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The Surprising Benefits of Finding a New Hobby

Think taking up a hobby is frivolous, unproductive, or — God forbid — selfish? Read on to discover how other women are making time for what they love — and how you can, too.



Growing up, Becca Fletcher loved being on stage, and she performed in theater productions all through her school years. As she grew older, got married, and started a family, her passion got pushed aside. But she keenly felt its absence, especially after the birth of her second child. "Performing had been a big part of my life, and I missed it," says the 41-year-old from Denver, who is completing her bachelor's degree with a major in Web development. "Taking care of two small children magnified the need to have some time and space that was just for me."

So Fletcher found some local community theater groups and now performs in at least one major musical production a year. Her theater hobby isn't expensive, though it does cost her time she could be spending with her family — or earning money. But Fletcher has no regrets: "I've decided that it's not selfish but essential to my mental health and the overall well being of my family."

In today's tough economy, when everyone is tightening their belts, it can feel self-indulgent, even irresponsible, to spend time and money on pursuits that don't contribute to your bottom line. But experts say that this is precisely the time when you *should* make room for the pastimes you love, to help you stay clearheaded and happy. "During times of hardship and stress, playing really does prepare you for

problem solving," says Stuart Brown, M.D., the author of [Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul](#). "When you're using your imagination and have a heightened mood, you open possibilities that you wouldn't think of otherwise." In other words, when you're quilting, running, gardening, or snowboarding, you might just find a creative solution to your money woes — or at least cope with them a lot better.

Now, that doesn't mean you should try to turn your love of knitting into an [etsy.com](#) business. The benefits of doing what makes you happy — a boost in optimism, greater resilience under stress, and more perseverance and creativity, to name a few — are most powerful when you do something just for the joy of it, Brown says.

And here's a bonus: While your own pleasure should be reason enough to do what you love, you'll also reap benefits in your relationships at home and at work. "Happiness is contagious," says Debbie Mandel, author of [Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7-Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life](#). "When you're happy, everyone else absorbs your mood. When you're stressed, they absorb that too." You'll also set a good example for your kids: "If they see their mother happy and doing something she loves, that's a tremendous role model," Brown says.

Convinced? Here's how to make room for your passions in your life.

Reawaken your inner kid.

Don't even know what pastime would make you happy? For inspiration, think about times in your childhood when you felt pure freedom and playfulness, says Brown (finger painting? riding your bike?), and find ways to experience those feelings today. It might not be the same activity; for example, if as a kid you loved bike riding because it let you explore wherever your whims took you, then joining an ultracompetitive cycling club may not be the way to get back that feeling. Perhaps try hiking or skiing — or even painting, if that gives you the same sense of possibility.

Treat your bliss as a requirement.

You have to eat. You have to sleep. Think of hobbies that feed your soul as being equally important to your physical and mental well-being. Melissa Ford uses precious free time when her kids are in preschool or sleeping to maintain [Lost and Found](#), a daily blog that serves as a clearinghouse for more than 2,000 infertility bloggers looking for support and connection. "I know I could use that time to read or relax, but I draw such happiness from the project that it's worth it," says Ford, 35, an author in Washington, DC.

So how do you actually make the time for a hobby? You've often heard the advice to ink in "time for you" and treat it as inviolable, just as you would your kids' medical appointments or a work meeting. But here's a twist: When you make your schedule for the week, try planning your fun time *first*, says Jill Dearman, writing coach and author of [Bang the Keys: Four Steps to a Lifelong Writing Practice](#). It's the old "put your oxygen mask on before assisting others" rule. That's how Cristine Hellerstein, 36, a high school science teacher in Atlanta, makes time for Irish step dancing — a passion of hers for more than a decade. By agreement with her husband, Thursday nights are her dance-class nights, and unless she or one of her children is sick, she never misses it.

Let go of perfection.

If you're trying something new, it's easy to fall into the trap of wanting to master the activity or feeling dumb if you're not great at it. But self-criticism sucks the joy out of anything, Dearman says. "Think about it: If your child or a loved one were trying something new, you'd never say, 'What's wrong with you? Why do you screw everything up?'" she says. Mandel adds, "No one is born a good dancer or driver. Don't worry about what people will think!"

Colleen Cole embraced this "So what?" attitude when she and two friends started taking Zumba classes at a local fitness center. "We aren't the best dancers, but we have a ball, even when we go in the wrong direction or can't get a dance step quite right," says Cole, 46, a social media consultant in Brampton, Ontario. "We'll be at the mall and a Zumba song will come on, and our butts start wiggling!"

Make room — literally.

A dedicated physical space for your hobby, even if it's just a corner of the kitchen counter, can help you make mental space for it too. When Tracy Fanslow moved into her current home, her boyfriend converted a small coat closet into a scrapbooking area, complete with built-in storage and a small counter where Fanslow can work on her projects. "I can make whatever mess I want, then just close the door and poof! The mess is gone and out of reach of little hands," says Fanslow, 39, a mother of four in Mesa, AZ.

Be open to spontaneous joy.

It's normal to have trouble finding time for your hobbies during these busy child-raising, career-building middle years, Brown notes. Accept that spending hours and hours on your hobbies might be hard now, and look for ways to experience that same delight in just minutes here and there each day. Caroline Adams Miller, 47, a life coach in Bethesda, MD, recently picked up jazz piano after not playing since she was a kid.

"I keep my music set up on the piano," she says. "I might not always be able to put in an hour of practice, but I can fit in a few minutes of scales or trills or jazz improv whenever I walk by, and it gives me so much joy."

We asked **REDBOOK** readers:

"I can't let a week go by without..."...tending to my succulents and cacti. Communing with nature, working with my hands, and being outside in my peaceful backyard is my little version of paradise. I also feed the finches and hummingbirds, and seeing all this loveliness in nature makes me enjoy the present moment. Tending to my plants costs little to nothing, but for me it's priceless.

—*Glynis Buschmann, 46, Yuba City, CA*

"I can't let a week go by without..."...playing Scrabble with my mom friends. We make it a point to get together to laugh, chat, and have a great time while all of our kids are wrapped up in a playdate. It's a great stress reliever — it feels like therapy! Mommies deserve playtime too!

—*Kelly Moran, 35, Holmes, PA*


"I can't let a week go by without..."...doing dog rescue. I love to knit and read, but nothing fulfills me like rescuing homeless dogs and finding loving homes for them. Seeing them become happy and healthy is the best feeling in the world.

—*Alex Wilson, 39, Charlotte, NC*

"I can't let a week go by without..."...quilting. I love to create beautiful things and fill my house with them, and to make baby quilts and know that the babies are wrapped in the things I crafted with so much love. I've been going through some difficult times: My husband was out of work for six months last year, so finances were tight, and I've had health problems that cause severe body pain, though thankfully my hands have been spared from that. Quilting has helped me weather these struggles. It clears my head and helps me focus on something beautiful rather than on our strain, and it helps calm me down when I'm stressed.

—*Molly Serkin, 50, Fairfield, CT*

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