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How the Busiest People Find Joy

Five research-backed strategies. *by Leslie A. Perlow, Sari Mentser, and Salvatore J. Affinito*

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Anna Hurley

Research suggests that to have a satisfying life, you need to regularly feel three things: achievement (recognition or a sense of accomplishment), meaningfulness (a connection to something bigger than yourself), and joy (happiness or positive emotion) in the moment. How well are you doing on each of those fronts?

For the many ambitious professionals we've studied, the answer is typically OK to great in the first two areas but decidedly lacking in the

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third. While achievement and meaning often flow naturally from work and family, joyful experiences tend to be rare and fleeting.

Consider Maria, a private-equity-firm partner and married mom of three. (Note: All names in this article are pseudonyms.) By 9 AM on an average day, she's already answered emails, reviewed reports, and seen her kids off to school. By noon she'll have led several meetings, made some key decisions, tried to squeeze in a mentoring call, and coordinated a carpool via text. In the evening she will close her laptop and set her phone aside to have a family dinner and put the children to bed, but then she'll log back on to work for a few more hours. Colleagues marvel at how she balances everything. And yet, while her calendar seems to incorporate every type of productive activity and obligation, it leaves no time for spontaneity or pleasure.

Tim has a similar story. A senior partner at a top-tier consultancy, he's spent two decades laser-focused on going above and beyond for clients and colleagues. At the same time, he's been a dedicated husband and father, noting that "nothing can beat the feeling of being needed at home." Across both his personal and professional lives, he feels accomplished and purposeful. However, between the long office hours and frequent travel required to do his job well and the more-mundane aspects of parenthood—helping with homework, regularly chauffeuring his kids around—he, too, struggles to find moments of pure happiness.

Why is joy—this third pillar of life satisfaction—so elusive for so many?

Time is one issue. In a study we recently conducted with a group of busy professionals—1,500 Harvard Business School alumni with full-time careers and families (see the sidebar "About the Research")—we found that our subjects spent an average of 50 hours a week on work and 12 hours a week on nonwork responsibilities. After sleeping, eating,

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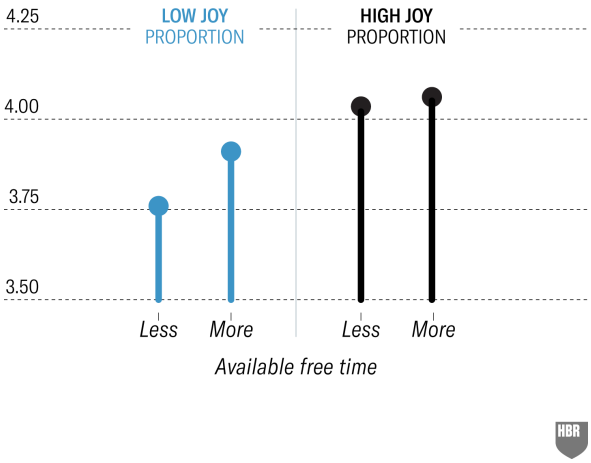
hygiene, and commuting, that left an average of 26 hours a week—or just over three hours a day—for all discretionary activities.

When we analyzed the participants' activities, we found, perhaps not surprisingly, that people experienced more joy in their free time than they did at the office or when engaged in housework, errand running, bill paying, and routine childcare. However—and this is noteworthy—*how* people spent those extra hours was more important than *how many* hours they had. To put it a different way, some of our study subjects did a much better job of finding joy in their limited leisure time than others did.

When free time is spent joyfully, life satisfaction is higher, no matter how much free time you have.



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Still, nearly everyone had room for improvement. Whether people had two or 40 hours free a week, they often fell short on maximizing that

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time. (For the median person, only 10 of the 26 free hours a week—or just over one hour a day—were spent joyfully.)

Though our initial study targeted a select cohort, we've confirmed that this pattern can be seen in a broad sample of professionals. In prioritizing work and home tasks that give them achievement and meaning, people often neglect activities that bring them joy. And yet humans need all three things—throughout their lives—to feel truly satisfied.

So what can you do about it? In analyzing how professionals who found joy did so, we uncovered five key strategies that will help you make the most of the time you have.

1. Engage with Others

According to the research behind the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which tracked hundreds of men for more than 75 years, the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction is strong, meaningful relationships with accepting, supportive people. Whether it's the comfort of family bonds or the camaraderie of friendships, these connections anchor people and provide a sense of belonging.

