

Bonus #4: SPECIAL TIME-LIMITED BONUS REPORT – PLAY YOUR WAY TO HAPPIER, HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS

by Richard E. Hamon II

This is a special bonus report on sprucing up your relationships with the power of play. Unique information distilled from my coaching and counseling practice is included. Play more and renew your relationships. Experience greater feelings of satisfaction and joy.

Not long ago, a colleague of mine was meeting with a group of friends after work, and they were discussing romantic relationships. My colleague asked her four friends what they deemed to be the most important aspects of making romantic relationships and marriages work.

She asked, “What are the indispensable keys to success in marriage or committed relationships?”

The first woman said, “Work. Hard work.”

The second woman replied, “Yes, lots of work, and more work.”

A man responded, “I agree with that. You do have to work, and you have to work year after year. You can never stop working.”

Most people seem to think that work is the answer.

Isn't that what we are taught? How many times have you heard someone say, “It takes work to make a marriage work?”

Yet, there is a dissenting voice. Nodding, the fourth friend, a woman, said, “I've never seen work make much of a difference. Most of the time, when my husbands and I were busy trying to work our problems out, things just got worse. So, I don't know. I don't know what helps.”

Client after client of mine has said something quite similar. People bust their butts trying to make relationships work, but they just end up feeling angry at each other, more frustrated and totally sick of working at their relationships.

Let's take a look at some of the reasons for that.

WHY WORKING AT A RELATIONSHIP MAY NOT WORK

1. All some people are doing is trying the same old worn out methods of fixing problems, methods that didn't work before and won't work now. And they go through time repeating these unsuccessful methods.
2. Since they are trying so hard, arguing, debating and concentrating on the same old problems,

it feels more like pulling teeth. Frankly it's no fun. And because it's not enjoyable, and people dread doing it, little progress is made. All of us learn more when we are relaxed and having fun.

3. Additionally, the spouses may be **trying to force each other to change**, which doesn't work, even though they continue to try.

4. Adding work to a relationship which already feels like work isn't going to help much. The more couples work at things the less they play. The lack of spirited and spontaneous play only makes it worse.

5. People may lack the relationship skills they need to make their relationship a success.

These are just some of the reasons working at relationships doesn't work. What it does is to drill the problems deeper into your head. Or make them seem so large it may feel hopeless.

I believe that, according to my nearly 30 years of experience, while you do have to make an effort in your relationships, working and being serious all the time will get you nowhere.

In fact, most marriages can be improved when the spouses avoid working at it, as long as they give up prior failed methods of repairing the problems, and learn to be more playful and spontaneous in their approach to improving the relationship.

Back to my colleague and the four women . . . my colleague suggested that relationships may fail because people make themselves sick by working at correcting their problems. They drag themselves into the mud too much. Those who succeed remember to remain playful and find creative and humorous ways of solving their problems.

At first, all four friends were astonished by her suggestion. They wondered if playing could help. My colleague said they talked about play like it was a form of evil, a disrespected contrivance of childhood that had no relevance to the adult world.

Well, I beg their pardon, but play is much more than that and, without it, relationships go exactly nowhere!

Adopting a playful, light-hearted attitude would help countless individuals to improve their relationships. How dreary a relationship must seem when viewed under the dark cloud of work. How flawed and problematic. How unapproachable.

BEATING UP ON PLAY

Although play is a basic human need, we seem to have forgotten that. Our culture seems to have no time for play. Everyone is too busy working at something. People are being driven to be busy all the time. Who puts playtime in their schedules?

Plus, many people have been conditioned to believe that unless you are working you aren't doing anything! They actually feel guilty if they stop working and suffering. If you aren't suffering, you must not be doing anything. And, when it comes to relationships, **the hidden message** is that relationships are painful and take a lot out of you.

Really, the opposite is true. Relationships need not be painful or exhausting, if you have the knowledge and skill to handle your relationships well.

David Elkind, respected professor and author, says, "Many young people today don't know how to play. Their time has been so programmed, so structured that they have had little time or opportunity to engage in self-initiated activities."

