

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

## Pleasure & Play

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OCTOBER, 2009

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 10



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### An Emotional Allergy Called Pleasure

As children, we enter the world with a wonderful capacity for pleasure. Have you ever watched a child relaxed in play, where laughter and delight come easily? Ever longed for those days yourself – where your only “job” was to play without a care in the world? For most children, shifting into play mode is automatic. Play is their familiar friend and a part of normal everyday life.

So how does it happen that as adults, many of us cannot move into play naturally? For some, play is minimized as childish and unimportant. As such, the need for play is removed and seen as unnecessary. For others, life is heavy and burdensome, and they pine for the vacation away and time to “forget” the everyday struggles of life. Vacations are anticipated and planned far in advance or they are snatched over a weekend to temporarily bring a sense of freedom from life’s cares. Like the classic rock song goes, “Everybody’s working for the weekend.”

Either way, play is not an integrated, normal event for most adults. Instead, it is like a dessert for special occasions. Some will find play too rich and indulgent, while others are so enticed that they tend toward over-indulgence.

### *The Adult Version of Play: Pleasure*

A word linked to the activity of play is “pleasure.” Pleasure is a noun, typically referring to that which is gratifying and a source of joy or happiness. Pleasure, much like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The experience of pleasure is unique to the individual and what is pleasurable to one person may not be to the other.

We long to experience pleasure, seeking it out and going to great lengths or spending large sums of money to momentarily capture the feelings. When we are not experiencing pleasure, we may feel upset, empty, deprived, jaded, or even enraged. Pleasure, in the truest form, can bring a sense of safety. When we are feeling on edge, worried, or concerned, the experience of pleasure is blocked. Pleasure comes easiest to those who are relaxed. All of us have heard someone say about a vacation, “It took me a good 48 hours until I could actually relax and enjoy myself.” The society we live in is filled with stress. Stress tends to be a constant ongoing noise in our lives. When we physically remove ourselves from the fast pace of a stress-filled life, the silence can feel deafening. Deafening, like the damp quietness of a pine-filled forest, the isolation of a peaceful tropical beach with waves lapping ashore, or the thin crisp air of a breathtaking mountain summit.

Many therapists utilize visual imagery like the locations just described to help clients mentally locate a “safe place.” This imagery helps those feeling anxious, burdened, overwhelmed, fearful, or distracted to use mental focus and the imagination to generate a virtual safe environment. As the brain accepts this possible environment, individuals can then move toward safer feelings such as comfort, ease, and harmony. Many will comment on how this is a stark contrast to their everyday lives. Additionally, many will report some internal resistance to actually “going there” in their minds.

This resistance is key in understanding a side of our normal defenses. Why would we resist such beautiful imagery and the wonderful, positive relaxed feelings? Why is it so hard to accept relaxation or pleasure itself sometimes? Many will report that when they try to relax, an interruptive feeling of discomfort or nervousness will wash over them – as if they are missing something or need to be more vigilant. This can be common during a vacation, making relaxation and escape difficult. Further, many will describe a feeling of blueness or anxiety surfacing in the middle of what would otherwise be a happy, joyful time. You may recall a time with a loved one of closeness when you or they would spoil the experience for no apparent reason.

### *Fear of Pleasure?*

The truth is, there is a part of our psyche that fears pleasure. This may sound counterintuitive, but let’s take a moment to explore why we might sabotage pleasure. The first reason is for **survival**. When we experience pleasure, our defenses relax and



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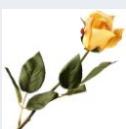
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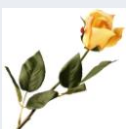
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we feel more fully alive and often connected to others. In this relaxed state, we tend to be more emotionally open...and vulnerable. One of the primary objectives of the more primitive part of our brain is to ensure safety. When our defenses relax, this part of our mind is aware of vulnerability (like a point of weakness in our armor) and will scan our environment. We then may experience feelings that summon our defenses, fortifying our armor and securing our personal castle. Our defenses, such as distancing, becoming detached, or for some becoming clingier in relationship, help us to feel more fortified and safe. While securing ourselves, these defenses also lock out loved ones and intimacy and close relationship is compromised.

Another reason for sabotage is the **unfamiliar** nature of pleasure. We are familiar with pain. We learn how to cope and survive pain and we learn how to avoid pain. When we are so careful to protect ourselves, pleasure can seem somewhat unusual or unfamiliar. We may not trust it to stay around or believe it is too good to be true. We can count on pain, but pleasure can seem fleeting. Further, the emotions of pleasure can be just as intense as that of pain. This can seem intimidating if we are not sure how to interact with pleasure; our brain may prefer the familiar (pain) instead of the unfamiliar (pleasure).

Another aspect of our resistance to pleasure is related to **unconscious self-hatred**. That is, a deep-seated belief that we do not deserve pleasure. Unconsciously, our mind might assess that if we were intended for pleasure, our parents would have provided this. If they did not, or positive experiences were somewhat limited, we may tell ourselves that we should not have too much fun. Work, work, work as opposed to play. We can also project (or turn) this onto a relationship partner, withholding love or sex (fun) as a punishment because he/she does not “deserve” the pleasure because of some infraction committed.

Many of us also got the message that pleasure is **earned** and we have to work hard for it. This is part of the economy of life. We have to eat our vegetables for dessert. Once our homework is finished, we can watch a half hour of television. As adults, we work countless weeks a year to earn a couple weeks of vacation time. In relationships, this can translate into a form of withholding and bartering: If you are really nice to me, jump through “x” amount of hoops and use the right tone with me, then you can have my affection, time, or whatever.

When we encounter pleasure, we may experience **reunion grief**. In the book, The Truth About Love, by therapist Patricia Love, Ed.D., she describes reunion grief as the experience of tasting the sweetness and joy of pleasure along with the bitterness and sadness of the years without. An example of this would be a military spouse returning after a lengthy stay abroad. An overwhelming mix of relief, joy and deep sadness over the loss of time and relationship may surface during such a reunion.

Lastly, our resistance to pleasure can be fueled by a **fear of loss**. A classic example of this would be the couple who journeyed through years and years of infertility and finally have a newborn baby. While holding their precious new life, they may experience anxiety about all the possible dangers ahead. Such parents might hold intense worry about the car seat fitting just so, leaving their child with a babysitter, exposure to germs and bigger kids, the baby getting hurt as she explores, etc. They finally have the baby of their dreams, but they are so consumed by anxiety and fearfulness that they struggle to relax and enjoy the pleasures of time with her. Worse still, the child may grow up anxious herself, having received years of feedback that the world is a dangerous place.

## Seeking and Finding Pleasure

Many have tried to solve the tension between the longing for pleasure and the fear of pleasure by excessively turning to pleasure substitutes such as alcohol, drugs, food, sex, or various forms of consumerism to feel better. While these can provide a momentary boost or “hit” of pleasure, it is typically fleeting and leads to a “crash” where the loss of pleasure is once again experienced. The deep longing is intensified, creating a cycle of chronic emptiness and dissatisfaction, along with the unending pursuit of elusive pleasure.

In therapy, clients make the first steps towards recapturing life-giving pleasure by increasing their awareness. Emotional growth and healing take place as they give themselves permission to explore their thoughts, feelings, choices, and relationships. Feelings and experiences are discussed in the safe presence of another. As loss, fear, and emotional wounds are processed and released, we are freed to spend our mental and emotional energy otherwise. We learn that pleasure can take on new forms and expression. We then learn the meaning and joy behind play.



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