

New Study Shows Hobbies Help People Find More Meaning in Their Jobs

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A five-week study of nearly 200 working adults found that leisure crafting, using hobbies more intentionally, boosted creativity and meaning at work, often more strongly than benefits seen in participants' personal lives
- › Creative activities like art, music, dance, and gaming are linked to younger-looking brain function, stronger connectivity, and greater mental flexibility
- › Reading regularly strengthens brain function, delays cognitive decline, and may reduce Alzheimer's risk by up to five years, making it one of the most powerful, affordable habits for long-term mental health
- › Cooking at home and free-form dancing both support brain and body health by improving mood, reducing stress, and encouraging you to experiment
- › Being intentional with your health by improving your diet, moving more, and getting sunlight can boost your energy, focus, and resilience so you can fully enjoy the hobbies that bring you joy

You can feel it in everyday conversations: the coworker you meet on Monday who's already counting down to Friday, that friend who cancels plans because they're "exhausted."¹ There's no question about it – more and more people are struggling with chronic fatigue and work-related stress. In fact, 6 out of 10 employees in major global economies now report rising levels of workplace stress.²

In response, many of us try to regain balance by eating better and moving more. But beyond these familiar strategies, there's a surprisingly simple habit that might offer greater benefits: hobbies. While people often turn to them as a way to unwind, new research suggests they do more than just lift your spirits.³

Leisure Crafting Positively Affects Workplace Performance

A study by researchers at the University of East Anglia and Erasmus University Rotterdam⁴ examined leisure crafting — this involves using a hobby more intentionally through small goals, learning something new, or connecting with others. Published in the journal *Human Relations*, the study explored how this intentional approach to hobbies might shape people's daily experiences.

The researchers aim to remind people that it is possible to use their hobbies to enjoy work more or possibly be more creative. Lead author and Associate Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, Paraskevas Petrou, Ph.D., said:⁵

"It's already known that hobbies are good for your well-being, but our study shows that hobbies don't just make you happier, they can also help you feel more fulfilled and creative at work. This goes beyond just relaxing or having fun — like binge-watching Netflix — and turns the hobby into something that helps people grow."

- **The study followed nearly 200 working adults** — Participants were mid-career employees with an average age of 46. Adults aged 61 and older were included as well, to explore how hobbies affect people at different life stages.⁶
- **How the five-week hobby program worked** — One group watched a short hobby-focused intervention video that guided them to approach their hobbies more intentionally by setting personal goals for their hobby, learning something new

through it, and building social connections by practicing their hobby with others. Meanwhile, a control group did not watch the video and did not receive any guidance or planning tools.⁷

- **A surprising boost in meaning and creativity** – Each week, participants reported how their hobby practice was going, and their answers were compared to that of the control group. The researchers found that those who followed leisure crafting reported greater meaning and creativity at work.⁸

"We were surprised to see that leisure crafting had a stronger effect at work than in people's personal lives. We had expected equal benefits in both areas ... One possible reason is that people who took part in our study were already fairly satisfied with their lives outside work, but their work life had more room for improvement," Professor George Michaelides, a study co-author from UEA's Norwich Business School, said.

- **Why do these findings matter?** As more workplaces focus on well-being, this study is "the first to be conducted among a mature working population and to demonstrate that leisure crafting can be understood, learned, and displayed by employees."⁹ The researchers point to practical steps organizations can take, such as offering hobby-related masterclasses and allocating development funds for learning outside work.¹⁰

Get Creative and Be Kind to Your Mind

If you're thinking about trying a new creative hobby, you're not just adding something fun to your routine – you're giving your mind something new to play with. Writing by hand, dancing, painting, or even simple coloring encourages your brain to spot patterns, make new connections, and stay more engaged day to day.

- **Creativity can be a 'fountain of youth' for your brain** – Researchers from the Global Brain Health Institute¹¹ published a major study in Nature Communications, examining nearly 1,500 adults across 13 countries to see whether creative

engagement might slow brain aging. Participants ranged from tango dancers in Argentina and musicians in Canada to visual artists in Germany and real-time strategy gamers in Poland.

Creative individuals showed "younger-looking" brain function, with brain imaging and machine learning pointing to stronger connectivity and greater mental flexibility compared to non-creatives.

- **Strategy games stimulate the brain** — In a second arm of the study,¹² non-experts completed 30 hours of training in StarCraft II, a complex real-time strategy game. Within three to four weeks (about five to 10 hours a week), their brain activity showed measurable improvements in areas tied to planning, focus, and learning. A comparison group trained on Hearthstone, a simpler, turn-based game, did not show the same gains.
- **Handwriting helps boost memory function** — Handwriting supports stronger memory because the physical act of forming letters activates multiple senses and engages brain regions involved in motor control and perception, helping you recognize shapes, process words more deeply, and build lasting neural connections.¹³
- **The colorful benefits of painting** — Painting isn't just about making something pretty; it's a chance to express yourself. It's also beginner-friendly, with endless room to grow, no matter your skill level. And when you paint with others, the social connection becomes just as enjoyable as the art itself.¹⁴

Enjoy Reading More Books

As more people look for calming ways to unwind, many are rediscovering their love for reading; The Sun¹⁵ even dubbed it "the hot new hobby for 2026." But beyond the trendiness, reading has always been one of the most satisfying and affordable pastimes you can get lost in.

