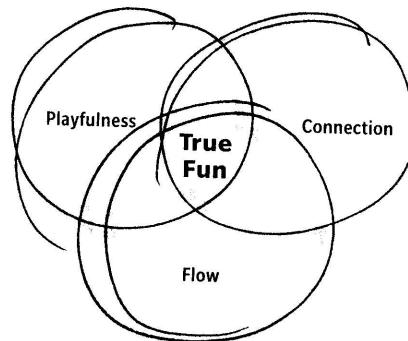


True Fun is the confluence of **playfulness, connection, and flow**. Whenever these three states occur at the same time, we experience True Fun.



It's simple enough in theory. But to understand it fully, we've got to dissect each of those elements on their own.

PLAYFULNESS

True Fun can only occur when people are being playful.

By playfulness I mean a spirit of lightheartedness and freedom—of doing an activity just for the sake of doing the activity and not caring too much about the outcome. As the examples shared by the Fun Squad made clear, True Fun carries with it no sense of obligation—when we're being playful, we don't mind if there's no tangible reward. Playfulness creates a sense of being outside of your normal reality; you're relieved of your everyday responsibilities and feel carefree; you smile frequently and laugh easily. When people are being playful, they sparkle.

CONNECTION

True Fun always involves a sense of connection—the feeling of having a special, shared experience with someone (or something) else.

It can occur when you feel unusually connected to your physical environment (e.g., nature), the activity in which you're participating, a pet, or even your own body. However, in the vast majority of instances, this connection is with another *person*; when people describe True Fun, they report feeling like they're joining together with someone while at the same time feeling totally themselves. Surprisingly, this applies to introverts as well as extroverts. Based on the Fun Squad's anecdotes, introverts are more likely to experience True Fun in a small group of friends than in a big crowd of strangers, but just like extroverts, their most fun moments do not occur when they're alone.

FLOW

Flow is a term used in psychology to describe when you are fully engrossed and engaged in your present experience to the point that you lose track of the passage of time. (You know the adage “time flies when you’re having fun”? That’s flow.) Self-consciousness and judgment—whether from yourself or other people—are anathema to flow, as is any form of distraction. Think of an athlete in the midst of a game, or a musician enraptured by the melody she is producing, or the feeling of getting lost in a project or a conversation and looking up to realize that an hour has passed. Its ability to ground us in the present moment makes flow an intrinsic part of True Fun; without it, True Fun cannot occur. Every experience shared by the Fun Squad took place in the context of flow.

Playfulness, connection, and flow are each independently capable of leading to a host of positive emotions, such as achievement, joy, sat-

isfaction, happiness, and awe—I have yet to see anyone come out of an experience that made them feel playful or connected or that put them into flow and say, “Well, *that* was a waste of time.”*

You can also experience two out of these three states together. Connected flow can happen in an intense conversation or during a religious service, for example. Playful flow can occur when you’re engaged in a solitary hobby you love, such as doing the crossword or making a craft. Playful connection can appear in discrete bursts, like when you give someone a knowing look or share an inside joke with a friend. All of these combinations are also worth seeking.

But when playfulness, connection, and flow happen at once, something magical results. You experience *True Fun*.

Once I’d settled on this definition of True Fun—and had confirmed with Fun Squad members that it described their experiences—a lot of things clicked into place. Playfulness, connection, and flow all make us feel engaged and focused, which helps explain why True Fun is such a life-giving force. They generate energy, which accounts for the electric feeling that’s so often associated with True Fun. And the fact that this energy can vary in intensity and duration clarifies how some episodes of True Fun light us up for a flash but don’t linger in our memories while others last longer and stay with us for the rest of our lives.

Playfulness, connection, and flow only exist in the moment when we feel them, which explains the fascinating fact that True Fun occurs exclusively in the present tense. Also, unlike positive *states* such as happiness or satisfaction, True Fun is an *experience*. This means that we can’t have True Fun continuously, alas, because each instance of it has a beginning and an end. But on the flip side, this makes fun more accessible; it’s easier to imagine specific circumstances in which you might *have* fun than it is to imagine how you could become someone who *is* happy or satisfied.

* This makes it particularly unfortunate that in our productivity-obsessed, materialistic culture we tend not to use them as metrics or goals.

Fun is also easier to evaluate. If you asked me “Are you happy?” I’d likely be thrown into an internal philosophical discussion with myself (*What does it mean to be happy? What is happiness? Et cetera*) and end up saying, “How the heck do I know?” Ask me if I had True Fun last weekend, on the other hand, and I’d have no problem telling you yes or no.

