

The Power of Fun

What's in it for me? Pursue more True Fun experiences and live a healthy and happy life.

Before we begin, think for a moment about the last time you had fun. When I think about what I did over the weekend – I had dinner with friends, I went to see a movie, and I had a long walk in the park – I know I “had fun.” But I also know it wasn’t the same level of sensory-overload fun I experienced when my friend and I went to an amusement park the week before it closed for the winter and there were absolutely no lines so we could go on as many roller coasters as we wanted without waiting! To distinguish our rather mundane, everyday use of the word fun to describe our activities from the more exciting full-on kind, Catherine Price, the author of *The Power of Fun*, has developed and built on a concept of what she calls True Fun. In these blinks, I’m going to talk you through what True Fun is, how to recognize it, and how we can generate more of it in order to live healthy and happy lives. In these blinks, you’ll learn

what differentiates True Fun from everyday fun; which three elements are necessary to experience True Fun; and how to put a SPARK into your life.

True Fun occurs when playfulness, connection, and flow coincide.

When Catherine Price started looking for a definition for this overused three-letter word, fun, she found it rather elusive. And perhaps surprisingly, she also found a dearth of research on the subject. So she set out to develop her own terminology and definitions, starting with True Fun. Through a process of analysis of her own experiences and those of over 1,500 volunteers from various backgrounds across the globe, she concluded that we experience True Fun when playfulness, connection, and flow occur at the same time. OK, that’s all well and good, but . . . what exactly are they? Playfulness is what you experience when you do something just for the sake of doing it. You’re not looking for a particular outcome or reward. You’re carefree, smile and laugh, and feel completely free of your responsibilities. You feel connection when you share a special experience with another person, but you could also feel connected to nature, the activity itself, or a pet, for example. And you know the saying “time flies when you’re having fun”? Well, that’s when you’re experiencing flow. You’re so engrossed in what you’re doing in the present moment that you simply forget time. Now, if you experience any one of these or a combination of two of them, you’ll undoubtedly feel a whole range of positive emotions – joy, happiness, and satisfaction, for example – but when all three occur at the same time? That’s when the True Fun begins. True Fun is electric. It can be a fleeting moment soon forgotten, or it can be longer and reside in your memory for the rest of your life. But however long it lasts, True Fun is an experience. It’s an energy that exists in the present moment. As cliché as it might sound, it makes you feel alive. So now we know what True Fun is, it’s much easier to see what it’s not. Think for a moment about the many things you do that are passive, like reading a book, watching Netflix, or going to a concert. These activities may be relaxing or thrilling, even educational or satisfying. And they’re absolutely not a waste of your time. But unless there’s playfulness, connection, and flow – for example, the singer at the concert really

connects with the audience, or you sing and dance along with your friend – chances are you're a passive consumer. And that simply saps time and energy from pursuing True Fun. And there are a few other things you should look out for, too. Distraction is the greatest True Fun killer. When you're distracted your attention is divided and you won't experience flow. Not only that, your playfulness and connection are compromised when you're distracted, too. Judgment is also a major buzz-kill. When you stop to evaluate what you're doing, you step out of the moment and are no longer in flow. And when none of the three elements of True Fun is present? Well, it's probable that you're not enjoying yourself at all.

True Fun is good for your health and your happiness.

Prepare yourself for an unexpected truth: we are all going to die! The things that disturb our sleep at night don't matter; the things that stress us out or that we obsess over on a daily basis – our careers, our failures, our bosses, our financial situations, our likes on social media – are all ultimately meaningless. Well, that's a killjoy if ever there was one – but there's a point! While ultimately we can't do anything about our final destination, we can make sure we enjoy the journey. Unfortunately, most of us have been brought up believing everything we do has to have a purpose. We've learned that purely pleasurable experiences aren't priorities. We might even find ourselves feeling guilt when we have them. Our modern busy lives don't help, either. Opportunities for playfulness, connection, and flow have become more elusive. What's worse, we've developed a kind of toxic relationship with our devices – our phones, our computers, our tablets, and our TV screens. Just consider that even before COVID-19 the average American adult was spending four hours a day on their phone. That's sixty days a year, or 25 percent of their waking lives. And that's just phones! Our addiction to our phones results in us being perpetually distracted. Remember, if you're distracted, you can't be in flow. Not only that, you also lose connection – if you're not completely present you're not really connected with the person you're with. So, your phone addiction is damaging your ability to have moments of True Fun. And here's the thing: True Fun is good for you emotionally, physically, and mentally. As Price says, "life-changingly, astoundingly good." For example, when we're playful, we don't have to pretend to be someone else. We let our guard down and become more open to humor and connection and we get back in touch with our real selves. Not only that, but play actually increases the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which then stimulates nerve growth in the decision-making and emotional processing areas of our brains. And when it comes to connection, some experts believe that loneliness and isolation can lead to a higher risk of health problems – such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke – comparable to those caused by smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Conversely, people who develop strong relationships live longer and have reduced levels of cognitive decline. And flow? You may have heard of *ikigai* – Japanese for "worthwhile life" or in other words, always being engaged. A study of *ikigai*, on Okinawa, an island that has an extraordinary number of centenarians, showed that they experienced the same kind of flow in practicing *ikigai* that we all do when we're having True Fun. In short, True Fun can make us healthier and happier, so why wouldn't we seek out more? In the rest of this Blink, we'll explore how you can create more True Fun in your life so that you not only feel alive, but maybe even stay alive, too.

