive.
2. Open in pdf reader and click on any of the images below to play the video.

Click the images to watch the video.

Did We Stop Playing?

Experts in social and behavioral research have formed a general consensus that play and laughter are important for optimal brain development across our lifespan. Additionally, experts believe that the reasons why adult engagement in play and laughter diminishes is a topic that is widely under-researched.

Click here to view the Ted Talk: The Decline of Play by Peter Gray.
YouTube

While we know that adults need activities that revolve around pleasure beyond just competitive play, researchers in this field speculate that as we grow into adolescents and adults, our focus on play decreases due to a number of factors. Academics and pursuits of intelligence and skill building are given higher priority through adolescent and post adolescent years, downplaying the benefits play and laughter would add to these stages of growth.

Other contributing factors could include:

Lack of appreciation or permission for play and laughter from family of origin (we are scolded, shamed or shooshed)

Lack of appreciation or permission for play and laughter at workplace or in social circles (we are seen as unproductive or unfocused)

Lack of priority on play and laughter due time constraints, social pressures, cultural expectations (serious tasks of survival or material pursuits and responsibilities take over)

Lack of emotional or mental resiliency or inability to be vulnerable (we are in a chronic state of overwhelm, whereas play and laughter come more spontaneously and easily from a relaxed, regulated state)

8 POSSIBLE REASONS **WHY**

Check through the following to see what might be inhibiting you from play and laughter.

1	I feel insecure and lack self-confidence when I am around people and this makes me act more reserved.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
2	I have fears of being hurt, embarrassed, or rejected and this makes me feel uncomfortable or reluctant to open up around people.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
3	I feel stressed out and overwhelmed which makes it hard for me to feel playful and to engage in laughter.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
4	I have difficulty connecting with people and feeling safe and that makes it hard to feel the vulnerability necessary for play and laughter.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
5	I often feel too sad or anxious and that makes it hard for me to be around others and enjoy myself.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
6	I have never really learned to let go and really play.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
7	My life is too busy for fun.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐
8	Laughter and play feel impractical to me.	True ☐	Somewhat True ☐	Not sure ☐	Does not apply to me ☐

HOW WE USE DRUGS & ALCOHOL to Increase Play and Laughter

Whatever reasons people might have for feeling inhibited or reserved with play and laughter, we do know that there are certain environments that make those healthy states more attainable. Some people need only to be in a group setting and their natural extroverted state leaps out and joins easily into states of play and laughter. Others find groups make them feel even more reserved.

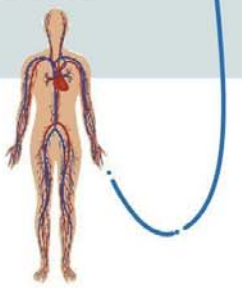
Substances like alcohol or drugs are sometimes used as unhealthy options to temporarily reduce anxiety or discomfort in the these environments. Substance use can temporarily reduce inhibitions and increase laughter and playfulness but can carry a high risk of negative consequences. This presents a challenge in balancing healthy outlets of play and laughter with potentially unhealthy lifestyle choices.

How Do Drugs and Alcohol Increase Play and Laughter

What Happens:

Alcohol or Drugs quickly enters the bloodstream and activate the pleasure centers of the brain.

An abundance of chemicals are released related to pleasure and reward.



Endorphin release increases making us feel good.

Other chemicals are released that help us feel more relaxed and less inhibited.

The Result:

We feel great, more open, with increased confidence, living in the moment, and everything is amazing, but only temporarily.

Summary:

With the influence of these chemicals, social engagement is effortless and we feel more relaxed. This creates the perfect storm for us to freely engage in play and laughter. If we rely solely on drugs or alcohol, we have not naturally learned how to increase play and laughter in a healthy way. The goal is to learn and engage in healthier ways to play and laugh without depending on substances at all.

The Influence of Group Dynamics

Head out to a pub on game night and observe the group dynamics to see how this experiment works. What you might see is people arriving with polite and reserved manners and behaviors followed by...

After 1 drink:

- increased gesturing
- open body language
- easy laughter
- increased relaxation

After 2 or more drinks:

- abundant laughter
- louder volume of speech
- increased playfulness and joking
- decreased inhibitions

The same effects can be seen, albeit in a slower fashion, from people getting together in groups around an event without drugs and alcohol. Concerts, parties, comedy shows, home parties, and sporting events bond people together around a common interest. Good energy around these events is contagious. People will begin to move into a state of play and laughter throughout the duration of the event, in healthy ways, as pleasure centers are stimulated.

There are obvious risks with overuse of drugs and alcohol. They alter brain chemistry, and with high use of both, there is the risk of not only addiction but mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Street drugs in particular present a potential high risk for permanent health issues and serious life threatening addiction.

The challenge is to seek out healthy expressions and social bonding where play and laughter can occur naturally. The more we do this purposefully, the more it will begin to occur spontaneously and the easier it will be to achieve. Those same pleasure centers in the brain can respond with the same “feel good” chemicals from these states of play and laughter and other healthy lifestyle modifications.