Playfulness, connection, and flow all encourage us to shed our inhibitions and formal façades, which is likely why people report feeling in touch with their authentic selves when they have True Fun. And the fact that these states are not dependent on any specific activity explains how the same person, doing the same thing, can have a completely different experience, depending on variables such as their mood, their attitude, and the people they’re with at the time. Defining True Fun as playful, connected flow also demystifies one of its most enigmatic elements: how we can all know what it is and yet experience it so differently. True Fun is simultaneously universal and unique.

Defining what True Fun is also helped me clarify what it is not. Simply put, if *none* of the three ingredients for fun are present, then we’re unlikely to enjoy ourselves at all. And if there’s anything that *prevents* us from experiencing one of them, whether it be playfulness, connection, or flow, then we cannot—and will not—have True Fun.

Distraction is probably the greatest offender, since it gets in the way of all three. If we are at all distracted—if our attention is split—we cannot experience True Fun, because fun requires flow, and flow requires that we be fully present. Since the definition of being distracted is that you are *not* present (the word “distracted” is derived from a Latin verb that means “to drag away”), this means that anything that distracts us is going to block True Fun. If we want to experience more True Fun, we need to minimize the amount of time we spend trying to pay attention to multiple things at once.

In addition, distraction gets in the way of playfulness, which re-

quires active engagement. (You can't maintain witty banter, for example, if you're not paying attention to the conversation.) And it destroys connection, too: we've all experienced the frustration and loneliness that comes from being around someone who is physically present but mentally someplace else. True Fun and distraction are like oil and water: they do not mix.

Judgment is also a fun killer. In order to judge something, we have to step out of an experience so that we can evaluate it, and (as we just noted) when we are out of our present experience, we are obviously not in flow. Even everyday forms of evaluation, such as "liking" things on social media or editing the selfie we just took, count as judgment and encourage self-consciousness—another fun killer—and therefore will destroy that moment's capacity to be fun. Comparing ourselves to other people is also a form of judgment and is toxic to fun—as the saying goes, "Comparison is the thief of joy."

The more I thought about the definition of True Fun, the more nuances presented themselves.

For example, there are certain experiences that make a person feel alive but that no one would classify as True Fun. Like, say, childbirth.

What's more, there are many objectively positive states, such as satisfaction or wonder or awe, that don't necessarily fit the definition of True Fun. Sure, having fun can often *lead* to a sense of satisfaction, wonder, or awe, but those states are not "fun" per se. For example, I'm often awed by a beautiful sunset, but I wouldn't say that the sense of awe itself was fun. And on the flip side, you can have True Fun doing things (e.g., car karaoke) that are not awe-inspiring or deep.

While particular activities, settings, and people can contribute to the likelihood that True Fun will occur—and each of us has a collection of activities, settings, and people that are more likely to generate True Fun for us than others (I call these "fun magnets")—no activity, setting, or person is intrinsically fun. You may love cooking and enjoy throwing dinner parties at your home, for instance. But we all know that some dinner parties end up being way more fun

than others, even if the same guests are invited, you're in the same spot, and the same food is served.

There are also things that we're drawn to, sometimes compulsively, but that are straight-up not fun. Like, for example, busyness. (This misperception is particularly common on vacations, when we overschedule ourselves in an attempt to maximize our fun.) True Fun is more likely to happen when it has space to unfurl.

Also not fun? Material possessions. Many of us work very hard at our jobs to afford things that are marketed to us as fun. But while possessions can facilitate fun (for example, if said possessions are water skis), objects themselves are not fun.

Neither is self-medication. If you take a step back and observe adults "having fun," you may notice that many of the things we pass off as fun could also be described as numbing ourselves from our current reality. For example: getting drunk or high. Binging on movies or TV. Spending hours mindlessly scrolling.

Self-medication can be soothing or enjoyable up to a point, and in moderation, substances can sometimes help us shed our insecurities and inhibitions in a way that actually is conducive to True Fun. But this shedding of inhibitions can have some notable costs: you may have a hard time remembering all of the fun you had; you may end up so uninhibited that you do something out of line with your values; and substances come with the risk of addiction and dependence, which are decidedly not fun. Ideally, we want to learn how to loosen up *without* external help (which is something that devoting ourselves to the pursuit of True Fun will help us do).

The fact that playfulness, connection, and flow are all *active* states also means that anything that could be described as passive consumption cannot, by definition, generate True Fun on its own. This is a really important distinction, given that so many of the things that we do "for fun" are passive activities such as watching television or checking our social media feeds, and given how much money and effort goes into convincing us that they're worth our time.

