

All Work No Play

What's in it for me? A guide to connecting with your inner child.

You come home, make dinner, wash the dishes, and go to bed. Then you get up and go to work and it starts all over again. When did life become a cycle of endless tasks? At what point did you lose that sense of fun and adventure you had when you were a child? We may not be able to change the responsibilities of adulthood, but we can certainly reconnect with our sense of play. And that's exactly what Dale Sidebottom set out to do when his life fell apart because of too much work. In these blinks, you'll rediscover the magic of play. You'll learn the powerful effects that play can have on your relationships and your mental health, as well as how to harness those benefits in your daily life through an approach called play-based mindfulness. In these blinks, you'll learn

what play-based mindfulness is; how Dale's great-grandmother lived past 100; and six reflective questions that could change your life.

Play can change your life.

Dale Sidebottom had hit rock bottom. At the age of 30, he was divorced and homeless, sleeping on his cousin's couch. As a passionate physical education teacher with an entrepreneurial spirit, he'd already developed several fitness businesses and education apps. So how did someone like Dale end up in such a tough spot? Through professional counseling, Dale found the answer - he realized that a decade-long addiction to work had taken its toll. Through time, effort, and support from loved ones, he began turning his life around. But he credits his recovery to one thing above all else: play. The key message here is: Play can change your life. More than anything else, play helped Dale Sidebottom get himself back on track. As he began picking up the pieces of his life, he realized that somewhere along the way he had stopped having fun; he had become all work and no play. But he hadn't always been like that. Dale grew up with a supportive family in a small town north of Melbourne, Australia. He loved playing with his two younger sisters, Kayla and Hannah. The three of them spent hours together - building forts, playing with LEGOs, and exploring the great outdoors. Despite his solid upbringing, Dale grew into a less solid young adult. He describes himself as being narcissistic and arrogant during that period. He became obsessed with work, often putting in 18-hour days. Even when it began affecting his relationships, he could always find excuses for why it wasn't his fault. This bad behavior followed Dale throughout his twenties and early thirties, until he hit his all-time low. When Dale finally admitted to himself that something had to change, one of the first things he did was start scheduling playdates into his calendar. At first, he would only do activities that brought him joy and reconnected him with his inner child when he was alone. Eventually, Dale began having playdates while he was teaching or working; he incorporated fun into his lessons or into his work with a client. His mood improved almost instantly - play helped him be more present in the moment, and it reminded him to laugh and smile again. Throughout these blinks, we'll explore what play is and how it can benefit your life. We'll also discover the practices and strategies that Dale used to incorporate play into his routine and turn his life around.

Play comes naturally to children, but it's important at all stages of life.

When Dale was ten, he would often visit his 100-year-old great-grandmother. She was one of the most content people he knew, and she loved playing games. Her favorite was Snakes and Ladders, and the two of them would play together – sometimes for hours. Their 90-year age difference didn't make it any less exciting or competitive. His great-grandma's love of games no doubt helped maintain her mental health, astuteness, and youth well into old age. But too often, when we hear the word "play," we tend to think exclusively of childhood. For Dale Sidebottom, that's a problem. The key message here is: Play comes naturally to children, but it's important at all stages of life. If you've ever played peek-a-boo with a baby, you probably noticed how naturally playful and curious it was. When a smile starts spreading across a baby's glowing cheeks and she then bursts into a fountain of giggles, you get that feeling of pure magic. Play is integral for children's development. It's how they explore and learn about the world around them. And the lack of it can have real consequences. In his research, Dr. Stuart Brown of the National Institute for Play found that youth deprived of play in their early years were more likely to display antisocial behavior and commit crimes. But the importance of play doesn't end in childhood. According to Peter Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College, it's fundamental to healthy human existence at any age – including adulthood. If you look closely, you'll find traces of play everywhere. In fact, you've probably played today without even realizing it. Think about the last time you were driving alone. Did you turn the radio up and sing loudly (and perhaps badly) to the music? That's play. Ever told yourself that you can't have a bite of that cupcake until you've finished a task? That's gamifying a situation, which is a type of play. Sharing memes on social media? Bantering with a coworker? It's all play. The reality is, play is a part of life whether you're doing it intentionally or not. That's because it's innately human. Sadly, many adults have lost their capacity for play. Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." But before you learn how to reconnect with your inner child, you'll need to better understand what exactly play means.