Before looking for more fun, do a fun audit and establish a baseline.

Audits are fun, right? I doubt you expected to hear the word audit in connection with fun. Yet, before we can start to have more True Fun in our lives, we need to take a step back, recognize the signs of True Fun, and evaluate how much of it we're already experiencing – in other words, establish a baseline. And then we need to identify 3 important things: our fun magnets, our fun factors, and our anti-fun factors. Sounds like a lot of hard work? Nothing says “fun” like an assignment. But bear in mind that the ultimate aim is to enjoy yourself. And you don't have to do this alone, either. Why not ask someone to do it with you? Chances are you'll grow closer and both end up having more True Fun in the process. There are a lot of typical physical and emotional effects associated with True Fun. Signs include laughter, losing track of time, feeling free, letting go, being totally present in the moment, and a sense of childlike excitement and joy. Most likely, when you experience these things, you have some combination of playfulness, connection, and flow. If it's all three – by now you know – that's True Fun. Here are three activities that will help you to identify True Fun and encourage you to have more of it: First, establish your True Fun baseline. Think about how you experience fun, and then rate these ten statements on a scale of 1 to 5, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Grab a pen and paper and score yourself now.

I prioritize fun. I know what fun is to me. Friends think of me as a fun person. I know the characteristics of experiences that make me feel fun. Five activities, settings, or people I have True Fun with come to me easily. I regularly include these activities, settings, and people. I always have something to look forward to. I make things fun for me and for others. I experience delight regularly. I have enough fun.

Add up your scores. Forty to fifty, and you're already embracing fun! Thirty to forty, good job – you just need to make some tweaks here and there. Below thirty? Don't worry! If you follow the advice in the rest of these blinks, you can make some big changes. Take particular note of areas in which you scored less than three – these are the areas you need to work on most. For the second exercise, you need a journal or notebook and to dedicate 60 undistracted minutes. Think of three True Fun moments in your life. Go back to each moment and imagine everything you sensed and felt. Make an exact account of where you were, what you were doing, how old you were, who else was there, and why it felt so much like fun to you. Next, think about something in the future you'd like to organize or take part in and write down everything in the same way. Now think about what it is that your historical and imaginary experiences have that makes them so special? Third, keep a Fun Journal, a record of everyday activities, people, and settings which for you create playfulness, connection, and flow. Label each with P, C, and/or F and note down who you were with, what you were doing, and where. Review your journal regularly – perhaps once a week – and look for recurring themes.

Identifying your fun magnets, fun factors, and ant-fun factors will help you experience more True Fun.