The future of play is bleak. Our children are being pushed into a box of hard work and growing up too fast. And they show it. They are losing their childhood innocence all too soon.

Equally problematic are the problems adults have playing. Do you realize that many adults do not even recognize a need for play in their lives?

PLAY AND THE IMAGINATION

Many couples I've worked with have no idea how to play. They tell me they once knew how, but they have given it up for lack of time or practicality. And many say it has been so long since they've really let loose with some free, spontaneous play they wouldn't know how to play if they tried.

Talk about scary, but that's what life can do to us!

Yet play is absolutely essential to adults and children alike. And it makes relationships more enjoyable and successful. It brings a ray of hope to a hopeless situation. Besides bringing people closer together, play is one of the world's greatest stress busters.

Elkind writes about the low rate of success American students have had in international math competitions. He says that we lose because the students aren't as playful as they once were.

Play develops the powers of curiosity, fantasy and imagination, the fundamental mental tools needed to succeed in higher mathematics. Without play, the capacity for imaginative thought is not developed.

Children learn pro-social skills by playing, as well. Play is required for children to move successfully from one developmental task to another.

In relationships, play is a life saver. It keeps partners feeling alive and energized. And I believe it keep couples together.

THE ADVANTAGES OF PLAYFUL COUPLES

Playful couples are happier, more resilient and effective at dealing with life's unpredictable blows than couples who do not play. Their playful interactions create a sense of joy and happiness. They know how to relate to each other in stress-free and highly fulfilling ways.

Their relationship is not dominated by a heavy-handed mentality, which requires them to think about and focus on problems until they drop from fatigue and mental exhaustion.

In fact, couples must play to keep the relationship in good condition.

Lauer and Lauer report in their book, The Play Solution, that in a study of over 300 couples, **the couples ranked play as being more important to their relationships than sex!**

I tell couples if they want to have a great sex life, they'd better be playful because playfulness puts people in the mood for sex and helps them feel more intimate.

The sad fact is, most couples are playful during the early days of their relationship, but they let go of their playful side over time. And nothing could make the relationship more unstable. Play is the glue that holds good relationships together. Laughter and play.

"Playless couples" eventually become failed couples, or broken relationships.

When I begin working with a couple, I do an assessment of their relationship and, most of the time, immediately prescribe more play. We will do many things, but that's where we begin. Play is like breathing. Without it you are in for trouble.

REASONS COUPLES DON'T PLAY

As you might guess, there is a long list of reasons couples do not play. Here are a few of the most notable reasons I've collected from my practice:

1. No time. "We're working all the time." Or, "Our schedule does not permit it."
2. "We're too tired to play. We're both exhausted by the time we get home from work and do all of our other chores."
3. "We're adults, not children." In other words, some believe they should act their age.
4. "We're too angry at each other. If we try to talk to each other, we end up yelling and screaming at each other. Playing is out of the question."
5. "We feel it's our job to buy things so our kids can play, but someone has to pay the bills so we can afford to let them play." The notion here is that play has to be bought. Perhaps you can

buy video game systems and expensive toys, but that isn't necessary.

You can play without spending a cent. Children, dogs and cats don't need money to play. They just do it. Animals of all kinds play. They are playful by nature. They find joy in the smallest, most insignificant things.

Which is exactly how we start out in life, but how easily we lose our way.

6. "We don't need to play. Life is not a game."

Well, the latter part of that statement is certainly true. But, the former part is not. We ALL need to play. Playing is how we keep our love for life. And playing does not turn life into a game.

A PLAYFUL GENIUS

My grandfather was a fiery preacher. Yet he was deadly serious about playing. He played all the time, even while in the pulpit.

He brought a beautiful spirit and positive mental attitude to every situation in life. He made people laugh. He revealed his love for everyone in his playful, non-critical and forgiving attitude.

Also a semi-professional baseball player, he took the same love of life to the practice field. He made everyone feel good. People relaxed around him.

Now he worked hard, but he played hard, too. People loved and respected him for his energy and effort.

When I was a kid, I noticed how differently people behaved when they were with my grandfather. They lightened up. They laughed more. They stopped talking about people. They quit discussing the latest rumor or tragedy.

