

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

TAKING TIME TO PLAY

Do you remember what it was like to be a kid and have no professional deadlines or serious responsibilities to worry about? As children, we enjoyed the luxury of wasting lots of precious time on pure fun. But now as adults with pressures and responsibilities, we simply don't have that luxury anymore, right?

It may be time to rethink that viewpoint. Mental health experts now say that carving out time for play is just as important for us as adults as it was for us as children. Play provides benefits to adults including improved brain function, reduced stress and improved social skills. In the long run, those who often take time from work to play outperform the martyred workaholics who don't take all of their vacation time and instead remain perpetually under the gun and on the job with few real breaks in the stress.

It is important for mental health, wellbeing and relationships with others to take time out to play. The type of healthy, therapeutic play that rejuvenates and improves mental health for adults is no different than the type of play we engaged in together as children.

Healthy adult play is defined by *www.HelpGuide.org* as "a time to forget about work and commitments, and to be social in an unstructured, creative way. The focus of play is on the actual experience, not on accomplishing any goal. There doesn't need to be any point to the activity beyond simply having fun and enjoying yourself."

It is a very tall, almost impossible, order for lawyers to try and find an "off switch" for their intensely goal-oriented brains. The thought of routinely doing things that do not have a point can seem absurd and irresponsible. The conditioning of law school, the bar exam and years of law practice thereafter can render unrelenting, goal-oriented habits of continuously moving toward achieving difficult goals.

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Even if we do learn to take a break now and then, we may need to rethink how to spend that downtime.

According to *HelpGuide.org*, "When we do carve out leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or the computer than engage in fun, rejuvenating play like we did as children. Play could be simply goofing off with friends, sharing jokes with a co-worker, throwing a Frisbee on the beach, dressing up at Halloween with your kids, building a snowman in the yard, playing fetch with a dog or a game of charades at a party, or going for a bike ride with your spouse with no destination in mind."

George Bernard Shaw's famous quote is: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

The National Institute for Play at *www.nifplay.org* and Scott Eberle's "Play Blog" at *www.museumofplay.org/blog/replay* are good resources to learn more about how fun and play are important components for maintaining personal mental health and better weathering the high-pressure environment of practicing law.

Access Stuart Brown's "TED Talk" about play, "Play is More Than Just Fun," at: www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital?language=en. Brown says the benefits of play are not limited to personal improvement but also have amazing effects in building trust and solving relation-

ship issues. The "Play Signal," he says, can override a differential in power and turn what may have been a confrontation into an interaction that builds trust, cooperation and bonding in a positive way.

From a lawyer's perspective, one of Brown's most striking observations is that the opposite of "play" is not "work," as we might intuitively expect it to be. Instead, the opposite of play is *depression*. Is there a possibility that a lack of play time is one of the causes of the high rates of depression in the legal profession? Does an intense work ethic with no significant time for lighthearted play on a routine basis hurt us as a profession more than it helps us?

As Plato said, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." Play is a very effective tool for teambuilding and boosting productivity and innovation in the workplace. According to *HelpGuide.org*, dot-com companies that offer yoga, exercise and games like ping pong at work are on to something.

Bottom line: Playtime is needed to avoid burnout and depression. Working harder and longer is not the answer. Instead, incorporate play into your schedule and benefit from it so as to be more effective in the long run.

If you need help with depression now, contact the Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) confidentially at 1(866)354-9334, (985)778-0571 or email LAP@louisianalap.com. Or visit the website at *www.louisianalap.com*.

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