If you find yourself pushing back on this idea, it's likely because passive consumption *can* be relaxing and pleasant, even educational and satisfying. Indeed, there are many situations in which consumption is genuinely enjoyable or rewarding—all of which make it easily confused with True Fun. For example, concerts, live theater, and dance performance can be thrilling, delightful, and even transformative, and I am not suggesting that activities such as going to the movies, reading books, or watching your favorite show are wastes of time, or that you should cut passive consumption out of your life entirely. But if we're being precise about it, these things are not truly fun—unless, that is, something about the experience provides a sense of playfulness, connection, and flow (for instance, if a performer is particularly good at connecting with the audience, or if you attend a concert with friends).^{*} And in *that* case, the experience no longer really qualifies as passive consumption to begin with.

As I see it, the main problem with passive consumption is that when it's made too easy and accessible—as it is on our televisions and devices—it runs the risk of becoming a form of drug itself, something we use to seek pleasure and avoid pain (both for ourselves and for our kids). Not only does this habit hold the potential to cause dependence, it can transform passive consumption from an occasional choice into our default, until eventually we forget that other options even exist. And every time we use it to numb ourselves, it saps time and energy that we could be putting toward the pursuit of True Fun.

This level of analysis may make it seem like we're getting into the weeds, but it's important: the better we understand what True Fun

* In other words, the source of entertainment went from being a form of passive consumption to being fodder for *interaction*, which in turn can facilitate fun. For example, I have a friend who routinely has fun when she and her husband watch cheesy Hallmark movies together and try to predict the dialogue. In this case, the movie itself isn't the fun *per se*; the fun comes from the game that they're playing together (for which the movie provides material).

is and is not, the better decisions we'll be able to make about how to spend our time. Indeed, the beauty of evaluating your life through the filters of playfulness, connection, and flow is that it can help you crystallize the difference between things that hold the potential to catalyze True Fun (i.e., your fun magnets), things that are pleasant (and that thus may be worthwhile, even if not True-Fun-generating), and things that are straight-up time sucks.

The challenge, however, is that you may have to come to terms with the fact that many of the things you ostensibly do “for fun” do not, in fact, generate True Fun. They may not even bring you pleasure.

In some cases, this may be a simple problem to fix. Anything we do for leisure is voluntary; otherwise it wouldn't count as leisure—and leisure is supposed to be enjoyable. So, if you're not enjoying a leisure activity, you should just stop doing it and make room for something else. For example, if you find board games boring, you could suggest something different. No one ever died from refusing to play Monopoly.

Sure, you may find it hard to abandon certain activities because of a sense of obligation—say, if you realize you don't derive much pleasure from your book club but don't want to let down your friends (or if you don't look forward to discussing the book, but you do like the chance to socialize). You may also decide to hang on to other pursuits because you enjoy them occasionally. But once you've put in the work to identify the pastimes that fall into these categories for you, at least you won't keep finding yourself participating in them without knowing how you got there. They're not the type of things that are so mesmerizing that you can't seem to look away, and they're not so easy to engage in that you find yourself drifting toward them on autopilot. If and when you spend time on them, you'll be doing so by choice.

In other cases, however, you may keep finding yourself entranced by things that you have realized are *not* ultimately enjoyable and that

in the process—and it can include more than just one other person if you'd like.) Going through these steps with a friend or loved one will provide fodder for conversation and exploration, bring you closer, and increase the likelihood of you both having more True Fun.

And on that note, please remember that this is meant to be a chance for self-exploration and enjoyment, not a homework assignment. While you do need to engage with the questions and experiments if you actually want to see changes in your life, you do not need to do every single exercise that I describe or take me up on all of my ideas. Follow the plan's basic structure, in other words, but feel free to customize the details. If you ever start feeling like your pursuit of fun is turning into work, back off a bit. Yes, we have a lot to do, but the process should feel like play.

The goal isn't to turn every second of your life into an outrageous explosion of fun. That would be impossible (and, honestly, a bit much—someone has to take out the trash). We also don't want to set the bar too high—*any* moment of playfulness, connection, and flow, no matter how fleeting, is a step in the right direction and will make you feel more engaged and alive. I like to imagine that we're playing darts on a board where the outer ring represents moments of playfulness, connection, *or* flow, the inner rings represent experiences that involve two of these states, and the bullseye is the magical confluence of all three. We're aiming at the center, but hitting any part of the dartboard is worth points.

At first, the effects of this refocusing might be subtle, but it won't take long before you find yourself surprised by how many aspects of your life fun has touched—from the quality of your relationships to your energy level to the way you choose to spend your time. Set True Fun as your compass, commit to sticking with it, and you will find your life transformed.