In our study we also found that shared experiences amplified joy. When subjects engaged in any free-time activity with others, it almost always felt more enjoyable (and almost never felt less enjoyable) than doing the same activity alone. It's noteworthy that this generally held true regardless of whether the participants were extroverts or introverts. Consider Caleb, who reported that though watching TV alone often left him feeling empty and sluggish, doing so with his family was a bonding experience that provided fodder for conversations.

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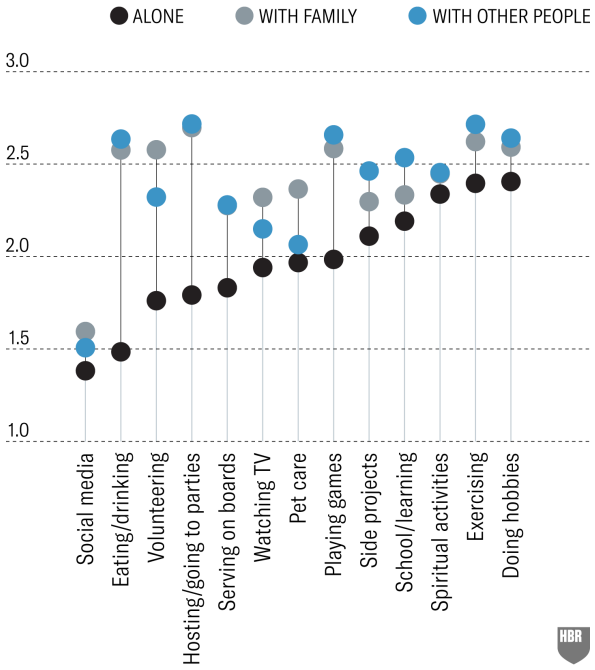
Of course, spending your free time with other people can sometimes add hassles to your life. As Omar, another study participant who has an extremely busy schedule, put it, “The coordination and planning often take more time. There is emailing and texting. We have to make a reservation, or if they come over, we have to plan a menu. We have to invest three times more hours than we’d invest in eating alone.” There are other benefits to solo time, as well: Solitude allows for reflection and relaxation, which also enhance well-being. However, our findings suggest that the rewards of connecting with others outweigh the costs.

People get more joy from doing activities with others than from doing them alone.



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2. Avoid Passive Pursuits

After a long day of finding meaning and achievement at work or home, it's natural to want to unwind. For many, from older adults to midcareer professionals to students in their twenties, this means passive leisure—collapsing onto the couch, flipping on the TV, or scrolling through social media. But our research—and a growing body of evidence—suggests that this habit might be doing people a disservice.

According to a meta-analysis of 12 independent studies by Christopher Wiese, Lauren Kuykendall, and Louis Tay, free-time physical activity is consistently associated with better moods and greater life satisfaction. Expanding on that finding, our own research shows that when people spend time alone, they derive more joy from active pursuits such as exercising, exploring hobbies, and volunteering than from napping, watching TV, gaming, or using social apps. On average, *active* solo pursuits scored 2.4 on a scale from 0 to 3 for joy, while *passive* ones scored 1.7. In addition, the more time individuals allocated to active pursuits, the more satisfied they were with their lives, while the more time they spent on passive ones, the less satisfied they were.

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Anna Hurley

Consider Taylor, a senior leader in an investment firm, who used to play video games or watch sports after work and taking care of family responsibilities. When she instead started using that time to participate in a weekly game of soccer with friends (both getting out and engaging with others), she found herself newly energized.

Again, it's OK to zone out, relax, and decompress once in a while. But when passive leisure becomes the default, edging out the opportunity to engage in more-joyful pursuits, you need to consider a change.

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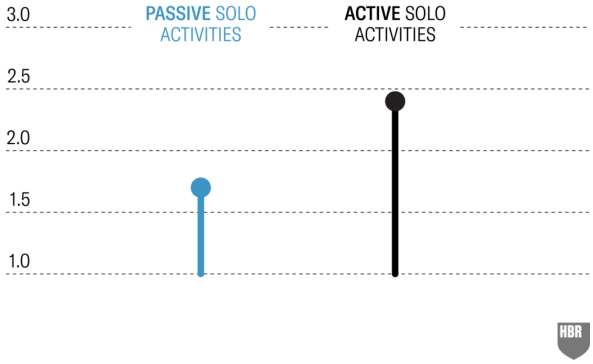
People find more joy in active solo activities than in passive ones.



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3. Follow Your Passion

Joy in free time comes naturally when we let it remain *free*—from obligations, societal expectations, and the pressure to do what's "good for you." Research, including the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, consistently demonstrates that autonomy—the capacity to make choices aligned with your personal values—is crucial for well-being.