When Okey was in the room there was a good feeling floating about. And the focus was not on what's wrong with life, but what's right.

And how we can get the most out of life right now!

Grandfather Hamon was like a grown-up kid. No matter how old he might be, he was a proverbial kid. The kind of kid you loved having around.

You could be talking to him when all of a sudden he'd do an Irish jig or rip off a little two-step. Or if you knocked on the door of his house or stopped to see him at his glass factory, he'd laugh and say he was thrilled to see you.

You'd laugh and he'd go on to some other method of entertaining you (he was never too busy to

enjoy being with people). And of entertaining himself.

My grandmother wasn't always the most cheerful woman. I often wondered if their relationship could have lasted without my grandfather's upbeat approach to life. ***He brought a much needed lightness to any dark or grave situation, and to a marriage which easily could have become too somber.***

I will confess that as a child, when given a choice of who I wanted to spend time with, my grandfather was usually first on the list.

My grandfather was always the apple of my eye. A little man with an incomparable zest for life. A man who accomplished a great deal in his life. A man whose character made him a shining example of what it means to be human.

A man who made his relationships beacons of light.

Yes, my grandfather knew that life was not a game. As a minister and servant of the people, he knew that all too well. And he realized that without play it wouldn't be nearly as meaningful. **Sometimes I think my grandfather's penchant for having fun and giving the gift of laughter and hope was his ministry, his gift to us all.**

Grandad gave a piece of that gift to my father, who gave it to me (at least I hope so). And I try to hand it over to others. ☺☺

By the way, that man was the richest man I've ever met. Rich as in happiness and inner wealth, rich as in having the world's greatest relationships.

I think my grandfather made a positive impact on every person in his life. He inspired many people by living a life of kindness.

HOW TO BECOME MORE PLAYFUL

First, it pays to keep in mind that play is its own reward.

It's not a chore you do to get something else. Playing is fun and it makes both members in the relationship feel good.

And there are other rewards, too. For example, playing keeps both partners and the relationship young.

It makes sense to remember what constitutes play and what doesn't. Believe it or not, when some couples try to play more they turn it into work. Doesn't surprise you, does it?

As a rule of thumb, if it's work it *isn't* play. So, if it's work, don't do it.

Also, whatever you do, be sure **both of you** are having fun! Sometimes, couples will do something one spouse really likes but the other doesn't. That isn't play. It's only enjoyable for the one spouse. So if both don't enjoy it, don't do it!

TURN EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES INTO PLAYFUL ENCOUNTERS

The most playful couples can turn almost any situation into a playful one.

Let's say you and your spouse are cutting the grass and pulling weeds in the flower garden. A playful or slightly devious husband may throw a handful of cut grass at his wife. A playful but slightly devious wife may squirt water from the garden hose on her husband.

A little impromptu wrestling match in a shady spot on the newly cut lawn wouldn't hurt anyone, would it?

I mean, why not? Why not have a little fun with the gardening?

Adult relationships often become orderly and rigid, calloused and strict, leaving no room for change. Rolling down a little hill in the backyard would be out of the question. No, we wouldn't do something like that. We're grown ups! What if the neighbors saw us?

And that's what's wrong! You **should** be doing something like that. You should be approaching the relationship more like kids.

Many spouses have a real gift for humor, but they've stopped using it.

You see, work can be turned into play without a lot of ingenuity.

And the cool thing is you end up laughing and enjoying yourselves far more than you might imagine.

IF YOU AND YOUR PARTNER ARE TOO ANGRY TO PLAY

Wait until you are both calm and you can talk and decide to do something positive. Wave the white flag. Sign a truce. Smoke a peace pipe . . . and get on a new path.

If you can live in the same house together or go out to dinner together, you can surely play. All you have to do is set a couple of rules, such as, no arguing/fighting, no criticizing, just go and do something for fun. Pure fun and nothing else.

Do something you both enjoy. Something you are not going to be competing at. If you decide to spend the evening playing miniature golf, do it like you did when you were dating.

You might be a little silly and you may not even keep score. The beauty of your game will be to enjoy each putt. Even the really bad ones. Even the ones that go bounding into the grass or those that get stuck under the windmill.

