

# Mike Rucker Fun Habit

**Mike Rucker:** [00:00:00] you'll start to realize that instead of feeling guilty about taking a little bit of time off the table for yourself, you're showing up better for the people that you love and the people that you feel this sense of duty for.

**Jill Stoddard:** That was Mike Rucker on Psychologists off the clock.

**Yael Schonbrun:** we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships work and.

**Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorenson, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado. Co-author of Act, Daily Journal, and an upcoming book on act for burnout.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm Dr. Yel Shreen, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

**Jill Stoddard:** from coastal New England, I. Dr. Jill Sto, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the Upcoming Imposter. No more.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to [00:01:00] build a rich and meaningful life.

**Jill Stoddard:** Thank you for listening to psychologists Off the clock.

I'm here with ya Elle, to introduce today's episode with Mike Rucker, where we talk about fun. And I was so excited to do this episode and , I'm smiling now thinking about how many episodes we've done on happiness and wonder and fun, and. You know, I'm not sure what that says about all of us as co-host or what it says about the state of the world that we're like really craving some knowledge in these areas and, and these topics. , but I love fun. Who doesn't love fun? And I think it can get really easy to get caught up in the hard parts. Life. And so I just really appreciated this conversation with Mike about how we can really inject more fun into our daily lives. And I'm curious, Yael, what your thoughts were about the episode

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, I like fun too, , and I think we should all have [00:02:00] more of it. And he makes some comment about how a little selfishness when it comes to fun is actually the most selfless thing that you can do. And I, I couldn't agree more as a. Parent as a therapist, as a partner. That fun really does help us engage more fully and more skillfully in all the roles that we care about most.

And this comes up a lot in couples therapy that people who come in are obviously not having so much fun in their relationships, and often there's more serious things that crop up that bring people in. But it is. infrequent that people will come in because they just feel that their relationship has grown quite stagnant.

And that's pretty common, right? Cuz the longer that you're in a relationship, the more you habituate and the more you kind of get into these really on autopilot kinds of ways of being with one another. And it takes a little bit of deliberate effort to keep things spicy and interesting and fun the longer that you're doing them and relationships are, you certainly fit into this.

And I was just gonna share one really cool research study that I love [00:03:00] where couples were randomly assigned to, to tasks that were either mundane or silly novel. And the mundane task was like rolling a ball back and forth for a period of time. And the silly novel task. involved partners being Velcro together and carrying a pillow around an obstacle course on hands and knees.

And couples who participated in this silly task experienced an increase in their relationship happiness compared to the mundane task activity. . And what it that speaks to is the importance of variety and, and really being deliberate because it's so easy in our busy, overwhelming lives to just do, you know, , the bare minimum when it comes to our close relationships because our partner is not going to fire us hopefully.

Or, , you know, , he or she can feed themselves. And so we kind of kick the intentions to incorporate some fun and silliness to the bottom of the priority list. And, and to me, This study and, and your conversation with Mike Rucker is a reminder to try to incorporate some fun, some silliness, some [00:04:00] variety into the relationships we care about most.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, it's such a great point and it's making me think about how, you know, we know as human beings we habituate to things, right? There's that, what's the fancy term? Hedonic

adaptation. Yeah.

and you know, so if we're, even if there's something we used to do that was very fun, like when you're first dating and you're just going to a movie, you're going to dinner, you know, something like that might be really fun.

And then it just becomes kind of mundane over time. Lord knows we're not normally Velcro ourselves to our partners but that does actually sound quite fun. , and you know, so that, that variety piece and being, being clever, being creative in, you know, how you get playful. And one of the things we talk about, I think it's closer to the end of the episode. And it reminds me a little bit of the episode that just came out with Jonah Paquette about happiness and how we can really boost those feelings of [00:05:00] happiness as well as fun and playfulness when we do these things with another person, whether it's your romantic partner or you know anybody else that that is in your.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Absolutely. And it reminds me too of my, my kids have their chores on the weekends and my oldest. has come up with a habit, a fun habit, , if you will, of listening to music while he cleans the bathroom. And I think it's absolutely terrific that he finds a way to add some fun to, to a task that is otherwise not that fun.

And I try to do that as much as I can too. And I, you know, the more that you can make that an intentional habit, something that you practice incorporating fun even into the less fun parts of your life. I, I think the more fun you can have, and that's a great thing.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and that that is certainly what the research supports and what Mike and I talk about. So we hope that you find this episode with Mike Rucker. Fun. [00:06:00] Hey everybody, it's Jill here, and I'm so excited about today's guest, Dr.