Armed with your baseline and your fun journal, it's time to think about what

preconditions there need to be for you to experience True Fun and identify your fun magnets, fun factors, and anti-fun factors. Let's start with those preconditions – without these in place, you won't experience True Fun. First, make sure you're completely present and engaged. No distractions, remember? Put that phone away! Then, nobody should feel judged or self-conscious during the activity and everyone involved should go all-in – no half measures. It's important not to think about a reward or outcome from the activity, too – so embrace your playfulness. And get together with other people. Even though you absolutely can experience True Fun alone, it's more likely you'll experience it with others. Seeking out your fun magnets – the people, activities, and settings that trigger your sense of playfulness, connection, and flow – is also likely to present more opportunities for True Fun. So make engaging with these a priority. Look back at your fun journal and think about when, where, and with whom you experience the three elements, either individually or in combination. And look for recurring combinations. You could even compare fun magnets with friends so that you can seek out True Fun together. Next, think about what characteristics, or fun factors, your fun magnets have that make them so magnetic. You might find you're drawn to physical activities – dancing, or sport, for example. Or perhaps you prefer more intellectual pursuits – maybe strategy games or discussions with friends lasting long into the night. Are there things you particularly like doing when you have fun such as organizing things, working on new skills, or interacting with other people? Try to organize characteristics you associate with playfulness, connection, and flow. For example, some playfulness characteristics might be creativity, silliness, games, or spontaneity. Those of connection could be teamwork, large groups, small groups, community, or strangers. And characteristics of flow may include nature, music, performance, or competition. Use these characteristics to brainstorm other activities which might create fun for you. It's a good idea to know what repels you, too – your anti-fun factors. For example, how do you feel about risk? If you're risk-averse then simply avoid risky activities. And if you dislike crowds, avoid those jammed-together concerts and over-full bars. But also . . . don't get too stuck in your ways. If you challenge your assumption that you dislike these things, you may be surprised to find that maybe you've changed. After all this hard work auditing your fun and defining what it means for you, the theory is done. It's time to get into action. Next up, we'll use the acronym SPARK to get things moving. You're going to make Space, pursue Passions, Attract fun, Rebel, and Keep at it!

Prepare for fun by making Space, pursuing your Passions, and Attracting fun.

Making Space means decluttering both your mental and physical space. The first step is to give yourself permission to prioritize fun in your life. You can do that just in your head, if you like, but if you need to visualize it, write yourself a permission slip. Perhaps something along the lines of “I hereby give myself permission to prioritize fun in my life and won't feel selfish or irresponsible in doing so.” Then, be sure to sign and date it. Next, think about any resentment you feel toward others. For example, you might be resentful because you're always responsible for looking after the kids, or for making sure everyone remembers doctor's appointments or birthdays, or even for making sure the toilet roll gets replaced. In cases like these, a weekly chat over coffee to divvy up these responsibilities can drastically lower your resentment levels. Cluttered physical spaces can increase anxiety and stress, so although there may not be a need to have a

full-on Marie Kondotidy up, it is a good ideato have a sort out. Discard things you no longer need and tidy away things you want to keep. And just as you do for your physical space, declutter your mind, too. You've only got a finite amount of time and attention, so consider using a planner to block out time for the big stuff so you can focus and avoid distractions. You might want to make a list of things not to do, like maybe avoid Facebook or scrolling your Instagram feed. And don't forget to make space for others, too. It's fine you don't share all your partner's or friends' fun magnets and fun factors! But still, help them to make space for those things anyway. That way, you're more likely to have fun when you do activities that involve your shared magnets. So, you've got space, and now you have to decide what you want to do with it. The P in SPARK stands for pursuing not only your Passions, but also your interests and hobbies. That means doing more fun things! You do these activities because you find them pleasurable and interesting. You don't need recompense, and flow is something that invariably occurs. Sometimes, they also lead to playfulness and connection and may also lead to True Fun. It's good to have a large number of free-time pursuits. This allows various aspects of your personality to come out and in the process you'll gain more knowledge and skills. Ultimately, this may result in you experiencing flow in even more contexts. For example, if you learn a new language and visit a country where it's spoken, you may be able to interact with the locals in ways other tourists can't. And if cooking becomes your passion, you can host dinner parties. The more activities you take part in, the fuller your life will be. Take a moment now to browse back through your fun journal and your list of fun magnets. Is there anything already there that could become a leisure-time activity? Brainstorm some new ideas, too. Are there things you didn't want to do when you were younger that you might want to try out now? And what about new things that maybe you've never considered before? Write a list of anything you can think of. There's no compulsion for you to try everything you come up with, but it'll give you plenty of ideas to choose from. And remember, solitary pursuits aren't bad – they're certainly more rewarding than simply scrolling through your phone – but if you want to generate True Fun, you also need playfulness and connection. Could some of your activities be shared with others? For example, if you love reading, why not join a book club? That way you can talk about what you've been reading and, who knows, that connection could lead to some True Fun, too. So, you've made space and found your passions. Now it's time to Attract fun – to become a fun magnet yourself! Yes, even if you're not currently somebody who everyone loves to be around or you consider yourself to be an introvert, you really can become that person. How? First of all, change your mindset. Start by taking a fun approach to life. Seek out each and every opportunity for playfulness, connection, and flow. Become someone who laughs easily at the humor of everyday life around you. And more than that, look for the absurd – the more ridiculous and illogical the better. We laugh at the absurd, and when we laugh we attract even more fun. Why not try adding a touch of that absurdity to your everyday activities? One of Price's survey respondents even tried pouring her tea standing on one leg. It might not have been earth-shattering fun, but it was fun for her and uplifted her mood, and that's all we're aiming for. Then, you can strengthen your playfulness by exercising it more. For the next seven days before going to bed each evening, think about or write down playful moments from your day. Pay attention to what you were doing, who was involved, and how you felt. Not only will this focus you on how and when you're playful, but may allow you to see where you could be playful in new ways. Practicing presence – whether you are alone in the moment or with others – is essential to developing your fun mindset. When you're present, people notice and want to spend more time with you. This, in turn, will lead to more fun. So, again, put your phone away, look up, make eye contact, smile, and let people you're with know that you're focused on them.