There are many ways to engage in play.

We just learned how play is an integral part of human life, whether you're eight years old or 80. But maybe you bristle at the idea of adults playing. You think, That's nice for others, but it's just not my thing. Especially for those out of practice, the idea of play might feel embarrassing. But play doesn't mean you have to crawl around the carpet or make a fool of yourself. There are all kinds of play: it can be structured or unstructured; scheduled or spontaneous; a specific activity or simply a state of mind. The key message here is: There are many ways to engage in play. Let's explore three approaches to engaging in play. Dale's 100-year-old great-grandma loved Snakes and Ladders. Games like that are a perfect example of the first approach: play-specific activities, which, as the name suggests, are designed to engage you in play. Think board games, video games, escape rooms, trivia, charades, and puzzles. But this form of play can also include sports and theatrics, or any other intentional form of play. You can bring more play-specific activities into your life by scheduling a weekly game night, or organizing a friendly game of kickball with friends after work. Next, imagine a coworker named Lucy. She's always cracking jokes around the office, or playing harmless pranks like replacing

someone's pens with gummy worms. Lucy exemplifies the playful mindset. This is all about bringing a sense of spontaneity, adventure, or light-heartedness to daily life. And for the introverts: daydreaming can be a perfectly playful mindset! Last, think of a coach – called, say, Gunther – who makes pregame warm-ups more fun by splitting his athletes into teams and rewarding points for completing drills. This exemplifies the third approach, which is all about bringing play into activities you don't necessarily associate with it. Gamifying a situation, like coach Gunther does with the warm-ups, is a great example. So is starting a meeting with a silly icebreaker, or tinkering around with an object in order to mend it or make it better. Now that you've seen some of the different forms play can take, reflect on which you could incorporate into your own life. Which are you already doing?

Play helps build connections and deepen relationships.

Dale knew his four-day hike up to Machu Picchu would be memorable. He was with a large group of trekkers from several different countries. But from his years as a play coach, Dale also knew how to bring an extra touch of magic to the experience. So one morning, Dale initiated a silly game of Evolution, which is like rock-paper-scissors in high gear. In no time, middle-aged Canadians and South Africans were squatting on the ground, laughing uncontrollably. The next morning, he was asked to facilitate another game to pump everyone up before the day's trek. On the last day, they all played Evolution again – only this time, five other trekking groups saw the fun and joined in. Dale had dozens of adults from ten different countries all acting like kids again. The key message here is: Play helps build connections and deepen relationships. Dale's game of Evolution wasn't just a fun activity; it helped create bonds that lasted long after the four-day adventure. This is the power of play. It's hard to be vulnerable in front of new people, but a bit of play and laughter can do wonders to put people at ease, open them up, and build authentic rapport. Play can also help you deepen the relationships you already have, like those with your family. Not only can play reduce tension and boost your mood – something that's especially important for overworked parents – but it also improves communication and helps strengthen family bonds. You can reap these rewards by setting up a weekly playdate with the whole family. Board games are always a great option, but you can also try other things, like climbing trees, building something together, or going bowling. And parents can schedule playdates just for themselves, which will help keep the marriage exciting and fresh. Whatever activity you choose, be fully engaged and present. That means no cell phones or television. Play is how we create lasting memories, and it can make the time your family spends together feel unique. Of course, play can also strengthen the bonds between members of any team, whether they're family or coworkers. For play to succeed in professional settings, make sure you set up a conducive atmosphere. When done right, office play has been shown to boost productivity, teamwork, and performance!

Play boosts your mental health and helps you be more present.