- **Reading gives your brain a daily workout** – Reading sharpens critical thinking, sparks creativity, expands vocabulary, and deepens knowledge – all while stimulating imagination and keeping your mind active and resilient.¹⁶
- **Reading can delay Alzheimer's disease by up to five years** – A 2021 study published in *Neurology*¹⁷ followed 1,903 seniors over seven years and found that those who engaged in cognitively stimulating activities like reading developed Alzheimer's five years later than those who didn't. Participants with high cognitive activity developed dementia at an average age of 94, while those with low activity saw onset around age 89.¹⁸
- **It protects you against cognitive decline** – A 14-year longitudinal study in *International Psychogeriatrics* found that older adults who read at least once a week were significantly less likely to experience cognitive decline. The researchers found out that:¹⁹

"[T]hose with higher reading frequencies (≥ 1 time a week) were less likely to have cognitive decline at six-year (AOR: 0.54), 10-year (AOR: 0.58), and 14-year (AOR: 0.54) follow-ups ... across all educational levels."

Reading has also been known to help people sleep better, improve their eyesight, and even reduce gadget use. To learn more about these findings, check out "[The Surprising Benefits of Daily Book Reading](#)."

Cook Up a Storm at Home

Cooking isn't just a practical skill; it's a fun, relaxing way to get creative and make meals that you'll love eating. Even if you're new to the kitchen, there are plenty of easy, enjoyable ways to get started. No matter how you begin, cooking is a rewarding, confidence-boosting hobby. It's also a more enjoyable way to eat healthy and be able to avoid eating [ultraprocessed foods](#) every day.

- **Cooking may support your mental health** — Beyond saving money or improving nutrition, cooking at home may offer real mental health benefits. A 2021 meta-analysis published in *Frontiers in Psychology* reviewed 13 studies involving over 11,000 participants to explore how home cooking affects psychosocial outcomes like self-esteem, mood, and overall well-being.²⁰

"Cooking at home is associated with higher diet quality and nutrient intake ... Biological pathways through which improved diet might enhance mental health and well-being include improvements in markers of inflammation, increased intake of antioxidants, which reduces oxidative stress, and changes in the microbiota gut-brain axis," the authors explained.

- **Experiment with ingredients and get comfortable** — Start with simple, easy-to-follow recipes that use just a few ingredients and basic techniques. As you get more comfortable in the kitchen, you can experiment with more complex flavors and dishes. Try adding herbs like **oregano**, **ginger**, or **dill** to your next meal — not only will they add depth, but offer health benefits as well.
- **Make time for tea** — Sipping a cup of tea daily could help lower your risk of diabetes. Researchers from the University of Adelaide found that regular tea consumption may improve blood sugar control, making it a small but powerful dietary habit.²¹ As the world's most-consumed drink after water, tea has been valued for centuries.²²

One standout variety is **Pu-erh**, a fermented dark tea also known as Chinese black tea. Its unique fermentation process increases levels of bioactive compounds, including polyphenols, amino acids, and polysaccharides, offering antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits.

You can also sip on some **green tea or matcha** to help you feel more relaxed. Green tea is rich in antioxidants and, like black tea, contains potent polyphenols — especially a catechin called epigallocatechin-3-gallate (EGCG), which has been shown to have even stronger antioxidant activity than vitamins C and E.²³

Dance Freely and Move with Intention

Free-form dance is more than art or fun; it's a powerful and accessible form of exercise that supports both physical and mental health. Unlike structured workouts, this unchoreographed style engages the whole body and brain, allowing for emotional expression, spontaneity, and cardiovascular conditioning all at once.

- **Free-form dance has the same intensity as traditional cardio workouts** — A new study in PLOS ONE²⁴ found that free-form dancing can match the intensity of traditional aerobic exercise. The research involved 48 adults ages 18 to 83, who were asked to dance freely in five-minute sessions at both moderate and vigorous effort levels.

The participants reached an average of 76% of their maximum heart rate, and vigorous dancing hit 7.5 metabolic equivalents (METs) — like jogging or cycling — while moderate dancing reached 5.6 METs.

- **What sets this study apart?** Most earlier studies looked only at formal styles like ballet or hip-hop, leaving out how every day, improvised movement might help regular people — this study finally tackled that. The findings indicate that even without strict choreography or a flashy studio, free-form dancing has its benefits, especially when you set weekly movement goals.