Play & Laughter

Assessment

Part of incorporating more play and laughter into our daily life includes taking a good look at how much we already do these things and how important it is to us. Fill out the following Play and Laughter Assessment. Ask someone who knows you well to fill it out based on their experience of you. Compare your answers. Were there any differences?

Do You
Play & Laugh Enough?

Check through the following to see what might be inhibiting you from play and laughter.

1. How much do you play?

- ☐ Everyday. Didn't I tell you I'm a Fun Maker?
- ☐ Once a week. Weekend pillow fights - woohoo!
- ☐ A few times a month. Whenever my playful friends make me!
- ☐ A few times a year. Don't you know how busy I am?
- ☐ I can't remember the last time! Errr what's play?

2. How much do you laugh?

- ☐ Everyday. I'm hysterical!
- ☐ Once a week. During that sitcom I watch on Thursday nights.
- ☐ A few times a month. Sure I laugh... when I'm around funny people.
- ☐ A few times a year. Usually only when someone trips or walks into a post
- ☐ I can't remember the last time... I may have turned into the Scrooge?

3. Do you know how to play, but have stopped?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Do you find it easy to laugh?

☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Do you want to play and laugh more often?

☐ Yes ☐ No

6. How much of a priority is incorporating play and laughter into your life?

- ☐ Priority. Let's do this - I'm already a Fun Maker!
- ☐ Moderate Priority. Great idea - it's on my to-do list.
- ☐ Low Priority. Meh - Maybe... I'm way too busy/important/tired/ stressed to even think about it.
- ☐ Not at All. I'm only reading this in a waiting room.

7. What are the potential roadblocks that might make this difficult for you?

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8. What would it take for you to make this a priority?

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9. How might adding more play and laughter into your life impact your relationships?

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10. Who in your life would you most like to play and laugh with?

_____

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12. How will you measure your progress?

_____

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Take a moment to read over each of the following initiatives and reflect on your level of readiness to implement the steps. To get the maximum benefit out of this exercise it is important that you evaluate yourself from a place of honesty. Answer as you currently are, not as you wish you were, or as you wish others to perceive you to be. If you believe that succeeding at mastering any one step might be challenging on your own, consider reaching out to your EAP counselor for assistance. Providing your EAP counselor with a copy of this guide and asking for support is a positive step towards your personal happiness and overall sense of well-being.

STEPS TO INCREASING PLAY AND LAUGHTER INTO YOUR LIFE

1. Find a close friend/partner or coworker you trust that would be willing to pursue these steps with you as a "Play & Laughter Buddy". By working at these goals together you have a greater chance for success. List friends who will join you on this adventure.

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2. Laughter and play often come very naturally to children. Sometimes as life unfolds, we experience situations that cause us to pull back from engaging in the fun, free-flowing spontaneity of play and laughter. Refer to your checklist, "8 Possible Reasons Why" for reasons why you may not be playing and laughing.

3. Review the items on the next page and check off some activities that appeal to you. Ask your laughter buddy to do the same. Rank how often you engage in each activity on a monthly basis. Consider if there are any activities you would like to do more often. Write down your goals. Join your "Play & Laughter Buddy" in creating a plan for how you might increase play and laughter in your life.

Click here to watch Dr. Stuart Brown's Ted Talk: Play is more than just fun. (hint: it makes us smarter!).

INITIATIVES TO GET MORE PLAY AND LAUGHTER

CUT OUT & STICK THIS TO YOUR FRIDGE

	Put a check mark next to each item you feel you can begin doing to increase your level of play and laughter.	How many times this week did you engage in this activity?	What was your experience from practicing this play and laughter activity?
1. Watch Laughter & Play Coach, James Wheeler, give creative ideas to get more play and laughter into your life.	CLICK HERE YouTube		
2. Attend a comedy club.			
3. Search Youtube for funny videos.	YouTube		
4. Invite friends to join you in watching a humorous movie.			
5. Google Laughter Therapist Guru Dr. Madan Katariai to learn how to engage in simulated laughter.			
6. Learn from children. Try engaging in a game of tag or imaginative play.			
7. Initiate a games night with exploratory or imaginative games like Taboo, Catch Phrase, Guesstures.	YouTube		
8. Participate in a sport activity of your choice.			
9. Watch animals play and play with them if you can.	YouTube		
10. Daydream - imagine places you would go, adventures you might experience, people you might meet.			
11. Purposefully seek out people, environments, and stimulus that makes you laugh out loud every day.	YouTube		
12. Remember how you used to play, what you used to do for fun.			
13. Surround yourself with people that are playful.			
14. Spend time with small children or pets- they play easily and naturally and invite us into their play.			
15. Grab a partner - outside of imaginative play, we need others to play with. Check out your play challenge and grab a friend to do this with.			
16. Get help. If you have areas that you feel are blocking your ability to engage in play and laughter, it can be a good idea to talk to a professional.			