Mike Rucker. We are going to be talking about fun today, so I am just thrilled to be covering this topic. Dr. Mike Rucker is an organizational psychologist and charter member of the International Positive Psychology Association. Whose work has been published in the International Journal of Workplace Health Management and Nutrition Research.

His ideas about fun and health have been featured in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post Fast Company, the Telegraph, psychology. Today, Forbes, Fox, thrive Global Mind, body Green, and more. Named one of 10 digital change

makers by the healthcare Information and Management System society. He currently serves as a senior leader at Active Wellness.

Mike, welcome to Psychologists Off the Clock. I'm so happy to have you here today.

**Mike Rucker:** So happy to be here. I love your guys' podcast.

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, amazing. Thank you so much. We love to do it. And in fact, as I was reading your book, I was thinking, does doing the podcast [00:07:00] count as fun even though it's sort of technically work? Cuz I certainly find it to be fun.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, and it's funny you say that because I think, , people that do use their agency and autonomy to do things like this, , cuz certainly if it wasn't fun, I think most podcasters would, , exit the profession. And so, There's almost this bias where, , you already kind of get it, you already kind of get the message, you know, but a lot of folks don't actually do the things that light them up.

And so, you know, that's sort of my purpose for the book, to try and gently nudge folks to find what they do enjoy. So,

**Jill Stoddard:** It most definitely does that. And I will start by saying, reading the book was also fun. I mean, I laughed out loud several times. You're a good writer and you're, you're very engaging and, and accessible and, and funny. But let's start with, you know, we might all think we know what the definition of, of fun is, but it may not be the same as.

The way you conceptualize it in the book. So why don't you start by telling us what exactly is fun and [00:08:00] how is it different from happiness? You make that differentiation in your writing.

**Mike Rucker:** , for happiness, I've kind of fallen on the, the psychological definition, right?

So it's this general sense of subjective wellbeing, and so how you could apply that with regards to any day life is that it's this act of evaluat. So when we think about being happy, we're really looking in the rear view mirror. It's this exercise of introspection, , because it quite, it's contrived by definition,

either by us who are using these instruments, you know, things like subjective wellbeing so that we can pair, , ourselves against others, or it's developed by

your own. , traits, like, what do you desire? And so I, you know, my insight here came from Dr. Iris Mouse out of, uh, university of California Berkeley, where we were looking at, , when you talk about happiness in terms of.

You personally, that could be a whole host of different [00:09:00] things, right? Like, you know, I'm happy because I have a connection with my family. I'm happy because I'm striving professionally. And so all of those are still acts of evaluation. So I don't think that's problematic for my own definition, but they still could, you know, happiness means one thing to one person and, and one thing to another.

With regards to our work as psychologists. We've generally defined it as subjective wellbeing, which is this instrument, and it really does, you know, it's an act of comparing ourselves to others, right? Whether that's country to country or individual to individual with fun. It's anything that's on the positive side, valance.

So that's just a fancy way of saying, are you enjoying what you're doing in the moment or are you not? Right? And so valence is a spectrum. , whether you are enjoying things or whether you're in sort of, you know, some state of, , either boredom or malays, , the whole spectrum of negative emotions.

So, , , again, simply put fun as anything that we find pleasurable. So if [00:10:00] you're doing a podcast and you're having fun doing it, you're having fun.

**Jill Stoddard:** fun. Well, and you're saying you're having fun. So, you know, I also think like, am I, when I'm checking in about my happiness, I'm saying, am I feeling happy versus fun? I'm saying, am I having fun? So it feels like it's, you know, and you talk about this in the book that that fun. Isn't a reaction to circumstances, it's really an action versus happiness, really being a feeling state.

And you know, at least the way that my co-hosts and I, we, we talk about this in all our episodes, but we all practice, , a therapy called Acceptance Commitment Therapy. And you know, one of the ideas is we don't get to control how we feel, but we do get to control what we do, right? So we can't control if we feel happy, but we can certainly control what we do in an effort to have.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, and you know, again, fan of both the show and of act as a discipline. Obviously, you know, you mentioned I'm an organizational psychologist, but in the clinical realm it's been fascinating to see how, you

know, that that's [00:11:00] really growing with regards to, you know, contrasting it against C B T. And I think that's exactly right.

I think we're finding more. This is a dotted line for me, but I, where my interest lies is talking to both psychologists and neuroscientists that we're starting to understand more. The way we view the world through our brain is not necessarily cause and effect like we once thought. It's really more of a predictive engine, and so when we feed that predictive engine that things are good because I think most would agree whether you're spiritual or not, that the world is full of bad and good.

