

How Hobbies Help Your Health

Hobbies can engage you physically and mentally. People who have a hobby are generally healthier, says Peter Lichtenberg, Ph.D., director of the Institute of Gerontology at Wayne State University. “We also know they are at a lower risk for depression and dementia. The great value of hobbies is they are a way for people to stay engaged on multiple levels.”



Health and Wellness

Most hobbies involve at least some level of mental activity, Dr. Lichtenberg says. Because we enjoy most things more when we share them, hobbies offer a reason to stay connected to other people with similar interests.

What kind of hobby is best? Hobbies that require expertise are more satisfying, Dr. Lichtenberg says. That’s because developing an expertise in something like photography or astronomy requires commitment, and commitment results in a higher level of engagement. Of course, hobbies that involve physical fitness, such as walking, “provide a physical benefit as well,” he says.

Psychologist Michael Brickey, Ph.D., is the author of the book *Defy Aging* and president of the Ageless Lifestyle Institute in Columbus, Ohio. His focus is on helping people stay physically and mentally active so they can enjoy their later years. Dr. Brickey says hobbies help by reducing stress and providing a sense of accomplishment.

“Hobbies can be thought of on three levels,” Dr. Brickey says. “The first is as a diversion. Hobbies help us pass the time. The second is as a passion. When a hobby becomes a passion, we become truly engaged in doing something we love. It not only helps us pass time, it makes us unaware that time is passing. The third level is as something that creates a sense of purpose. We all need that.” The ideal hobby, he says, combines all three levels.

“Hobbies can become so important, especially if they are a way to connect with others, that they become part of who we are,” Dr. Brickey adds.

Needy Causes

Janet Langlois directs Elder Craftsmen, a New York group that sponsors creative projects for seniors. In some of the most rewarding activities, she says, people build or make things and donate them to needy causes. For instance, participants in a quilting program donated their products to a homeless shelter.

“People get satisfaction on multiple levels,” she says. They get satisfaction from being creative and making something. They get the satisfaction of being connected to other people involved in the project. Finally, they get the satisfaction of giving something back to the community.

Senior centers and community organizations often sponsor such programs, she says. If no such project exists where you live, contact a charity group, such as a shelter, and volunteer to help set one up.

“Most people don’t have trouble finding a hobby they enjoy,” Dr. Brickey says. Dr. Lichtenberg says that thinking about what you liked to do in your leisure time before you retired is one way to find a hobby. You just need to be aware of the changes in the body that happen with age, he adds.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t play tennis,” he says, or take up something new. “You just need to be aware that your reaction time may have changed. If you listen to your doctor, take precautions and compensate for the changes, nothing’s off limits.”

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If you're just starting a hobby, remember that it takes time to realize the benefits. "You don't start exercising one day and feel great the next," Dr. Brickey says. "The same is true of a hobby. If you work at it regularly, you become more engaged. Over time, you find yourself getting more and more involved. If you stay with it, and make an effort to meet others who do the same thing, you'll eventually develop a passion for it."

Get Started Now

If you're looking for a hobby, plenty of folks can help.

Community colleges and senior centers offer classes in activities that range from ballroom dancing to playing blues harmonica. Ask for a list and look for activities you think you'll enjoy. An introductory class on watercolor painting or gardening shows you how to get started. It's also a great way to meet others who are interested in the same hobby you are. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Bird-watching:** Bird-watchers get excited when they tell each other what they've seen, whether at their backyard feeders or on their vacations. Local groups often have outings to catch sight of rare birds during migration. Check the nature programs at your local parks for classes on birds.
- **Scrapbooking:** This fun hobby results in a historical record of what's important to you and your family. Ask your local librarian to help you find articles about getting started. Sometimes, libraries and museums offer classes in how to preserve important memories.
- **Calligraphy:** If you've always been proud of your handwriting, you might consider calligraphy, the art of exquisite lettering. Check to see if your local craft store offers classes.

Some more activities to consider:

- Coin and stamp collecting
- Genealogy
- Photography
- Gardening
- Embroidery
- Song writing
- Sculpting
- Ceramics
- Writing poetry
- Acting
- Woodworking

What better way to stay busy than by doing something you love? That hobby you've been toying with could be your prescription for a healthier, more satisfying life.

