

Avoid the “pleasure desert:” Finding your joy

The term self-care typically brings to mind things like healthy eating, regular exercise, maintaining good relationships, meditation, yoga or a bubble bath. Under ideal conditions, some or all of these activities can be something to look forward to, but it's easy to feel as though self-care becomes an entire to-do list of its own when we're maxed out and short on time and energy. When we need self-care the most, the last thing we need is another list of “must do” items that reinforces those feelings of being overwhelmed and inadequate.

Rather than give up on self-care altogether when you're struggling to find the time and energy, why not take a different approach and start with something that feels fun or brings you joy?

Take a moment to think about the presence or absence of joy and pleasure in your life. Where do you find joy shows up without effort? What do you do that brings you pleasure? Under what circumstances do you grant yourself permission to make joy and pleasure a priority? For many of us, pleasurable activities fall to the bottom of our priority list. This means that we set conditions for pleasure: after my obligations at work and home are taken care of, and if I've eaten my vegetables and taken a walk and meditated for 20 minutes, then I'm allowed to sit down and play my guitar. And if we're honest with ourselves and examine this set of conditions with a realistic eye, it's easy to see how the guitar ends up collecting dust in the corner. When we're under a heavy load, we often lack the energy to do self-care tasks

that aren't necessarily fun, like exercising regularly or meal planning for healthy eating. So, if we tell ourselves that we aren't allowed to “have our dessert until we've eaten our vegetables,” it's easy to end up in a ‘pleasure desert’ where joy seems impossible to find or appears only as a mirage in



the distance. It may seem the opposite to what you'd expect, but making pleasure a priority can make it easier to do the things you have to do by energizing you and attending to all aspects of your self.



The proverb, “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” originates as early as 1659. It means that when we don’t make time for pleasure, we become boring people. It could also be said that “All work and no play” leads to a lack of motivation, lower productivity, increased risk of mental and physical health concerns, and all the usual suspects when it comes to poor wellness outcomes. That’s because play, joyfulness, pleasure and fun are some of the things that give our lives value and meaning. When we feel that our lives have value and we regularly connect with the things that bring meaning, we’re fueling our gas tank to take care of the “must do” tasks that typically fill the bulk of our days.

If you’ve been wandering in a ‘pleasure desert’ and are wondering how to bring joy and fun back into your life, it doesn’t have to be difficult. Often some small mental shifts are enough to move things in the right direction. Here are some questions for self-reflection to get you going:

- What activities or experiences do you find fun?
- When you feel joy or pleasure, where do you notice it in your body?
- What do you do when you want to laugh?
- Which activity (past or present) do you do less than you’d like because it feels less important than other tasks?
- What change do you notice in yourself after you’ve experienced joy, pleasure or fun?

A common reality is that when we’re feeling low or tired, it can be difficult to engage our creative mind to come up with things that make us feel better. Many people find it useful to make a list of fun, joyful or pleasure-inducing activities to keep handy for times when they need a boost.

Another practical tool is scheduling “fun time.” This is sort of like budgeting. Just as it’s a good idea to include “fun money” in your financial budget, scheduling regular, doable amounts of time for joy and pleasure is a healthy way to avoid the boomerang effect that can happen when we are too restrictive for too long. Whether it’s a budget, a diet or the balance of obligations and fun in your life, success is less likely when we expect ourselves to go without the good stuff altogether. So, make sure your weekly schedule has some fun sprinkled in it and make it a commitment to follow through on those plans, or experiment with other options if you find it hard to make it happen.

Joy and pleasure are important parts of a self-care plan and not to be banished to the bottom of the list. If “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,” then “a good mix of work and play makes me healthy, motivated and engaged” are certainly the better words to live by.

Do you want help finding your sources of joy or pleasure? Manitoba Blue Cross members with Employee Assistance Program or Individual Assistance Program coverage can get counselling support from a qualified clinician.

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For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca.



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be resilient is a quarterly publication of the Employee Assistance Centre, a Division of Manitoba Blue Cross. Direct inquiries and letters to R. Sinclair, 599 Empress Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 3P3 204.786.8880, TTY 204.775.0586, toll-free 1.800.590.5553, Fax 204.788.5598.

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