Leisure for Pleasure: How to Take Charge of Your Leisure Time

Julie and Rick are young professionals with plenty of money to spend on leisure activities. They go along with the trend, whether it's bridge or squash or cycling, because it's what "everybody" is doing. Julie and Rick seldom consider their own needs and preferences. So it's not surprising that they often find their leisure activities unfulfilling.

Maureen, a school teacher, mishandles her leisure time by playing the "someday game." In other words, Maureen is a procrastinator. Friends and co-workers often hear her saying things like "Someday I'll learn French," or "Someday I'll join an exercise class," or "Someday I'll do volunteer work." Maureen doesn't seem to realize that "someday" is not a day of the week.

George, a soon to retire salesperson, promised himself that he would take up golf, and would satisfy a secret yearning to do landscape painting. George isn't likely to tackle either of these leisure pursuits unless he overcomes his fear of failing and looking foolish. George overlooks the fact that no one starts out as an expert—a lot of time, effort, and frustration go into either a good game of golf or a beautiful painting.

How We Mishandle Leisure

We don't all mishandle our leisure the same ways as Julie, Rick, Maureen, and George. Many people exclude themselves from the pleasures of leisure by assuming that recreational participation involves spending a lot of money. Others miss out on leisure experiences simply because they don't know what is available or how to get involved. And still others avoid leisure by keeping compulsively busy. They fill up free time with tasks and obligations that resemble work, to avoid having unstructured time on their hands.

In fact, leisure has a negative connotation for many of us. It is viewed as a frill-something that is shallow and boring. And more people than you might imagine experience twinges of guilt when they take time out to relax in the sun or smash a tennis ball around a court.

What we tend to forget is that our lives need balance—we need both work and leisure. In their book Healthy Pleasures, Robert Ornstein, Ph.D. and David Sobel, M.D., say, "Having something you love to do, not for the pay of it, but just for the sake of it, is the essence of recreation." They go on to say, "Some kind of hobby seems an essential compliment to healthy work."

When we have a negative attitude toward leisure, we stop ourselves from living fully. We all need chances to grow, learn, and change; to do creative and enjoyable things; to develop positive relationships. Leisure can provide us with all these opportunities. What's more, leisure experiences can reduce the stress in our lives.

That we mishandle our leisure time is not surprising. The vast majority of us had never given leisure much serious thought. We consider it simply "time free from work or duties." And so, it's unlikely that most of us have ever thought of transforming our free time into what the experts say it could be—a meaningful experience that enhances our quality of life. In other words, it's not enough to have free time, we could be using it creatively and also enjoy it.

Expanding Your Leisure Horizons

The first step forward is a willingness to admit that you're getting very little personal satisfaction when you are not working. Once you've taken that first step, here are more you can take to expand your leisure horizons.

1.) Cultivate a positive attitude toward leisure. This involves looking forward to spare time and viewing it as an important part of your life. Believe it or not, retirement counsellors mention more than twenty benefits resulting from leisure activities. How many can you list?

All too often, we see only the most obvious benefits gained from a recreational pursuit. For example, many people, if asked to think about the benefits of taking art lessons, would probably come up with learning a new skill, being creative, and having the opportunity to get out and meet new people. Whereas a closer look would make them realize that perhaps the greatest benefit is the boost their self-confidence would receive when they are complimented on one of their paintings. Charles Brightbill, author of The Challenge of Leisure, puts it this way: "To be able to say "I made it" or "I mastered it" is to enlarge the personality."

2.) Discover your leisure interests. Ask yourself the following questions and write down your answers.

- Which leisure time pursuits have you enjoyed in the past?
- Which ones (recent or past) do you enjoy now?
- To which of these pursuits would you like to devote more time?
- What new activities—arts, crafts, hobbies, sports, studies, travel or volunteer work—would you like to try?

If you're like most of us, you'll find that there is quite a gap between your present leisure involvement and your ideal leisure lifestyle. For instance, a business man who said that his favourite personal interests were reading mystery novels, and going to baseball games, realized that he hadn't read one novel or attended one ball game in the past year.

3.) Tune into your leisure needs. This means finding out what you are looking for in your leisure pursuits. Personal taste and interests may have you wanting to do something meaningful, meet new people, contribute to the community, develop more skills or just laugh and enjoy. If you list all the things you would like to do, there could be a way in participating in one or two of them.

It's also important to realize that your leisure needs may change according to what is going on in your life. If you are experiencing a lot of stress for instance, your most important need may be to relax and take it easy. When your circumstances change, however, you may find yourself looking for something more challenging to do.

One of the immensely valuable aspects of leisure is that it can help you satisfy needs that you can't satisfy through work. For example, a person who works mainly at a desk may need involvement with a more physically demanding pursuit.

4.) Don't try to accomplish "the impossible." By considering your skills, your aptitudes, and your financial resources, you'll be able to select leisure activities that are realistic for you. Although challenges do make life more interesting, most of us aren't likely to follow through on leisure goals that are very difficult to attain. It also makes sense for people in later life to select some activities that they will not have to give up at some future point, due to possible health limitations.

5.) Strive for variety. If you concentrate on one activity or even one type of activity to the exclusion of all others, you're likely to find your leisure boring. The experts tell us that leisure should be a combination of relaxation, entertainment, and personal development.

6.) Plan your leisure. Procrastinators, ineffective time managers, and people with little free time can bring more leisure time into their lives by scheduling leisure activities. Remember that your personal time is one component of your life of which you can really be in charge.

7.) Find out what leisure activities are available to you. Begin by collecting information about leisure activities and starting your own leisure file. This file can provide you with up-to-date information about what is available, show you how to get involved and help you to tune into your interests. In fact, you'll see a definite trend after you have kept this file for a month or two. Here are some suggestions on what to collect for your leisure file:

- Travel folders
- Book reviews
- Clippings about sports, hobbies, volunteer work
- Brochures or pamphlets on forthcoming plays, concerns and continuing education courses

Remember Julie, Rick, George and Maureen at the beginning of the piece—the four people who were mishandling their leisure? We now know that they can get more personal satisfaction from their recreational activities by taking charge of their free time. And, what's more, so can you!