

## **Plan to Play**

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Many things contribute to cognitive fitness, but perhaps one of the most important things is whether we take time out to play. Playing isn't just for children! It's an important part of maintaining our mental (and physical) fitness! Playful experiences help our brains grow! Our ability to play lies at the heart of our capacity to imagine and create. Jaak Panksepp's neuroscientific research on mammals identified play as a primary human drive and the brain's source of joy. Joy is the emotional fuel that helps the brain to develop—and later, to help ward off decay. Play nourishes our highest-level cognitive functions and improves our ability to reason and understand the world. Albert Einstein saw his ability to grasp profound insights into the nature of the universe because of play that stimulated his ability to combine diverse information in meaningful ways.

Play is a tool we must consciously use. Our society calls on us to exercise ever greater levels of emotional control; therefore, as we get older we tend to play less often. This reduces the revitalizing capacities of play. But, a legitimate and comfortable environment for brains to play can be a powerful tool for allowing people to develop their creative capacities and cognitive health.

For play to contribute to a thriving brain it must occur in the right emotional environment. We must truly be engaged in it. We must have a stake in the outcomes, because risk alerts the brain and activates capacities for both reason and imagination. Too great a personal stake in the outcome can create debilitating stress, though. So keep it light and keep it fun.

Benefits of playing:

- Increased memory capacity
- Increased enthusiasm
- Increased imaginative capacity
- Increased learning capacity
- Improved social interactions
- Reduced stress levels

Happy games to you!