Rebel once in a while and remember to Keep prioritizing your fun.

So far we've covered the first three elements of SPARK: make Space, pursue Passions, and Attract fun. Now, let's consider the final two: Rebel and Keep at it. It may surprise you to know that when Price looked through all the anecdotes she was sent about past experiences of True Fun, she discovered that many of the activities were, as she says, "mildly naughty." Rules were broken, even if only slightly, and some respondents described behaviors that were taboo, unexpected, or unusual. We're not talking about such rebellious activities that might hurt someone or land you in jail, but more, you know, things that are harmless. You could, for example, rebel against convention. Just because everyone else is talking about politics or the coronavirus doesn't mean you have to. Or you could rebel against traditions. Find preparing your Thanksgiving feast too stressful? Why not have a more relaxed day instead? You can always celebrate Thanksgiving another day with family and friends. And, of course, there are many other things you can rebel against. You could question the validity of some of your beliefs, for instance. You might find a shift in your mindset opens up new possibilities. Or you could rebel against your own adulthood – next time you're in the car, turn up the volume and sing along to music you loved when you were 16 instead of listening to the news. You can even rebel against your responsibilities and obligations – well, within reason! Maybe don't quit your job and run off into the sunset. Just do some things that are for you – be a little selfish. Sign up for that painting course you always wanted to do, for example, or take a weekend break with your friends. And, finally, we've arrived at the K of SPARK – Keep at it! If you want to prioritize fun you need to commit to doing that for the rest of your life. First, identify your fun squads – the people you have fun with. You probably have several of them already – perhaps coworkers, friends, or people you share a passion with. You could even find new squads by joining a sports team or an interest group. Remember your fun magnets? Knowing that your time is limited, make sure you prioritize those activities, settings, and people that you regularly have True Fun with. Plan for fun, too. Spontaneity isn't everything, and without planning you might miss out on opportunities to engage your fun magnets. Make a commitment to yourself to always have something to look forward to on your calendar – if not daily, at least weekly. Planning will help you do that. And, finally, to have fun you obviously have to invest time and attention, but small doses don't necessarily need a lot of monetary investment. On the other hand, holidays and gatherings of friends or family are likely to require some financial outlay. But remember, if it comes to a choice of spending on things or on meeting people, always choose the latter. Time with your friends should be your priority. Price's daughter described True Fun as "sunshine." It really is. The more you bask in it, the healthier and happier your life will be.

Final summary

The key message in this Blink is that: If you want to lead a happy and healthy life, the pursuit of fun – True Fun, that is – is essential. Carrying out a fun audit and identifying your fun magnets, fun factors, and anti-fun factors will help you to plan more activities where you'll experience the three elements necessary for True Fun – convergence of playfulness, connecting, and flow. By following the principles of SPARK – making Space, pursuing Passions, Attracting fun, Rebelling, and Keeping at it – you'll also create a little sparkle in your life. And here's one more piece of actionable advice: Build a Fun Toolkit

Put together a collection of things that inspire you that you can turn to at any time. You could keep a list in your head, but a physical receptacle that's pleasing to the eye is probably better. It can become somewhere to keep your fun journal along with a list of ideas, souvenirs of fun times, photos, and reminders of your interests and hobbies. Whatever you end up putting in it, keep adding to it, and when you're feeling down or lacking ideas, reach inside and get inspired!