You'll enjoy being together and not thinking. You'll have fun just passing the time. You'll enjoy the break from seriousness or worry. You will not be buried under an avalanche of responsibility while you are playing miniature golf. No, you won't be talking about that stuff.

You'll be playing and that's all, okay?

Soon your angry mood will be a thing of the past. And you can move onto other enjoyable moments together. **Some folks think they can argue an angry mood away, but arguing only deepens it.**

Laughter is a terrific tonic for the mind and spirit.

Play and laughter can help you to deal with loss and grief. It can help you to cope with tragedy. It can be a wonderful stress management tool.

You can build play into everything you do. Which will make your life better in so many ways.

A ROMANTIC TIP

When couples play they become closer. They feel reconnected and refreshed. Feelings of intimacy increase. Many good things become possible.

Couples are often surprised when they learn my prescription for building a sex life that sizzles, which is to simply play more – and that includes being more playful in sex.

Play is a natural **aphrodisiac!**

The more fun you have out of the bedroom, the more joy you find in the bedroom. If you and your partner will play and keep playing, your fun will carry over into your romantic life. Laughing and feeling good does wonders for a couple's connection.

Enough said.

MORE TIPS FOR PLAYING

Tip: Play spontaneously.

You don't have to plan play for it to be great fun. Sometimes the unplanned play period is the best. Spur of the moment play is without a doubt my favorite form of play. I can always find

some way to fit a little play into any occasion, and so can you. I'm sure you have countless times in your life.

What you can do now to help your relationship is to remember to do it more often! Or to recover the lost art of spontaneous play.

I did a family therapy session recently – a session I knew would be difficult – and so I bought a package of balloons on my way back to the office from lunch. As the family members came in and seated themselves, I concentrated on blowing up a few balloons.

Everyone asked what I was doing. I told them I was blowing up some balloons, and were they interested in trying their hand at it?

Naturally everyone said yes, except for the parents. You see, parents are adults and they suffer from the affliction of adulthood. ☺

But, soon, with a little encouragement, both parents were in the swing of things, too. All of us were just huffing and puffing away. When the balloons were filled with air, the real fun began. Someone (it wasn't me) decided we'd all try to keep the balloons afloat, and allow no balloon to touch the floor. Organized chaos ensued! What fun!

What did all of this have to do with therapy? Everything. **People who were hardly speaking to one another before the session were cooperating now.**

It put people who may have been a bit nervous into a nice, relaxed mode and warmed up our engines. The session turned out being a great time for all, and I was told it was a very helpful one, too.

A little impromptu play goes a long way in our relationships.

Tip: Use surprise to lighten things up.

You don't have to broadcast your intentions. If you can keep a secret, you can add an unexpected element of play to any situation.

Surprise adds punch to a couple's experience. It brings out the joy in a relationship. When we go to the trouble of planning a little surprise for our beloved it says volumes about how we feel about him/her. It fills him/her with a deep sense of satisfaction. It deepens the relationship.

If it's hot outside, like it is here in central Kentucky, a wonderful gift would be a night at a nearby hotel or bed and breakfast where they have a swimming pool. Or if you have a pool, why not prepare dinner for your partner and eat at pool side? Play your partner's favorite music CD. After a fun-filled swim (with plenty of water splashing or slow-dancing in the shallow end), you could give your partner a surprise massage, complete with hot oils, which you heat over a candle.

Don't tell your partner about the massage. Take your time and give a sumptuous massage. That's what I call having fun! Fun for the receiver and the giver!

FOUR WAYS TO BECOME A MORE PLAYFUL COUPLE

I. INCREASE STRUCTURED PLAY

Let's do a little exercise.

I recommend that each partner make a separate list of their favorite play activities. Write down all the things you like to do for fun, such as watching old movies, baking cookies, skipping stones, playing softball, playing cards, fishing, ice skating, playing bingo, horseback riding, going to concerts, tennis, riding roller coasters, square dancing, playing frisbee with the family dog, hiking, in-line skating, scrap booking, going to wine tastings, canoeing, cross country skiing, photographing landscapes or building model railroad sets. Whatever!