Play at WORK

Some adults do have a desire to exhibit playful behavior at work, though historically business environments have not supported levity at work. Whether the work culture focuses on structure and discipline or flexibility and creativity, often we put on our work clothes, with our straight work face, and hit the ground running. The process of transitioning into a highly focused productive work mode to accomplish all our daily tasks before the end of our work day has often been synonymous with an air of seriousness.

Click here to watch a video on the benefits of play at work.

We know that the benefits of play and laughter actually increase productivity at work. Incorporating play at the workplace provides physical stress relief, increased mental focus, improved creativity, and increased social bonding. Team building and trust are all enhanced in a work environment that not only has acceptance for play and laughter, but actively encourages it from its employees.

"Comon Sence and a sence of humour are the same thing, moving at different speeds."

William James

INITIATIVES TO GET MORE PLAY AND LAUGHTER

	Put a check mark next to each item you feel you can begin doing to increase your level of play and laughter.	How many times this week did you engage in this activity?	What was your experience from practicing this play and laughter activity?
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2.	Invite friends to join you in watching a humorous movie.		
3.	Search Youtube for funny videos.		
4.	Google Laughter Therapist Guru Dr. Katari to learn how to engage in simulated laughter.		
5.	Learn from children. Try engaging in a game of tag or imaginative play.		
6.	Participate in sports activity of your choice		
7.	Initiate a games night with exploratory or imaginative games like Taboo, Catch Phrase, Guesstures.		
8.	Watch animals play, play with them if you can! www.youtube.com		
9.	Daydream - imagine places you would go, adventures you might experience, people you might meet.		
10.	List some of your own ideas here:		
11.	Spend time with small children or pets- they play easily and naturally and invite us into their play		
12.	Remember how you used to play, what you used to do for fun		
13.	Surround yourself with people that are playful		
14.	Purposefully seek out people, environments, and stimulus that makes you laugh out loud every day (YouTube has an abundance... add the BBC talking animals YouTube clip here even)		
15.	Grab a partner - outside of imaginative play, we need others to play with. Check out ur play challenge and grab a friend to do this with.		
16.	Get help. If you have areas that you feel are blocking your ability to engage in play and laughter, it can be a good idea to talk to a professional to work through those so you can get to place of health where you can experience regular play and laughter in your life.		

Cut and fold the wallet card on the dotted lines. Fold it into the size of a credit card and carry it with you in your wallet.

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HOW TO PLAY & LAUGH MORE

1 Your Definition of Success

We know that play and laughter are important for good overall health and wellbeing. The ability to easily play and laugh can be seen as measures of resiliency and yet, as many of us have gotten older, we have stopped playing and laughing as much. We now know how important it is to seek out opportunities to initiate and participate in both.

2 Play and Laughter

Play and laughter are important at all life stages and the health benefits are well recognized. As we get older we tend to play and laugh less. Seeking out opportunities to play and laugh can include the following benefits: increased creativity, enhanced relationships, decreased anxiety and stress hormone production, increased immunity, improved learning and memory and increased self esteem.

3 Why Did We Stop Playing?

If it wasn't encouraged in your family of origin growing up, if it just faded out of your life as you got older, or if life events have got you down, play and laughter may no longer a priority in your life. Whatever the reasons may be, it's important to aware them so that you can start to add play and laughter back into your life.

4 Eight Possible Reasons Why

Do you remember what your reasons were for not playing and laughing as much?

- Lack of confidence/ self esteem.
- Fear of being hurt/ embarrassed/rejected.
- Too stressed/ overwhelmed.
- Too hard to feel vulnerable.
- Too sad or anxious.
- Never learned how.
- I'm too busy.
- Play & laughter are impractical.

5 How and Why We Use Substances to Increase Play & Laughter

Because of how quickly drugs or alcohol can alter our brain chemistry and bring down our inhibitions, it's no surprise that many social activities include them. Group laughter is swiftly enhanced and increased, at times, when drugs or alcohol are included. Please use caution and awareness in this area to see how you might use substances

6

to facilitate play and laughter. Consider group activities, without substances, that naturally increase your ability to play and laugh.

7 How to Play and Laugh More

Play and Laughter come very easily to children and even animals. Now that you know why you may not play and laugh enough, here are some steps to take to improve this in your life.

- Find a Play and Laughter Buddy
- Make a list of activities that you can do with someone that will help increase the amount of play and laughter in your life.

8 Play and Laughter Initiatives

What four things from the list on the back of this wallet card could you include into your life this month, on your own or with your Play and Laughter Buddy? What support or encouragement do you need to follow through on setting those things up?

List your top four below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Consider regular brainstorming and adding to your play and laughter bucket list.

9 Play at Work

Work environments that include the freedom to play and laugh can increase productivity, reduce workplace stress, improve employee retention and improve team building and cohesiveness. Do you have a Fun Maker at your work? Is it you? Are there ways that more play and laughter could be brought into your workplace to help with stress management or team building? What would it be like for you to have more play and laughter at work?

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