So my kind of thesis is if you can kind of steer your shit towards the good, and we now know that our brains are sort of this predictive engine, then those predict. By proxy become more positive and more optimistic. And the empirical, you know, sort of research in this area backs me up.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. I think about that a lot. It, it's reminding me of things like motivation. You know, we often [00:12:00] wait to feel a certain way before we do something. Like I'll wait till I feel like it, wait till I'm motivated, and then I. Do the thing when really like the error sort of goes in the other direction. If you do the thing, even if you don't feel like it and don't feel motivated, typically, that that motivation follows.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, and another kind of thematic analysis that I'm trying to pull from different disciplines. So I got it from my work in workplace wellness, right? It's clear that autonomy. Has a pretty straight line to wellbeing both psychologically and physiologically. There's a ton of workplace research to suggest that, but then you look at social psychology and clinical psychology and it's clear that agency and autonomy, you know, a lot of this, , knowledge comes from self-determination theory.

Like once you understand that you have a little bit more control than really interesting things happen, right? One, you use your time more wise. But also you develop inherently a growth mindset, which we also know has, you know, a host of different benefits. So, [00:13:00] but it's a subtle shift, right? I mean, we habituate so much behavior as adults.

We have all of these heuristics and there's good reason for that, right? Especially now with all this information coming, , at us, we need good filters to understand what's important for us and what's not. But because of that, we're exhausted and often. We kind of, you know, fall into these passive leisure activities that don't really contribute to our wellbeing.



They're really just a way to pacify time because , we've lost our sense of control. And so just finding simple ways, you know, even if it's two or three hours a week to reclaim that, you know, is an important step that so many people aren't doing. And so figuring out ways to do that, I think is an important.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, a hundred percent. And I wanna talk about time and I wanna talk about your play model. That's sort of the different kinds of, of ways to have fun. But before we do that, I wanna, I wanna make sure we get some buy-in from our listeners. So why fun, like [00:14:00] convince, I imagine most of our listeners are probably like pretty busy professional types.

Maybe a handful of overachiever out there. Why is fun, not just for kids? Like what is the benefit for us as busy adults to prioritize fun?

**Mike Rucker:** I think enjoying life just in general doesn't require too much, you know, convincing. But to your point. A lot of people don't wanna prioritize it, and there are a host of different reasons for that. Right. What I found the most interesting in researching the book is there seems to be an evolutionary predisposition to ruminating on negative things,

and that probably made sense way back when, when the risks to us were kind of finite, and so we needed to give them more credence than the positive things in. But for the most part, I meant the world is still scary, but for the most part, we don't need to ruminate on all of the negative things all the time,

so kind of retraining the [00:15:00] brain to think about, , fun things. And, and, and to do that you need to engage in fun and remember why. You know, you wanna be connected to something , better than malaise is an important step. So that's one. The second is, is that it really is an add. A approach to gaining more vitality.

So again, falling back on my own research. It's an interesting paradox that Mo, that people don't understand because there is this kind of heavy lift to get started, , this cognitive load of, of, , reintegrating into the things that you like for all the reasons that should make sense. You know, you might have, , if it's a reconnection to a hobby, you might not remember.

It. Feel kind of like, I don't wanna pick up the car because I'm not good at it anymore. Whatever it.

**Jill Stoddard:** amazing.

**Mike Rucker:** But you know, this work comes from Cassie Holmes outta UCLA and , Colin West from Toronto. When you start to regain some of that control so that you're really enjoying what you're doing, You [00:16:00] have more vitality and your, your better self for the things that you feel the sense of duty for.

And so, , again, even if it's just a few hours out of the week, , hopefully it's more than that, and you start to understand the benefits. And again, I'm trying to convince them, the listener that has resistance. Just check in with yourself how you feel two or three weeks later, and you'll start to realize that instead of feeling guilty about taking a little bit of time off the table for yourself, you're showing up better for the people that you love and the people that you feel this sense of duty for.

And so it's not just about you. I mean, I think people that have. Hedonism slant, , might just be stoked that they get to enjoy themselves and didn't realize that they had habituated their life in a way that, , sucked out the joy and delight outta life. But for the ones that do feel resistance, once they realize like, wow, I'm not just doing this for myself, I'm doing it for others.

That's helpful. And then there's another great study and it, it essentially peer validates the [00:17:00] hedonic flexibility principle. When we are living a joyful life, what we found is the people that are in that space. Do the harder work. So not necessarily the busy work, but have the capacity to do things that are richer in the moment and lead to betterment.