Now share your lists with each other and go over them together.

Combine both lists into a master relationship play list. You will select activities from the two lists that you **both enjoy** and write only those on your master list.

You may rank the new list of activities, if you wish, or put the most enjoyable ones at the top. This list will be your guide in adding more play activities to your daily life. This will serve as your guide for **structured play**.

Let's say one of you has tennis on his list. And the other partner doesn't play tennis but is interested in trying it. So, you put tennis on the master list and you decide to play tennis the next time you do structured play.

Next ask yourself how often you will play tennis. Once a week or every now and then? Write it down. Put it on your schedule or you may not do it.

Maybe you try tennis, but the partner who is new to tennis does not like it. What do you do? You take tennis off your master list. The partner who likes tennis can still play, but he will play with someone else.

The activities you choose for couple play must be agreed upon by both spouses. You both must enjoy and look forward to doing them. Don't waste your time doing those things which only one partner likes.

Keep your **master list** on the refrigerator door or in another prominent location. Add activities as you uncover new ones you both like. Grow your master list until you have a long, healthy list of varied activities which you both love to do.

Each time you do one of the activities on the list, you can give it a check or write the date you did it. This will help you to keep track of what you've done and haven't done. Eventually, you'll want to try everything on the list.

II. DON'T FORGET SPUR-OF-THE-MOMENT PLAY

Besides structured play, you can sometimes choose to play in an unstructured, spontaneous way, which we discussed earlier. You can add an element of spur-of-the-moment play to almost any activity or family outing, from yard work to housework, budgeting to meal planning or grocery shopping to washing the car.

You can both work on finding creative ways of making all tasks more enjoyable by remembering to be more fun-loving and spontaneous.

If you are going to wash the car together (an activity I highly recommend because there is so much potential for spontaneous fun) please do not allow yourselves to slip into an argument about anything. Focus on getting the car clean and having fun.

Discipline yourselves not to argue or fight.

⊗ Couples who are in trouble make everything a hassle. Even the most innocent trip to the dry cleaners can turn into an emotional debate about the SAME OLD SAME OLD disagreements.

They have a penchant for not having fun. In fact, it's as if they do not want to have fun! Every opportunity to reconnect or build intimacy becomes a verbal judo match or tug of war, a chance to grow farther apart, a chance to resent each other more.

They want to stage arguments, win debates and have the last word. *They try to battle their way to a happy relationship.* And if they can't have that, at least they can make the other person miserable.

But you want to have a better relationship, a relationship you can be proud of, one that will serve you for many years to come . . .

stay clear of play killers, whatever you do.

What are the most common play killers and happiness downers? This is about using time for play in the wrong way. Using it to achieve ulterior motives.

TOP TEN PLAY KILLERS

Here we go . . .

1. Bringing up a sore subject or unresolved conflict
2. Considering only your interests when making a decision
3. Trying to dominate your partner or make him/her submissive to your needs
4. Becoming the center of attention and it's all about you

5. Reminding your partner of your superiority in subtle ways
6. Paying your partner back for something he's done/getting even/punishing
7. Rubbing it in because you were right about something
8. Holding feelings or thoughts in/keeping yourself from your partner
9. Dredging up mistakes or hurts from the past
10. Laughing at your partner at his expense/teasing

By staying clear of the above behaviors you will make it much easier for the two of you to enjoy your time together, and you won't have barriers getting in the way of your play.

III. DEVELOP A MORE PLAYFUL WAY OF COMMUNICATING

This sounds hard but it really isn't. It involves making more pleasant conversation, and not making hurtful or spiteful remarks, which only kill the desire for play and being close.

It's about being more positive in your talk. Some people are very negative communicators. They speak of problems, but seldom solutions. They talk about what's wrong with the world. They complain. They obsess on the downside of everything.

If you are one of those people, take heart. There is hope for you. You can learn to refrain from making such negative conversation, and you can learn to speak more positively or highly of people. You can learn to keep your communication more upbeat and people-friendly – and your relationship will be much better off for it.

Both partners can find the good in the world and others. And they can find the humor in life.