STEP 1: KNOW THE SIGNS OF TRUE FUN

We can't appreciate or seek out fun if we don't know how to recognize it when it occurs, which is why our first step is to learn to identify some of its most common physical and emotional effects.

When I asked my then-five-year-old daughter to describe what fun feels like, her response was "happy and excited." She hit the nail on the head: True Fun is a mood boosting *and* energizing state.

Here are some other signs to watch for:

- Laughter
- A sense of release/freedom/letting go
- Feeling like you're having a special, shared experience
- Losing track of time
- Feeling free from self-judgment and self-consciousness
- Feeling like you've temporarily "stepped out" of normal life
- Being fully absorbed and present
- Not caring too much about the outcome
- A feeling of childlike excitement and joy
- A positive boost in energy
- Feeling totally yourself

If any of these are present, you're likely experiencing some combination of playfulness, connection, and flow. If all three apply, chances are that you've identified a moment of True Fun.

Also, note that True Fun can vary in intensity and duration—it can feel mind-blowing or mild, and it can occur in a flash or last for a more extended period of time. (Think of the difference between sharing a moment of laughter with a friend and spending an entire weekend with that friend.) If you're the kind of person who enjoys categorizing things, you can think of this as the difference between

thor, who had begun to take voice lessons as an adult, approached her teacher after her first recital and asked for a critique of her performance—perhaps because her own penchant for self-criticism was so strong that she felt driven to seek it from other people, too. The teacher looked at her blankly and said, “You are a beginner. You are right where you are supposed to be in your development. Why would I critique anything?”

This brings us to one of the biggest roadblocks of all: our own perfectionism. It’s a huge problem, and not just in terms of our ability to have fun.

In 2017, Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill published a study that investigated the rates of perfectionism—defined as “a combination of excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations”—among American, British, and Canadian college students from 1989 to 2016. The study found that perfectionism is on the rise; as the authors wrote in a description of their findings, “increasingly, young people hold irrational ideals for themselves, ideals that manifest in unrealistic expectations for academics and professional achievement, how they should look, and what they should own.” Young people, they continued, are “seemingly internalizing a pre-eminent contemporary myth that things, including themselves, should be perfect.” After all, who posts a video to YouTube of their first try?

Some of the rise in perfectionism might be attributable to what the researchers refer to as “our society’s emphasis on social comparison, and the sorting, sifting and ranking that follows” a description that seems to perfectly (ha!) describe what we do on social media. But regardless of the cause, the rising rates are a problem because, as Hill and Curran point out, “perfection is an impossible goal. Those who become preoccupied with it inevitably set themselves up for failure and psychological turmoil. They become obsessed with winning the validation of others and demonstrating their worth through flawless performance after flawless perfor-

mance. They ruminate chronically about their imperfections, brood over what could have been or should have been, and experience considerable anxiety and even shame and guilt about their perceived inadequacies and unworthiness.”

Not only can perfectionism prevent you from trying new things out of fear of failure, but it can actually be damaging to your health. Perfectionists have been found to have stronger physiological reactions to stress and perceived failure than non-perfectionists (e.g., higher spikes in blood pressure), and are more susceptible to anxiety, depression, social phobia, anorexia and even suicidal ideation. Curran and Hill point out that “there is growing evidence that the increase in psychological ill-health of young people may stem from the excessive standards that they hold for themselves and the harsh self-punishment they routinely engage in,” and hypothesize that perfectionism may be behind what they describe as “almost epidemic levels of serious mental illness in young people.”

Hill and Curran’s research was specifically about rates of perfectionism in college students, but it has lessons for older people as well. First, we need to put less pressure on our kids, and teach them from a young age that perfection is not an attainable—or healthy—goal.* And second, we need to be better role models by cultivating more acceptance toward ourselves, and not being afraid to put ourselves out there and try new things, even if we might end up feeling (or looking) dumb. As a recovering perfectionist myself, I know this is hard. But if you want to have more fun in your life, it’s absolutely essential.

One way to loosen perfectionism’s grip is to gently investigate what, exactly, you’re afraid will happen if you do *not* perform

* I’ve been trying to do this with my own daughter by resisting the urge to use the word “perfect” as an adjective as much as possible. I felt like my efforts might be working when I accidentally referred to something she had drawn as “perfect” and she responded by looking up at me with a bemused smile and declaring, “Mama. *Nothing’s ever perfect.*” (This either means that she will be well adjusted, or that she’ll need a lot of therapy. Or, perhaps, both.)