That might seem hard, but you have, , this more endurance to actually do it, and then that becomes an upward spiral. Cuz those things actually then turn out to be fun if you're connected to them, right? Like mastering a new skill. and, and then we do them more. And , instead of kind of, , this weight pulling you down, there's this levity that kind of lifts you up.

And it's infectious too. It starts to positively impact all the folks around you. So, but it's interesting because it's not a complex idea, right? And so I think that's another difficult thing, like, wait, you're telling me if I just reclaim two or three hours out of my week, , my life's gonna be that much better.

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. So just try it , again, you're only really committing to nine or 12 [00:18:00] hours. Reflect on how you feel, reflect on your ability to be a better person in every other aspect of your life and see if it was worth, you know, time worth spending.



**Jill Stoddard:** And I think the try it is the most important advice because as humans, we rely so much on our language and our brains, and we make a lot of predictions and assumptions and have rules about things, and they're not. Always entirely helpful. So I imagine there, when we talk about the people who have resistance, it probably most commonly comes in the form of, , I don't have enough time , you know, how am I supposed to find the time to add more fun when I'm already burnt out? I already have so, so many things going on, and there's an assumption that if we do this, it's going to take away from our bandwidth because it's just one more thing on the list to do.

And what you're saying is well test it out because it may be the case that it creates more. B. because you're taking, you're, you're kind of taking away from some of the other things that might be a little more [00:19:00] soul sucking and making time for the thing that fills your gas tank.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, but you did identify an important, , piece that I kind of stepped over, and that is, in this process, we generally wanna do find. Things that you're doing that you don't necessarily need to do because it's an important first step to create space. So this doesn't seem additive, right? So in my academic work, that's where you see a lot of workplace wellness initiatives be so problematic, right?

Cause it's like we're just gonna prescribe yoga, or we're gonna prescribe a meditation practice. Oh really? To physicians that are already working 60 hours a week. Like just the burden of that. . Cause we do know. Motivation doesn't hit, that actually ends up being a component that can be toxic,

like, , okay, so I'm supposed to be doing this thing, but I don't have any capacity to do it, , and now you're just making that person feel awful. And so if we were heading in that direction, I, I, I apologize. I think, you know, , an important correction that you queued up is [00:20:00] that what we wanna do first is that oftentimes we think we live this busy life, but we find out that there are these pocket.

We're really just pacifying time because we are so exhausted, and so the argument that I'm making is replacing those activities with things that light you up is an additive experience. Trying to find pockets of time in an already busy life can be a recipe for disaster, so thanks for allowing me to

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, that's true. Well, and, and I think it's something that the, my cohost and I must really relate to because when I look at the list of guests we've had on, so many of them share this idea and comments that we had lighty

clots on who wrote the book, subtract, which is not just about saying no to things, but about actively removing things out of your life.

, we had Nera y who you talk about in your book, who I think is a friend of. Yeah. Um, and Ive, Rodsky came on and she talks about the importance of, you know, an equal distribution of labor at home, which creates more time if you're the person who had been doing the lion's [00:21:00] share. I mean, there are so many guests we've had on that are all about, essentialism was another one that are all about Yeah, right, like using science to discover ways to.

Limit the things in your life that are draining you and not providing value or vitality, and then really being choosy about the ways you're spending your time. And that's essentially what you're saying. And that like one of those choices should be fun.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, no, absolutely. And I'm gonna like, the mental frame I like is a little bit. Selfishness leads to a lot of selflessness because, , once you have that capacity, then you can contribute so much more. , whether that's your own family to being a change maker. Like I make, , I feel, not to pat myself on the back, but I, , felt like I made a fairly strong argument, , at the end of the book, that like, this isn't just about the self, but I don't think it's problematic to say, Hey, yeah, I wanna enjoy [00:22:00] the time that I have here on.

And also what a beautiful thing that allows me to be a better person and contribute, , to the greater good at large, ultimately, because I have the capacity to do so. Cuz what, what I meant. Intuitively, everyone knows that once they get burnt out, they're not gonna be able to contribute at all. But yet we tend to be martyrs.

And so, , it's a complex issue why that happens. , in the book I Villa and I as a Puritan work ethic to some degree, cuz I think that's a culprit, but not necessarily the end all be all. Some of it is that we just do feel this sense of duty. Another is, , here in the US in particularly, We don't take advantage of leisure.