I have a rule, which I try to follow: **“If you can't find something positive in a situation, then find the humor in it.”**

Turn brief encounters into positives.

Saying “I love you” is nice. And so is “You look great tonight.” Say your partner is at the kitchen counter and you walk up and say, “Oh, you smell great. Let me get another whiff.” Then give him/her a hug or a nibble-kiss on the cheek.

Whether you say it or do it, it's still communication. No one dislikes getting a 60-second shoulder rub. So stop and make your partner feel real good!

Simply make your interactions with your partner upbeat and fulfilling. Be nice. Be positive. In thousands of little ways you can express your love for your partner.

Be more imaginative and less rule-bound. In all your words, thoughts and actions make your partner feel good. Use your voice, mind and body to put a positive and playful spin on all things.

Cultivate (the art of) playful talk. Don't be so serious all the time. Make your conversations

pleasant and light hearted.

Make your partner smile or laugh more often. Inject a sense of humor into your conversations. A sense of humor can help you get through the hard times. Again, it takes practice, but it's well worth it.

Result? Your partner will want to be with you more and will gladly be nicer to you. And your own attitude will improve!

IV TICKLE YOUR PARTNER'S FUNNY BONES

This technique is like the last, only it involves an outright effort to make your partner laugh. Laughter is the best medicine. And it makes everyone feel good. Every relationship needs a good dose of laughter now and then. Or preferably every single day! In fact, you could aim for laughing together at least once a day!

Sometimes play will lead to laughter, especially spontaneous play. If you play in the right way you will find yourselves laughing.

This isn't as hard as it seems, and you don't have to be a comedian. If you have a dog or pet bird, sit and watch them long enough and you'll find something to laugh about. If you have kids, let their actions give you a good laugh. They are hilarious. Laugh at yourself. Tell your mate something crazy you did and give him a good laugh.

Laugh at your own stupidity – I do this all the time.

Find the humor in the world around you. It's everywhere! Be willing and ready to laugh, rather than complain.

You can bring more laughter into your relationship by going to funny movies, attending Comedy On Broadway or renting DVDs/videos with your favorite comedians.

I prefer to watch dramatic movies, independent films or art house movies. And for years that's all I would watch.

One day, my wife and I caught a Jeff Foxworthy special on satellite and we laughed our little butts off. I realized we needed to laugh more. So I changed my policy on movies. And I began to watch comical movies, including the old slapstick silent movies, and it made a big difference in my own stress level.

Do some funny TV or comedy on a regular basis for your relationship. It will help you fight the blues and make your relationship feel like new again.

Laughter is one of those good drugs. **A really good laugh is a happy drug.** So use it strategically to build your relationship.

TRY ACTUALLY PLAYING DURING FOREPLAY

Another really great way to improve your relationship is to build more play into foreplay. Not only will it help you to take more time for foreplay, but it will make the two of you feel closer, and more like making love.

Laughter can be a terrific turn on!

Write a juicy letter or card for your partner and leave it on top of the pillow. Something that will make him/her laugh and also want you more!

If you always get undressed the same old way, try doing something different . . . try undressing your partner in a playful but sensuous way, and making the removal of each article of clothing very interesting . . .

Even if it means looking at some naughty cartoons or reading the *Kama Sutra* together in bed, add playful touches that will make your sexual experience more pleasing and rewarding.

Engage in pillow talk. Try whispering sweet nothings into your partner's ear . . . this can work wonders for the sex drive.

Immerse yourself in a love feast. Kiss or massage your partner's total body, adding a new dimension to your efforts. Use oils, lotions, perfumes and feathers, whatever!

Wear something you wouldn't ordinarily wear, something a bit colorful, if you know what I mean. Be playful. Mix it up. Have fun!

While caressing, tell your partner a dirty little joke. Well, not too dirty . . . ☺

Be care-free. Just relax and let go of your inhibitions. Trust the playful child within and see where he/she leads you. And follow.

Use your imagination to spice up your foreplay, and the other aspects of your sex life will greatly improve.

Because . . .the more you and your partner can laugh and enjoy being together, the better! ☺

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