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CAREER COUCH

Hobbies Are Rich in Psychic Rewards

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. Between work and family, you have little time or energy left for hobbies, like crafts, painting or music. Without them, though, life feels mundane. What can you do about it?

A. Squeeze them in, even it's for just a few minutes at a time, because those moments can change your mood and your mind-set.

When people do things that make them feel good, like a hobby, it activates an area of the brain called the nucleus accumbens that controls how we feel about life, said Dr. S. Ausim Azizi, chairman of the department of neurology at [Temple University's](#) School of Medicine in Philadelphia who studies brain activity and cell signaling. Activities you enjoy also stimulate the brain's septal zone — its “feel good” area — and that makes you feel happy, said Dr. Azizi.

Q. Are hobbies good for you?

A. Yes, and in many ways. Hobbies can enhance your creativity, help you think more clearly and sharpen your focus, said Carol Kauffman, an assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School. “When you're really engaged in a hobby you love, you lose your sense of time and enter what's called a flow state, and that restores your mind and energy,” she said. In a flow state, you are completely submerged in an experience, requiring a high level of concentration. Research shows strong correlations between flow states and peak performance, said Ms. Kauffman.

Being in that heightened state of concentration raises the levels of neurotransmitters in your brain — chemicals like endorphins, norepinephrine and dopamine — that keep you focused and interested in what you're doing and that energize you, said Dr. Gabriela Corá, a psychiatrist who is managing partner of the Florida Neuroscience Center and president of Executive Health and Wealth Institute, an executive coaching firm in Miami.

“Making time for enjoyable activities stimulates parts of the brain associated with creative and positive thinking. You become emotionally and intellectually more motivated,” she said.

Hobbies also enhance self-esteem and self-confidence. Feeling that you are solely defined by your job — even if it is going well — can raise your chances of experiencing anxiety, depression and burnout, because you don't have a perception of yourself outside of work, said Michelle P. Maidenberg, a psychotherapist and business coach in New York, and clinical director of Westchester Group Works, a center for group therapy.

“When people rely only on their role at work to foster self-esteem, that alone cannot typically fulfill their

needs,” she said. If you are unhappy with your work performance, you are more inclined to define yourself as inadequate, but if your identity is varied — businesswoman, mother, wife, painter, cook — you can reflect on your success in those other things, she said.

Q. Can a hobby make you better at your job?

A. Yes, because doing something you enjoy can help you think more creatively and give you confidence. Ms. Kauffman said a hobby could even help prepare you for a difficult meeting, making you more sure of yourself and energetic. “Let’s say you are passionate about opera. [Google](#) your favorite opera piece and listen for five or six minutes,” she said. “That positive emotion builds your cognitive and social skills. If you follow your bliss for a little while, it really gives you a surge of energy.”

Challenging and stimulating hobbies may inspire ideas that will help you at work — leading, for example, to a new approach to making presentations, solving problems or meeting a client’s needs. “Any time you take a break from routine, you develop new ways of thinking,” said Gail McMeekin, a psychotherapist and owner of Creative Success, a career coaching company in Boston and author of “The Power of Positive Choices.”

Ms. McMeekin said that by tapping into our creativity through hobbies, we make connections that lead to a flurry of insights and new ideas.

Q. Life is so busy. How do you make time for a hobby?

A. If you start thinking of your hobby as something that helps you professionally as well as personally, you won’t feel so guilty about making time for it.

Schedule an activity on your calendar at home and at work, said Andrea Kay, a career consultant in Cincinnati and author of “Life’s a Bitch and Then You Change Careers.” Ms. Kay’s hobby is making whimsical papier-mâché creatures. She usually dedicates time on the weekend for her art, but also suggested using time early in the morning or in the evening, after children are in bed. “A lot of people just spend their nights in front of the TV; do your hobby instead,” she said. Another option: take a class, like painting or pottery, that forces you to make time for it.

Q. How can you tell if your hobby is something you should pursue professionally?

A. The tipping point is reached when you are far more interested in your hobby than your job and when work feels like a waste of time, Ms. McMeekin said. But take a long look before you leap.

“You have to do some market research first and make sure you could earn a living doing your hobby. You also take the risk that making your hobby your career will take all the fun out of it,” she said.

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