We're one of the worst countries to do so, and we know how problematic that is. You know, there's, there's rich literature in that area. The fact that we're not taking some time off, , to really have a transition from the things that do burn us out, you know, it's like any engine that's redlining all the time is eventually gonna [00:23:00] break.

And so if you're playing the long game, making sure that you're enjoying at least some part of your life becomes extremely.

**Jill Stoddard:** I mean, I certainly know, as for me, as I've gotten more choosy about how I spend my time, I've become a better mom and a better partner, and a better boss, and a better coworker and colleague and friend, and all of those things. ,

**Mike Rucker:** And that's a a great point too. Like sometimes if you're in the minority and you truly can't remove anything from your schedule, then look for opportunities where. You can at least just change that activity in a better way. One common example that works well for parents, like you said, with the kids, is, and I fell victim to this, so you know, it was an intervention I did, you know, for my own family as well.

Is that okay? , now I gotta go make sure that the kids have fun. So that activity ends up, you take them to the park and then just, you know, sit on the bench and catch up with work emails, right? Where you could co-create this, , amazing experience with a child where you're [00:24:00] both, , having fun and then creating these memories, which, , ultimately can lead to not just fun in that hour, but , fun after the activity through joyfully reminiscing, ?

And then again, these are things that where you start to learn about yourself and each other. And again, it's just additive, right? Instead of really just wasting an hour. So the anecdote. Using the book is that I, I was doing that exercise. It was when my daughter was young. I'll, I'll say right up front this, this wouldn't work now because she doesn't wanna dance with her dad.

But it was one of those things where we just wanted to get the kids outta the house, right. So we signed them up for activities and I was taking her to a tumbling class and I realized, , she was kind of having fun and it was serving the purpose again, like outcome based. Right. You know, I checked the.

I was just sitting on a bench, essentially mindfully scrolling on social media to pass the hour while she was doing it. And it dawned on me like, why don't we do this together in some fashion? So I pulled her out of that class and we ended up taking a dance class together [00:25:00] that, , was a few dollars more, I think.

, like, so it wasn't from this place of privilege where I was now, , I was able to do that for just a, a few extra dollars. She had an amazing time dancing with her dad. , we did this choreograph number by the end and we look at that so fondly, even though she says she would never do it again cuz she doesn't wanna dance with her dad.

And now she's back

**Jill Stoddard:** is she now?

**Mike Rucker:** uh, she's 10 and

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh yeah, my daughter is ten two. She would never in a million years, how horrifying would that be?

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** I love this chapter on parenting though. I, I mean, I got so much out of it. And you think any of us can, you know, we've all had that experience of like, That inner groan when your kid asks if you'll play with them or play a board game and you're like, oh, I don't wanna do this again.

And then feeling horribly guilty because if I were a good parent, I would wanna be on the floor playing board games with my kid all the time. And it's really complicated and. You know, you talk about bundling, you know, another way to save time is to [00:26:00] make things you're already doing more fun. And that, that certainly applies with kids.

And, and we've gotten the hang of that more now and I think it's easier now cuz they're a little bit older. They're eight and 10, but we, we agree on the movie we're gonna watch or the game we're gonna play. So, and you know, they make a lot of really fun games now, you know, like taco versus Burrito and there's all these like crazy funny.

Games. That adults. Can enjoy too. , or to find other kinds of things. Like my son and I go hiking all the time and we love it and it's like this special thing that we do together.

And, , , I think that's an important piece of this is that like, it's okay as a parent. To do something that's fun for you too. It doesn't make you selfish. And if anything, you're sort of modeling cooperation. Like that's a good social skill to have, like for that they should have with their friends too.

You don't always get to be in charge of what you're gonna do. You should decide together and find something that's fun for whoever's involved.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, you're hitting the nail on the head. [00:27:00] I. So like one thing I always kind of tried to defend up front is that if you're trying to

teach your child a skill, that's not what we're talking about here, right? We're talking about wanting to enjoy certain amounts of time in a fun activity. And so allowing kids to lead because they're the best teachers.

Cause a lot of times we've kind of forgot to have fun because it requires a little bit more horizontal thinking than vertical thinking. So allowing them to kind of reteach us and connect us to. That inner joy, , is helpful. But then I, , the second thing is it isn't fun if both of you aren't having fun, so your child wouldn't play with somebody else that didn't enjoy their time.

And so making that argument, I think often for parents, like it just requires that simple reframe that, , if you're not, if you don't wanna play Hot Wheels again for the 11th time, you can. Hey, these are three things I like. Do you like one of 'em? And, and, and pick that one. , and [00:28:00] then you will just see the magic happen because now you're at least kind of enjoying it rather than, , it coming from the sense of duty.

