

THE BIG IDEAS

What Is Play?

Imagine babies or kids playing.

Play Personalities

What's yours?

Sea Squirts

Let's not eat our own brains!

Work + Play

Brought together with love.

One Big Sandbox

That's the idea.

Bliss

In play and in pain.

Play Booster

Just move!

Infusing Joy

Into our lives via play.



Play

How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul

BY STUART BROWN, M.D. W/CHRISTOPHER VAUGHAN · AVERY © 2010 · 229 PAGES

“I have spent a career studying play, communicating the science of play to the public, and consulting Fortune 500 companies on how to incorporate it into business. I have used play therapies to help people who are clinically depressed. I frequently talk with groups of parents who inevitably are concerned and conflicted about what constitutes healthy play for their kids. I have gathered and analyzed thousands of case studies that I call play histories. I have found that remembering what play is all about and making it a part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being. The ability to play is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person. . . .

Ultimately, this book is about understanding the role of play and using it to find and express our own core truths. It is about learning to harness a force that has been built into us through millions of years of evolution, a force that allows us to both discover our most essential selves and enlarge our world. We are designed to find fulfilment and creative growth through play.”

~ Stuart Brown, M.D. from *Play*

Play.

It's an essential part of optimal living.

In fact, [Stuart Brown](#), M.D., goes so far as to say that “remembering what play is all about and making it a part of our daily lives are probably the most important factors in being a fulfilled human being.”

That's a strong statement.

And, the good doctor walks us through the compelling evidence of why it's true. The book is a quick, fun read. (Get the book [here!](#))

In this Note, we'll take a quick look at the what's and whys of play along with some practical Big Ideas we can apply to our life today. I hope you enjoy.

Let's jump straight in!

WHAT IS PLAY?

“Sometimes running is play, and sometimes it is not. What is the difference between the two? It really depends on the emotions experienced by the runner. Play is a *state of mind*, rather than an activity. Remember the definition of play: an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self-motivating and makes you want to do it again. We have to put ourselves in the proper emotional state in order to play (although an activity can also induce the emotional state of play).”

“The beneficial effects of getting just a little true play can spread through our lives, actually making us more productive and happier in everything we do.”

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

Stuart tells us that defining play is kinda like trying to explain a joke—*“analyzing it takes the joy out of it.”*

He establishes some basic properties of play such as: *“apparently purposeless (done for its own sake) + voluntary + inherent attraction + freedom from time + diminished consciousness of self + improvisational potential + continuation desire.”*

And... He tells us that the easiest way to describe play is to help us connect to the EMOTION of play. The easiest way to do that? Look at a picture of babies or cats playing. THAT is play. :)

Why should we care?

Because play is INCREDIBLY PERVASIVE throughout nature—from baby leopards and cats and dogs play-fighting as they grow up to bison jumping on a frozen lake and sliding on all fours (haha!). And, as Stuart tells us: *“As a scientist, I know that a behavior this pervasive throughout human culture and across the evolutionary spectrum most likely has survival value.”*

Although play appears to be purposeless, it actually has HUGE implications on our well-being. So, let's take play seriously. :)

WHAT IS YOUR PLAY PERSONALITY?

“When people know their core truths and live in accord with what I call their “play personality,” the result is always a life of incredible power and grace.”

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

“As we grow older, we start to have strong preferences for certain types of play over others. Some things float your boat, other don't. Over the years, I've observed that people have a dominant mode of play that falls into one of eight types. I call these play personalities. These categories are not scientifically based, but I've found them to be generally accurate.”

No one is a perfect example of a single play personality type; most of us are a mix of these categories. At different times and in different situations, people might find themselves playing in a mode that is different than their dominant type. I've found that most people recognize themselves in these archetypes and find them useful for discovering their own play personality.”

Play personalities.

Stuart identifies eight of them and gives us some detail on each. Here's a quick snapshot:

- *The Joker.* The class clown or practical joker falls into this category. Loves nonsense.
- *The Kinesthete.* The kinesthete loves to move—whether it's football or yoga or dance, they do their best thinking and feel most alive when moving.
- *The Explorer.* Explorers love to discover new places—whether the terrain is physical, emotional or mental, they love pushing their edges and finding new vistas.
- *The Competitor.* The competitor loves to play by creating games and playing to win—whether it's solo or social, they love keeping score and coming out on top.
- *The Director.* The director loves to organize—the party givers and excursion leaders who take us on adventures.
- *The Collector.* The collector loves to have the most interesting collection of objects or experiences—whether that's coins, toy trains, antiques, shoes, cars or whatever fascinates them.
- *The Artist/Creator.* Artists/creators love making things—whether that's painting or sculpting or knitting or sewing or gardening, they're playing when they're creating.
- *The Storyteller.* Play for storytellers focuses on imagination. Our novelists, cartoonists, and screenwriters, performers and also those whose greatest joy is engaging in those creations.

