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Building Resilience by Wasting Time

by Jane McGonigal

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As a game designer, I'm often accused of helping people waste substantial portions of their lives. And no wonder: Worldwide, we spend 7 billion hours a week playing video games—300 million minutes a day on Angry Birds alone!—with seemingly nothing to show for it.

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But research suggests that engaging in some activities we assume are nonproductive—as tiny exercises—may actually be a smart way to spend time, especially at work. These practices can make people more-resourceful problem solvers, more collaborative, and less likely to give up when the going gets tough. In other words, they can make people more resilient. That's why I've made it a personal goal to waste at least four minutes every hour.

I began immersing myself in the science of resilience after I was laid up for three months with a traumatic brain injury. I was under orders to let my brain rest: no e-mail, no writing, no running. Every night I went to bed feeling as if the day had been a waste, and that made me anxious and depressed. I realized that I'd go crazy being so unproductive unless I could redefine what productivity meant to me. I thought of activities that would speed my recovery—small things that would make me feel happy, connected, and creative.

Once I got better, I became curious about why some of the biggest wastes of time, such as looking at photos of baby animals or wandering around the neighborhood, were the activities that had helped me the most. That's when I started devouring scientific literature about resilience, which draws on neuroscience, medicine, and psychology. And here's what I learned: There are four aspects to the ability to snap back and go on after a hit—physical, mental, emotional, and social—and each one can be developed with activities that appear to fritter away time.

As you might expect, physical resilience is crucial because it allows your heart, lungs, and brain to react efficiently to stressful situations. More and more, researchers agree that a sedentary lifestyle is the number one obstacle to becoming able to endure and bounce back. Their advice: Stand up and



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take at least a few steps away from your computer every hour.

Research also shows that willpower gets stronger the more we exercise it. Tackling a pointless but mildly challenging task, such as snapping your fingers exactly 50 times or counting backward from 100 by sevens, is a scientifically backed way to improve focus and determination—and thus mental resilience. In fact, the more arbitrary the task, the better; without external motivators, you have to will yourself to finish.

How about emotional resilience? To be less afraid of failure and more open to using different strategies, try to experience, on average, three positive emotions for every one negative emotion over the course of the day. Scientists call this the 3:1 ratio—and gazing at an adorable baby animal or making a satisfying hit in Angry Birds can raise your count.

Finally, social resilience is about the relationships that help us find resources when we need them. Here, studies on the effects of gratitude and touch suggest developing habits that connect you to others. Send a thank-you note once a day by e-mail, chat, or text message. When you shake hands, hold that grip a little longer. If you do it for a full six seconds, the touch will boost oxytocin levels in your bloodstream and your colleague's. (Elevated levels of it have been associated with trust.)

Greater resilience will make you more capable, and it will benefit your organization. Come up with a regimen—a game, even—to build yours every day. I'll be happy to have wasted your time.

Jane McGonigal is the inventor of the game SuperBetter and the author of *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Penguin Press, 2011).

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Eric 10/20/2012 04:16 PM

Great article. Jane thank you the insight and advice. Yes, this is in line with what we've heard previously regarding the overall benefits of physical and mental exercise.

Like Reply



Lschmier 10/05/2012 05:50 PM

I blow bubbles, talk with my flowers, to relax and appreciate all around me.

Like Reply



RalfLippold 10/03/2012 07:36 AM

Games are when your child genius within you has a chance to emerge! Thanks Jane for sharing your findings. I have made similar experiences with business-related games, and Lego Serious Play which at the 3rd SoL Global Forum in Muscat, Oman, April 2008, brought to the same level CEOs, coaches, students, and normal people in a workshop. And they could start off from the same level: their inner child :)

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Jane McGonigal 10/01/2012 01:26 PM

Hello! Author here. Adding to the credibility of this methodology, new research just out last week from Japan demonstrates that looking at pictures of baby animals boosts productivity at work. Yes, it's not just a theory, it's actually the subject of scientific inquiry -- and the proof is in! <http://www.theatlantic.com/bus...>

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George Patrin 09/30/2012 08:41 PM

Game playing is great for sharpening your mind and 'resting,' absolutely. Important concept to incorporate into the work place and life. Not enough employers get it. However, recognizing compulsive game playing is also a good thing.

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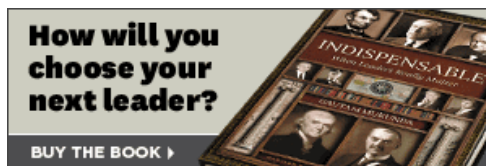
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