And the other problem is if you're overly apparent in, in these moments. So I talk about some research I did in child museums. As soon as the kid sees you kind of start to direct there. There's two things that happen that are problematic. One, the child realizes this isn't a fun moment, this is a moment of teaching.

Especially, , if you have a good relationship, they, okay, I get it. We're not supposed to have fun right now. You're in the parent role and I'm the child role and I'm gonna listen. But unfortunately that changes. You know what? , kind of this creative, fun activity in, into the child thinking it's fun.

And then two, you lose that ability to sort of flex your creativity and enjoy the benefits of those moments where you can think non-linearly and kind of open yourself up to, , new opportunities. So, Really being mindful of like, okay, I get it. This is time for me to have fun with my child. [00:29:00] This is the game we decided to play.

And I mean that in more of a macro level, , there's certainly games at the micro level and, and then benefit from that. And that doesn't mean that if your child's out of line, you can't flip back into the adult role. Course correct. And come back like, , again, some, some of us get so stuck in absolutes, right?

But it does mean. When you're engaged in a fun activity, really try to have fun, , and then there'll be plenty of opportunities to be an adult and a parent. Trust me.

**Jill Stoddard:** Well, and, and when you're, when you're letting the child lead and not being directive, I think part of what happens is there's this like natural exploration and curiosity that kids. Maintain until a certain age and then they lose a lot of it just like we do. And that's certainly one of the things I've noticed.

You know, when I think about my son and I going hiking, the best times we've had are the paths we've never been on and we have done zero research, like we just show up and it can actually be a little scary. There was one hike we [00:30:00] went on that I said, oh my God, your father would kill me if he knew I was taking you the hike where there are no other children.

, but those have been the most memorable. Fun times because we're, we're sharing that like adventure and curiosity and exploration, and I think that's what's really made it fun.

**Mike Rucker:** Absolutely. I meant there are a couple things there where, you know, just inherently. , , the research supports you, right? It's like these time blocked moments. So there's this paradox, well, you scheduled this hike, but you kept all of this room for spontaneity, right? And that's where, , again, some of fun's magic, like it's really hard to contrive those experiences, but you can still index them by going on hikes all the time.

And then when that magic does happen, it's so special, like, do you remember? You know what we had. And then the other is you. Playing, , up to the line of edge work, right? Like it seemed, just the fact that there was a little bit of risk makes it interesting, right? And so it doesn't mean you need to put yourself in harm's way, but [00:31:00] the fact that you're like, oh, , those can be extremely fun moments as well.

So like, playing with those elements, , do become important and uh, yeah, I love it. That's great.

**Jill Stoddard:** And you talk about, , the importance of reminiscing or the way that reminiscing can, like extend a fun experience. And so I'm, thinking about that in this context because the, the, the spontaneity of these experiences is part of what made them memorable. And then, , there was a day that

it was supposed to rain by three o'clock and it didn't rain and it was three o'clock. So we're like, let's go. We'll go for a hike. And then of course, we're like out on this trail and not only does it start raining, it starts hailing

**Mike Rucker:** Oh my goodness.



**Jill Stoddard:** immediate. And we were in San Diego, so we don't get weather like this very often.

So it was very exciting. We had our dog. Who had never experienced this before and completely froze. The trail got completely muddy. I had to pick up my dog to walk with him. Slipped fell on top of my son, literally on top. We [00:32:00] have never left so hard. We were caked in mud from head to toe. I had just gotten a new car and we had to get in the car caked in mud to drive home.

And this was probably. At least three years ago. And he still talks about it constantly. And every time, mommy, remember that time when we went hiking and the, and the hail came and you fell on me? And I was thinking about that. I was, as I was reading in your book about reminiscing, like what a gift that the fact that this crazy thing happened made it so memorable that we get to keep re-experiencing that special moment because we can reminisce about it together.

So can you talk a little bit about reminiscing and.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, I think, you know, it's just the sort of conscious , activity of savoring moments after they happen. Right? And so we know that journaling and kind of this introspection can be. for some people. And so I kind of just tailored that [00:33:00] activity in a way that can help that predictive engine that we talked about at the beginning,

like as we unpack these things, a few things happen. They help us index the memory, and we know that the more of these memories we have when we look back at time, we look at at it's more expand. Versus things where our behavior, , just constantly is habituated. Those tend to be stored as sort of single memories.