Finding a Hobby That You Love

In an article in The Guardian, Daisy Fancourt, professor of psychobiology and expert in social prescribing, explains that hobbies do far more than just pass the time. If you're thinking of starting one, it helps to reflect and ask yourself:²⁵

- **How much time did I actually spend on a hobby last week?** Compare this to how much time you wish you'd spent. Noticing that gap can help you be more intentional going forward.

- **What aspect of my health am I hoping to improve?** If you're seeking calm, exhilaration, connection, or a sense of purpose, clarify that upfront. The more specific your goal, the easier it is to find a hobby that fits.
- **What did I love doing as a child – or wish I'd pursued as a career?** Old passions can offer clues. If you dreamed of performing, try local theater. If you wanted to work with kids, look for volunteer roles or intergenerational activities.
- **What do I need to get started?** You might need a taster session, a how-to video, or just a friend to come along. Local newsletters and social prescribing directories can help you find options.
- **Which core needs are currently not being met?** Think about what's missing: autonomy, creativity, physical movement, fun, or purpose. Choose something that balances what your work or daily life lacks.
- **What kind of challenge would I enjoy right now?** Look for "moderate novelty" – something slightly outside your comfort zone but not overwhelming. That sweet spot tends to deliver the most joy and fulfillment.

Trying out a new hobby always comes with learning curves, and yes, it can feel awkward at first. Hobbies aren't performances, and they aren't about perfection. So be proud that you started and go at your own pace.

Supporting Your Health While You Explore New Hobbies

If you're trying new hobbies, routines, or ways to add purpose to your day, keep in mind that the same intentionality you apply during your free time should also be reflected in how you take care of your body.

1. **Rethink your cooking oils** – The oils you use in your meals have a major impact on how your cells make energy. Seed oils like canola, soybean, sunflower, safflower, corn, and grapeseed are high in **linoleic acid (LA)**, which can interfere with

mitochondrial function. Swap them for more stable fats like grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow.

Poultry and pork are also high in LA, so choose grass fed beef, lamb, or wild-caught fish to support cleaner energy production at the cellular level. These small changes help you feel clearer, steadier, and more energized throughout the day.

- 2. Nourish your body with the right carbs** — Your brain runs best on glucose, but the type of carbohydrates you eat makes a difference. Start with easy-to-digest options like fruit and white rice, then gradually reintroduce root vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Aiming for around 250 grams of clean, whole-food carbohydrates per day can support steady energy.
- 3. Don't sit your life away** — **Prolonged sitting** and a sedentary lifestyle make you a moving target for conditions like **hip pain and osteoarthritis**. That's why I suggest walking at least 7,000 steps a day. You don't need high-intensity workouts; walking, light strength training, or stretching can do the job.
- 4. Enjoy the sun** — Get direct sun exposure on bare skin each day, ideally without sunscreen for short, safe periods. However, if your diet is high in canola, soybean, sunflower, or generic vegetable oils, you may be flooding your tissues with LA, which builds up in your skin and oxidizes easily.

This increases your sensitivity to sun damage, especially during peak hours between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. To protect your skin and support healthy vitamin D production, remove seed oils from your diet for at least six months before spending extended time in high-intensity sunlight.

Leisure isn't about checking out or doing nothing; it's time meant to help you reset. But when most of it turns into scrolling, napping, or zoning out, you often end up feeling more drained than restored.

Leisure crafting offers a better alternative: it's low-effort but still intentional, giving you a way to unwind without slipping into habits that sap your energy. And when you choose how to spend your downtime instead of letting it disappear, you create a fuller life – one that supports your health, strengthens your relationships, and leaves your days feeling more intentional than wasted.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Hobbies and Leisure Crafting

Q: What is leisure crafting, and how is it different from having a hobby?

A: Leisure crafting means approaching hobbies with intention – setting goals, learning something new, or doing them socially. Research shows this purposeful mindset can boost meaning, creativity, and even work satisfaction.

Q: Can hobbies improve mental and brain health?

A: Yes. Studies show that creative hobbies like dancing, painting, reading, cooking, and even strategy gaming are linked to better mood, stronger memory, and brain function that looks biologically younger.

Q: I'm not artistic. Can I still benefit from creative hobbies?

A: Absolutely. Creativity isn't about talent; it's about engagement. Handwriting, doodling, rearranging your space, or even making tea with intention can all activate the brain and support mental well-being.

Q: How can I find the right hobby for me?

A: Start by asking what made you happy as a child, what kind of energy you want more of, and what gently challenges you. The best hobby is one you'll enjoy enough to return to.

Q: What are some small lifestyle shifts that support my hobbies?

A: Simple changes like walking daily, cutting back on seed oils, getting sunlight, and eating nutrient-dense whole foods can improve energy and focus – helping you stay present and engaged in the hobbies you love.

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