The more we can identify our play personality, the more we can consciously set out to ensure our lives are full of play.

Can you see yourself in any of those descriptions and identify how you currently engage in certain play activities?

My dominant play personality appears to be the Competitor with a mix of Creator. I *love* to set ambitious creative targets for myself and “compete” with myself to get them done. I get great joy in keeping track of how I’m doing and pushing myself to “win” in my own little game. I smile as I type that. :)

You?!

DON'T BE A SEA SQUIRT, YO!

“The people who stay sharp and interesting are the ones who continue to play and work.”

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

“The adult sea squirt becomes the couch potato of the sea. In a surprisingly macabre twist, the sea squirt digests its own brain. Without a need to explore or find its sustenance, the creature devours its own cerebral ganglia. It’s like something out of a Stephen King book: “All work and no play make sea squirt a brain-eating zombie.”

The sea squirt is an example of a basic principle of nature: Use it or lose it. If a capability is not being used, it becomes an extravagance that is jettisoned or fades away. Either we grow and develop or we waste away.”

The sea squirt.

Here’s a quick biographical sketch of the little guy: In its youth, it explores the sea—finding nutrients and avoiding harm. When it reaches adulthood, it fixes itself permanently to a rock or a boat’s hull. As Stuart says, it becomes the couch potato of the sea.

Then what happens? Then it eats its own brain. (Hah! And, d’oh!)

The brain was only needed as it was exploring. Just sitting there, it became extraneous. Use it or lose it, baby!

As Stuart advises: “When we stop playing, we stop developing, and when that happens, the laws of entropy take over—things fall apart. Ultimately, we share the fate of the sea squirt and become vegetative, staying in one spot, not fully interacting with the world, more plant than animal. When we stop playing, we start dying.”

How about *you*?

You attached to your couch or out there exploring and playing and continuing to grow?

The good news for us is that we can continue to create new neurons/connections and PLAY is one of the best ways to do so! (So, let’s!)

WORK + PLAY

“Play is like fertilizer for brain growth. It’s crazy not to use it.”

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

“Finally, and perhaps most important, work that is devoid of play is either boring or a grind. We can get pretty far through sheer willpower, and some people have prodigious powers of perfectionism, self-denial, and suffering. Ultimately, though, people cannot succeed in rising to the highest levels of their field if they don’t enjoy what they are doing, if they don’t make time for play. Having a fierce dedication to grinding out the work is often not enough. Without some sense of fun or play, people usually can’t make themselves stick to any discipline long enough to master it.

People always say that you can reach the top by “keeping your nose to the grindstone,” but as sports performance specialist Chuck Hogan observes, this is not true. People reach the highest levels of a discipline because they are driven by love, by fun, by play. “The great performers perform as they do, and do so with such grace, because they love what they are doing,” Hogan observes. “It’s not work. It’s play.””

"When people are able to find that sense of play in their work, they become truly powerful figures."

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

Love that.

Want to reach the highest levels of performance in a given domain?

We need to *love* what we do. PERIOD. We're simply not going to put in the HUGE amount of effort over an extended amount of time to reach true mastery unless we bring a great deal of love (and play!) to our work.

Reminds me of [Carol Dweck](#) who shares this wisdom in [Mindset](#) (see Notes): *"The growth-minded athletes, CEOs, musicians, or scientists all loved what they did, whereas many of the fixed-minded ones did not."*

Many growth-minded people didn't even plan to go to the top. They got there as a result of doing what they love. It's ironic: The top is where the fixed-mindset people hunger to be, but it's where many growth-minded people arrive as a by-product of their enthusiasm for what they do.

This point is also crucial. In the fixed-mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or if you're not the best—it's all been wasted. The growth mindset allows people to value what they're doing regardless of the outcome."

[Maslow](#) echoes this wisdom as well—telling us that the apparent dichotomy between work and play dissolves in those who are self-actualizing.

And Stuart wraps up the chapter on work and play with this gem from writer James Michener's autobiography: *"The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence at whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him, he's always doing both."*

P.S. Back to you. How can you bring more love + play into your work?!

Here's one way:

ONE BIG SANDBOX

"True mastery over a lifetime comes from one's internal play compass."

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

"What about work, which is supposed to be the opposite of play? Is there play in something as serious as biochemical research? After taking play histories of Nobel laureate scientist Roger Guillemin and polio researcher Jonas Salk, I realized that what they were doing every day in the laboratory was playing. When Roger took me through his laboratory he was like a kid as he described his experiments. Here was the biggest, most expensive sandbox he had ever played with, all set up to let him discover wonderful new things. I still remember his glee when he told me about his latest work, "Releasing factors, Stuart, we have discovered releasing factors." His joy was as pure as that of a kid showing off a beautiful shell picked up at the seashore."

What an amazing image.