And we know that people have a general better sense of wellbeing if they have a, a bunch of interesting things to think back on, because time just by proxy is extended because we were like, oh wait, 30 things happened in the context of my life versus five, you know, that's a hypothetical, but just to, , illustrate the point.

And then two, it does extend this joyful activity, like as we're remembering it in any given moment where we might have some downtime or, , that's the exercise that we wanna do, we're able to relive that. , like in your retelling, you were smiling the whole time, and so,[00:34:00] , having just a connection to that memory, we know through, , Barbara Fredrickson's work and others.

As we broaden and build these, a wide breadth of experiences, that's really where resilience lives. And so it's important for a whole host of reasons. One, it's a good use of time cuz it allows us to extend, , sort of the power of fun as it were. And then two, as we build these experiences, it allows us to look back at our lives, especially in our later years as it being, you know, a, a rich, well lived life rather than someone that looks back and.

Man time really passes me by. And then three, now that we, , it's an, it's an exercise in flexing your agency and autonomy. So as you build these experiences, it's really building the equity of positivity and optimism. So rather than it being toxic, it's you realizing like, I do have this sense of control over at least my personal domain, , Fear of influence might not be worldly, but at [00:35:00] least within you know what you control.

You do have some choices about which way your ship is going.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah. I love it. So if we, let's say we've, we've got, we've got our, our listeners on board that they want to start creating a fun habit, which I hadn't even mentioned.

The name of the book is The Fun Habit, how the Disciplined Pursuit of Joy and Wonder Can Change Your Life. If we wanna create a fun habit, , talk to us about where to start. Like what if we feel like we don't have any ideas for fun, which I sometimes feel like that happens as an adult. Like, I'm just so boring these days.

I can't even generate a creative idea. Or maybe some people might have too many ideas. , so how can we make application of this change more like,

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, so first, if you don't have any ideas, really, you know, just a simple brainstorm is a good place to start. I mean, most of us can connect to fun things we did in the past and , for reasons of wisdom and [00:36:00] maturity. Maybe not all of them apply anymore, but certainly some do. So kind of, , doing a little bit of introspection and figuring out, okay, what is it that I used to feel connected to that is not in my life now?

And kind of, , writing that down and then looking outwardly, like what is it that I see others doing that isn't necessarily where I'm following, , falling victim to fear of missing out, but things that I genuinely wanted to do. And then also things that maybe you put off, , even if that's just something as simple as a vacation or something like, So that you have a premeditated list so that you're not going into this and sort of, , facing the cognitive load of having to think about that, you know, when you have these opportunities.

And so creating that list first. And then the second is, , whether you wanna do a full blown time audit, which isn't hard, , it's always. We talk about fun, and this is one, , if you approach it with curiosity generally can be a fun activity. But I think an audit for most people is like, really, I'm gonna start off my fun quest with a really [00:37:00] unfun exercise, but just understanding how you spend your 168 hours, , within a week and areas where you can create the space to sort of integrate more fun, , is an important second step.

And so, In the book, I talk about something called the Play Model, and it's a really easy way to, , sort of sort your time and figure out where are these pockets of opportunity. And so play stands for pleasing, living. Agonizing and yielding and pleasing activities are things that are generally easy to do.

So making sure on your list, you know, whether that's walking your dog, connecting with one of your best friends, , things that would be fairly easy for you to implement, , in your day to. , those are things that we want to index. This work comes from Daniel Gilbert and, , Matt Killingsworth from Harvard.

And they just know from looking at time journals from others that folks that have these pleasurable activities throughout their day generally have this, , a better sense of general wellbeing. So these are important things to [00:38:00] do that not enough of us are doing. Right. The living quadrant. Those heights that you talked about with your kid, , those really require, especially in our busy lives, to be scheduled on our calendar. , they require energy. So it's not like you can do them all the time. I don't think you always wanna be caught in that hailstorm, right. But and oftentimes for a lot of folks, it's reconnecting with something, , that does require a little bit of work.

So, , they might have played guitar and but haven't picked it up for three years. So, , it's gonna require some work to get back there. But those are the things that really allow us to sort of transcend the ordinary and so become important to figuring out how to at least. Some of those things in your life yielding is the low hanging fruit.

And so in the literature we call this passive leisure, like where are the opportunities where essentially once you look at how you're spending that time, it could be easily replaced with, , something from the pleasing or living quadrant. And so, , again, we generally try to start there. Like what is it the things that you've [00:39:00] habituated that when you look at it, one you don't need to be doing and two really aren't fun when you think about them critically.

