

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Adults Need Play, Too

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Today marks the beginning of Labor Day Weekend in the United States and the end of summer (at least psychologically). This holiday is associated with backyard barbecues, back-to-school shopping, and horrible traffic. Its origins, however, date back to the Labor Movement in the late 19th century in response to dismal and unsafe working conditions. In 1894, facing a crisis over federal efforts to end a railroad workers' strike, President Grover Cleveland designated the first Monday of September a [national holiday](#).



[Photo Credit](#)

*When many American workers toiled long hours in low-paying jobs with unsafe working conditions and minimal protections, there was not a lot of time for adults to play. While you may think that was then, the same is true now, albeit for different reasons. And yet, the data are clear: play does not belong exclusively to children. We all need to play no matter our age. When adults take the time to play, we are happier and healthier, report greater psychological well-being, and are even more productive at work.*

**1. We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing - George Bernard Shaw.** Play keeps us young at heart, in mind, and in spirit. It inspires joy, enthusiasm, pleasure, and positivity. It can boost our energy and vitality and [improve resistance to disease](#). Some [data](#) suggest that participating in reading, writing, and playing games enhances cognitive resilience, which may have protective benefits in delaying the onset of cognitive decline. The [hypothesis](#) is that cognitive activity, including playing games, creates a kind of cognitive reserve that may delay the onset of dementia in Alzheimer's Disease by as much as five years. Much more research is needed to know for sure, but there's little downside in taking time out to play, so why not?

**2. Play is the highest form of research - Albert Einstein.** Play is our brain's favorite way of learning. We know that childhood play is essential for brain development. Across the lifespan, play engages our creativity and can provide opportunities for us to develop - or strengthen - critical social skills. Studies suggest that playing games or doing puzzles helps maintain memory and thinking skills. Play can improve brain function. Activities that challenge us, such as playing chess or solving brain teasers, can help prevent memory problems and improve certain aspects of [cognitive functioning](#).

**3. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy - Proverb.** Many types of play get us thinking creatively and keep our minds exercised and sharp. Play can engage our imagination and promote positive neural plasticity, meaning that we can rewire our brains in ways that improve well-being. A big reason that we play as grown-ups is to help us maintain a sense of social connection and well-being. Whether board games, tennis clubs, badminton on the beach, or team-building activities in the office, play is how we connect. The social interaction of playing with family and friends is not only fun, but [play also helps us ward off stress and depression](#).

**4. Work hard, play hard.** Play is an essential antidote to work, and striking a balance between work and play ensures optimal health, well-being, and life satisfaction. This is true throughout the human life cycle. Progressively learned play-based skills maximize the use of talents and lead to [enhanced personal and societal](#)

[well-being](#). [Around the world](#), we find that countries that have a cultural emphasis on work/life balance and adequate leisure/family time have shorter workdays, workweeks, and/or more vacation days. These countries also tend to have more worker-friendly employment practices and workplace conditions. They also are more likely to be at the top of the [world's happiest countries](#) list.

**5. Play is serious business.** We make time for what is important in our lives, and play is important. Play [relieves stress](#), and both physical and psychological wellness improve as stress levels decline. Lower levels of stress are associated with lower levels of inflammation, better heart health, better sleep, and more energy. Less stress promotes optimism and happiness and is associated with decreased risk of depression and anxiety. Play strengthens our social connections by facilitating trust, empathy, compassion, and intimacy. Play can help [heal emotional wounds](#). The same playful behaviors that predict emotional health in children lead to positive changes in adults' mental health and psychological well-being.

*My first research assistant position was with world expert on play, Professor Catherine Garvey, in the Psychology Department at Johns Hopkins University. We focused on children's play. I wrote about the importance of [play in children's health and development](#) in a previous Five on Friday. Labor Day is a reminder that play is for everyone. It's a lifelong pursuit that brings a sense of connection and engagement, transports us in time, and is valued for its own sake, not for its outcomes. It has many positive impacts on our mental health and psychological well-being. It's time to play.*

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