Midway through the half-marathon, Dale's friend and colleague Dr. Craig Daly was slowing down. While he'd done all the necessary training, he'd failed to pace himself in

the first half, and now his body hurt. He lay down in some grass beside the road and wondered if he could even finish. Then he heard a familiar voice: “Ganbatte-ne, Craig-san! You can do it!” It was Sato-san, the smiling, gray-haired Japanese man who Craig had met earlier that day. Something about Sato-san’s words and demeanor lifted Craig’s spirits, and he picked himself up and got back in the race. But something had changed. He was no longer fixated on his performance. Instead, he enjoyed the views of Australia’s Gold Coast as he ran. Time started flying by, and when he finished, Craig discovered that he had run the race in a personal best time. The key message here is: Play boosts your mental health and helps you be more present. It wasn’t just Sato-san’s positive encouragement that gave Craig such a boost; it was also his infectious, playful mindset. Adopting it for himself, Craig immediately felt an improvement in his mood and found himself able to slip completely into the moment. And no wonder – these are proven ways that play benefits our minds. Engaging in activities that are fun and joyful relieves stress and improves your mood by releasing endorphins and dopamine. Play also supports brain function by preventing memory problems and fostering creativity. In fact, we learn new tasks more easily when they’re fun and engaging, and when we’re in a relaxed state. In his own experience, Dale Sidebottom has come to think of play as a form of mindfulness because it helps him to let go and be completely in the moment. Researchers refer to this as a flow state, and it’s what Dr. Daly experienced during his race when he finally let go and discovered the pleasure of running. When you’re in the flow state that is play, you’re focused on the task and aren’t worrying about things like your growing to-do list. You can stay present and really enjoy the moment. That’s why Dale coined the term play-based mindfulness, which is a powerful approach to living. It’s a set of practices that help bring the well-being benefits of play and mindfulness into your life. In the final blink, we’ll explore a routine that Dale recommends for incorporating play-based mindfulness into your day.

A ritual of play, exercise, gratitude, and giving can bring play-based mindfulness into each day.

Many adults think they don’t have time for play. For years, Dale thought the word “busy” was a badge of honor. But busyness won’t bring happiness. So isn’t it time to slow down and reconnect with the things that bring us joy? To help him do exactly that, Dale developed a daily practice centered around Play, Exercise, Gratitude and Giving – or PEGG for short. The key message here is: A ritual of play, exercise, gratitude, and giving can bring play-based mindfulness into each day. Dale recommends you start every morning and finish every evening with the following simple routine. To start, make your bed. Why? Because it’s an easy win, and it feels great to accomplish something so early. Then drink half a liter of water; it’s hydrating and good for your brain. Next, sit down with your morning coffee or breakfast, and answer three questions: “What am I excited about today?”; “What will challenge me today?”; and “How can I surprise somebody today with an act of kindness?” This third question is about the practice of Giving. Brightening someone’s day and making them feel special will make you feel really good. Once you’ve answered all three questions, get up and spend ten minutes doing some Exercise. Go for a walk, do some push-ups, or dance around the kitchen. Moving your body will help wake you up and give you a rush of endorphins. Finally, finish the morning with presence and calm by practicing simple breathing exercises or a few minutes of meditation. There are many phone apps that

offer guidance if you're unsure about the process. Now you can go about your regular day! And once it's all behind you, Dale recommends capping the evening off with three more reflection questions. First up: "What are three things I'm grateful for?" This is the practice of Gratitude, and it'll help you foster appreciation for life and the people around you. The second question is, "What form of play did I do today and how did it make me feel?" This is to ensure you made time for Play, the foundation of the practice. Third, ask, "What did I learn today?" This question will help you embrace the fact that you're always growing. So there you go! A simple daily ritual to help you incorporate play-based mindfulness into your life.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Play is an integral part of human life – and not just during childhood. As adults, when we tune into our sense of play and take the steps to integrate it into our daily lives, the world starts to look different. We lighten up. We smile and laugh more. We form deeper bonds with people. And we reconnect with what matters most in life. And here's some more actionable advice: Try the Evolution game. Next time you're in a group of people who don't know one another very well, provide an opportunity for play and connection with the Evolution game. Everyone starts as an egg on the ground and pairs off for a round of rock-paper-scissors. The winner evolves into a chicken, and the loser remains an egg. In the next round, eggs pair against other eggs, chickens against chickens. The chicken who wins evolves into a monster, while the chicken who loses reverts back to an egg. The game ends when the first monster wins, evolving into a human. It's totally silly – and guaranteed to have the whole room laughing. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with All Work No Play as the subject line and share your thoughts!