For example, a study on adolescents and young adults done by Meera Padhy and colleagues found that intrinsic motivation (engaging in activities because they're personally rewarding) is a strong predictor of life satisfaction. Whether it's gardening, baking, or playing video games, the key is to choose what you enjoy rather than what others label "worthwhile."

Our own research shows that while some activities (like exercise or volunteering) did enhance well-being for everyone, on average their

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benefits paled in comparison to those our study subjects derived from what *they* personally valued most.

Pursuits that align with what you find personally rewarding will boost your life satisfaction four times more than activities that are considered generally good for the typical person. In short, following your heart in your free time is the most powerful path to fulfillment.

Take Sophie, who for years tried to find a craft project that would suit her because everyone told her it was a great way to unwind. She tried knitting, crocheting, embroidery, and even weaving, but none of those activities brought her much joy; they just kept her busy. Then one weekend she spontaneously reorganized her kitchen cabinets and pantry and felt unexpectedly delighted. She discovered that her joy came not from crafting but from labeling jars, arranging spices, and creating orderly, beautiful spaces. While her friends tease her about this quirky hobby, Sophie has found that embracing her genuine passion for organizing makes her significantly happier than following the latest leisure trend.

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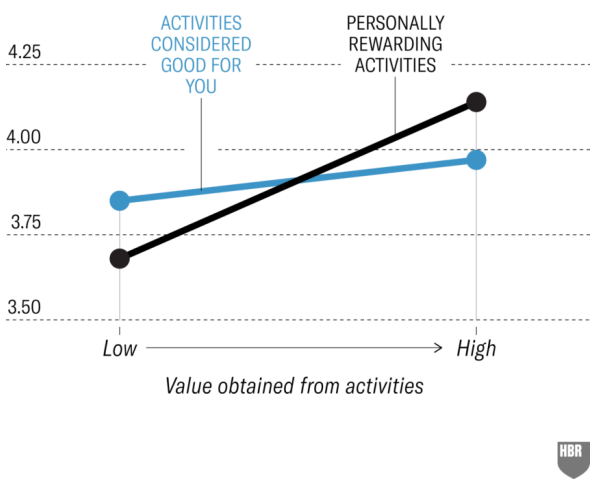
Life satisfaction rises significantly as you go from doing personally rewarding activities of low value to ones of high value. The change is less dramatic with activities generally considered good for you.



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4. Diversify Your Activities

Given the importance of following your passion, you might think that you should devote all your free time to a single, deeply satisfying activity. However, a study by Frode Stenseng and Joshua Phelps found that there's actually a negative link between intense dedication to hobbies and success in many domains of life, such as work and relationships with family.

Our findings take that insight one step farther, suggesting that the more time someone dedicates to one leisure pursuit, the less joy it delivers. In fact, there's a tipping point—spending too many hours on an activity can start to diminish its benefit altogether. Variety—not depth—is what boosts happiness, perhaps because it prevents monotony,

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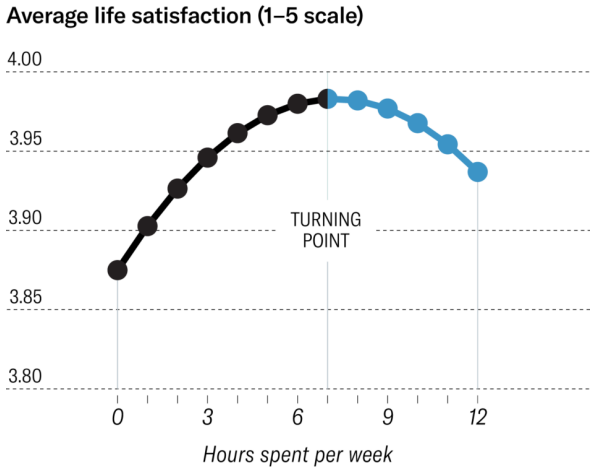
keeping experiences fresh and more exciting. For example, a study by Jordan Etkin and Cassie Mogilner demonstrated that variety in activities prevents hedonic adaptation—the process by which repeated exposure to the same stimulus reduces its impact over time.

Consider Jeremy, who during the pandemic stumbled upon a new interest—chess. But what began as a casual exploration of an app quickly evolved into a deep and all-consuming pursuit. Soon he was spending many hours competing and letting the game dominate his evenings. Worse, the hobby no longer made him particularly happy. He had to scale back and reallocate some free time to exercise and catching up with friends to find joy in chess again.

Life satisfaction declines when people spend too much time on a single free-time activity.