A nobel-laureate with the joy of a child who gets to play in the most incredible sandbox all day long.

Let's bring more of *that* energy into our lives!!

SOMETIMES PAIN IS BLISS

"Living a life of play doesn't mean always choosing the most pleasurable or fun path, however. Joseph Campbell, the brilliant scholar who documented how people across all cultures and all times are essentially living by common mythologies, is probably most famous for his advice to "follow your bliss," but he had to add a clarification because some people took this to mean that

"A lack of play should be treated like malnutrition—it's a health risk to your body and mind."

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

they should forgo anything that was unpleasurable or distasteful. I worked closely with Campbell for several years, spearheading the effort that led to his many PBS series. What he believed was that people should find the path in life that fuels their spirit, that speaks to them on the deepest level. But Campbell also showed that this path is sometimes hard. "If your bliss is just fun and excitement, then you are on the wrong path," he would say. "Sometimes pain is bliss."

Follow your bliss. That's some powerful wisdom. (Of course.)

And... As Stuart points out here and we discuss in our Notes on [Campbell](#) (see [A Joseph Campbell Companion](#), [Pathways to Bliss](#), and [The Power of Myth](#)), it's not *all* about non-stop bliss-making.

Sorry to break the news. (Laughing.)

As Campbell says, if your bliss is *just* fun and excitement, you're on the wrong path. Hero's journeys just don't quite work out that way.

Stuart shares the story of a friend of his who loved to scuba dive.

He was out on a trek to reach a great spot to dive. The boat ride out was super rough and he was complaining the whole time. Finally, his guide told him that he's never going to have the peak experiences he wants to have unless he was willing to go through some discomfort.

His friend quit complaining and could appreciate the choppy waters as a prelude to (and essential component of) the bliss he was about to experience sixty feet below the surface of that choppy water.

Reminds me of a great [Earl Nightingale](#) story Denis Waitley shares in [The Psychology of Winning](#) (see Notes): "One of the best ways to develop adaptability to the stresses of life is to view them as normal. Earl Nightingale tells of his visit with his son recently to the Great Barrier Reef which stretches nearly 1800 miles from New Guinea to Australia. Noticing that the coral polyps on the inside of the reef, where the sea was tranquil and quiet in the lagoon, appeared pale and lifeless... while the coral on the outside of the reef, subject to the surge of the tide and power of the waves, were bright and vibrant with splendid colors and flowing growth... Earl Nightingale asked why this was so. 'It's very simple,' came the reply, 'the coral on the lagoon-side dies rapidly with no challenge for growth and survival... while the coral facing the surge and power of the open sea, thrives and multiplies because it is challenged and tested every day. And so it is with every living organism on earth.'"

How about you?

You so busy trying to make your life non-stop blisstastic that you're missing the beauty of the challenging times?

Here's to saying "YES!" to it all!

PLAY BOOSTER: JUST MOVE!

"One of the quickest ways to jumpstart play is to do something physical. Just *move*. Take a walk, do jumping jacks, throw a ball for the dog (a double play boost). Motion is perhaps the most basic form of play. We are designed to start moving when we are in the womb. When a grinning and gleeful infant pulls himself up on his feet you can see in his face the pure pleasure of this little triumph. Remember the sea squirt? It has a brain only when it is moving through time and space, and for us such movement is fundamentally pleasurable. We are *alive* when we are physically moving."

Stuart spends a chapter describing "a world at play" and gives us a number of ways to bring play into our lives.

"When enough people raise play to the status it deserves in our lives, we will find the world a better place."

~ Stuart Brown, M.D.

One of the best, easiest ways to jumpstart some play mojo?!

JUST MOVE!!!

If you haven't noticed, nearly all the great teachers come back to movement as a CRITICAL part of our well-being—whether it's a neuroscientist describing it as a key component to brain hygiene or an exercise scientist telling us moving is like taking a little bit of Prozac + a little bit of Ritalin, it's HUGE.

We are born to move. So, let's!!

(I'm hopping off to do a set of burpees now. Be right back... Ahhhhh.... That was fun. :)

INFUSING JOY VIA PLAY

"For me, this gets to the heart of the matter. Play is how we are made, how we develop and adjust to change. It can foster innovation and lead to multibillion-dollar fortunes. But in the end the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect most deeply with the best in ourselves, and in others. If your life has become barren, play brings it to life again. Yes, as Freud said, life is about love and work. Yet play transcends these, infuses them with liveliness and stills time's arrow. Play is the purest expression of love."

Beautiful.

Here's to bringing more play into our lives and infusing our work and our love with even more joy!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of "Play"

STUART BROWN, M.D.



Stuart Brown, M.D. is a medical doctor, psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute for Play. The producer of a three-part PBS series, *The Promise of Play*, he has also appeared on NPR and his research was featured in a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Carmel Valley, California, and works out of his office treehouse. Get the book [here!](#)

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.