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5. Protect the Time

Because work is a source of meaning and achievement (and even some —but not much—joy) for most ambitious professionals, they often let it bleed into their free time.

But research has long underscored the risks of overworking, showing that it's linked to increased health problems and reduced well-being. Studies by Sabine Sonnentag and others have also found that "psychological detachment from work," or the ability to mentally disconnect from professional demands during off-hours, improves well-being and even increases job engagement. And in our own study we saw that for every additional hour people devoted to work each week, their sense of joy in life decreased, whereas when they used that hour for leisure activities like hobbies, exercise, catching up with others, or eating and drinking with friends and family, they experienced greater happiness.

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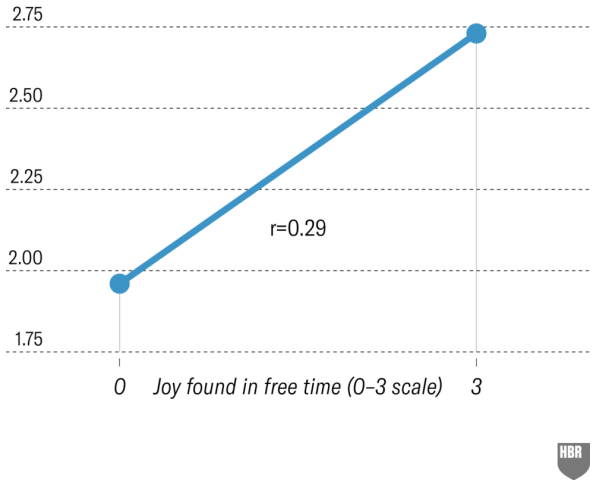
People who experience more joy in their free time tend to find more value in work.



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Jane, a senior developer in a design firm, loved her job, took great pride in her dedication to her organization, and for years believed that working longer hours was the key to success and life satisfaction. But when she found herself among those let go in a big round of layoffs, she was forced to rethink how she used her time. Without the constant demands of work, she baked without rushing, spent unhurried afternoons with her children at the zoo, went on long runs with her husband, and met friends for dinner or the theater. It was a joyful time. She's since taken on a more demanding new job, but she now sets aside a few hours weekly for pure leisure (no caretaking or chores) and makes sure to schedule activities that she enjoys during them. She's found that her health and well-being, her family, and her work all benefit.

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While we encourage the setting of clear boundaries between work, family duties, and leisure, what happens in one domain inevitably spills

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over into the others. When people use their free time ineffectively, it leaves them feeling exhausted and empty—and less capable of finding achievement, meaning, or joy at work. But when they instead use the few extra hours they have in the day to find joy, it improves their outlook and their performance in their personal and professional lives.

In our study we found that participants who reported more joyful free time found greater value, purpose, and success in their jobs, further enhancing their life satisfaction. They'd created a virtuous circle.

Though many of our interviewees experienced this phenomenon, the comments of Jane stuck with us. "Before, I never made room for fun because I thought it was a distraction from my goals," she admitted. "But after the layoff forced me to slow down, I discovered that allowing myself to feel more joy gives me patience and more energy to tackle challenges in my life. Now I don't feel guilty when I take an hour for myself to recharge. I know doing this genuinely makes me even better at my job."

Free time is scarce for many working professionals, but it's still possible to maximize the happiness you get from it by protecting it, following personal passions while prioritizing variety, and seeking social and active experiences. You don't need to find more hours in the day or sacrifice your drive for meaning and achievement. To create a more satisfying life, you just need to find more sparks of joy in the limited leisure time you already have.

About the Research

For this article, we analyzed data from 1,500 Harvard Business School alumni who used our Life Matrix tool, which helps people uncover how they spend their time and assess whether it aligns with their values. To confirm that the results were generalizable, we then compared them with

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those from a diverse group of 458 more professionals who had also used the tool. All 1,958 people worked 40 or more hours a week and had children. We examined how they spent their 168 weekly hours, including all the activities they engaged in, the people they did them with, and how much achievement, meaningfulness, and joy in the moment they derived from each. As a follow-up, we also ran sessions with groups ranging from eight participants to more than 1,000 to discuss the results.

To try the tool yourself go to yourlifematrix.com. You'll be asked to track and reflect on your activities. Using that data, the tool will generate a Time Quality Index showing your time allocation and how it compares with others' and provide a list of recommendations for small, practical shifts that can boost your life satisfaction. The data will also be incorporated into ongoing research on what it means to live with intention and thrive.

A version of this article appeared in the July–August 2025 issue of Harvard Business Review.

LP

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