**Jill Stoddard:** social media or just binge watching Netflix, those kinds of

**Mike Rucker:** Relationships with convenience, , things that you kind of just do now because you know, you feel obligated, but could easily be taken off your list or admin work, right? Which is kind of a fancy way of saying, , things that potentially could be easily replaced with just a little bit of creativity,

and so, , that could be something as simple as childcare and it doesn't have to come from a place of privilege, some folks. You could make the argument like, do you realize how cheap it is to outsource laundry? And , kind of figure out if that, , but again, I realize that not everyone is gonna be able to have access to, , , being able to replace time with money.

But like something as simple as childcare. Could you do it? A kid swap? And especially with older kids, that ends up being a huge win. You just kind of feel obligated, , to obviously to watch your kids, but you can trade that obligation with others and free up that time to [00:40:00] reconnect with something.

And so, , again, what are the things that, where you could, with some creativity, you could potentially, , swap out with things that you really enjoy. And then agonizing is the same again, we can't orchestrate a life or architect rather a life that doesn't have agonizing activities. That's, , most of.

Do want to do the hard stuff. And so, , again, just to define agonizing, , discreetly, it's things that take a lot of energy and we truly don't like, but when you look at your week, , in reflection, a lot of times these agonizing activities, again, can be either. Re orchestrated so that they are a little bit more enjoyable either through, , pairing them with something fun like, so if it's something that doesn't take a lot of, , cognitive resources, , maybe that, , like exercise or cleaning your house, you could pair that with, , your favorite podcast like yours, for instance, or, , music that you really.

For me, , , I'm, uh, a product of the nineties, so I, , [00:41:00] my secret pleasure is gangster rap. There's no way I can listen to that, , with my kids around. So when I'm, , having to do, , domestic duties around the house, I'll generally put on the earphones, and I enjoy that time.

It's sort of, , because it, it reminds me, , it's almost an act of reminiscing. It connects me to, the fun time that I had in my twenties, and it allow, Sort of the agonizing aspects of those activities to get better. , and so like finding ways to reduce, , the agonizing time in your life also becomes a helpful exercise.

And generally with a little creativity, you can either make those things a little bit more enjoyable or again, swap them, , through some sort of creative act. Like,

are you doing your own taxes? Do you really need to do that? Right? And so again, that's just one example that might not apply to you, but general.

you can look at things and and, and see if there's a better way to do it,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, absolutely. I found this model incredibly helpful because I think, , I started out the question, something around the lines of like, what if you can't even think of what to [00:42:00] do and , so in the book you present this model as a two by two matrix with, , one side, so it's higher, low.

Challenge, is that right? Or effort? And then higher. Low

**Mike Rucker:** Essentially fun. Yeah.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, fun. Essentially fun. , so if, if listeners picture that, , make a two by two matrix, , and you have high and low challenge and high and low fun, and then that's where the, , the pleasing, living agonizing and yielding felt fell into.

And I found it really helpful to think about. In this way. Maybe it's just me, I need a little bit more structure in my brain, but it made the idea of starting a fun habit feel so much less overwhelming because I could categorize, categorize what I'm doing, and you recommend, I think taking about a week and actually collecting some data, like writing down all the things that you're doing in a typical week, and recognizing in which quadrant those things fall.

And that really gives you a great starting point for going. Wow. When I get outta my head and [00:43:00] actually write this down, I see how much time I'm spending on brainless, , social media or, , television or these other kinds of things. , or whoa, there's a lot of agonizing stuff that maybe I could find a way to make more fun or find a way to, to do, um,

**Mike Rucker:** And if anyone wants a visual and doesn't feel like buying the book, just Google rer play model. It should come right up just so

**Jill Stoddard:** Oh, that's, that's awesome. That's great. , yeah, it's, I, it's, it's hard on a podcast where you don't have visuals, but it is a really helpful thing to look at. , and I was just laughing thinking about, gosh, what are the things that I have that go into these boxes? And I thought, I think walking my dog is pleasing.

And I think that's what you then used as an example, or friends of ours introduced us to this game called Happy. . And it's a game you can play with your kids that you have to stand up and it's active and loud and you make noise, but around is like a minute.

Maybe 30 seconds, you know, so it's, it doesn't require it's low effort, but it would, [00:44:00] but it's really enjoyable cuz you can't not get into it. And I thought, oh, I think Happy salmon probably goes in pleasing. And I just, I don't know, I wouldn't have thought about these things in this way before and found it really useful to do that.

And I encourage people to do the same. I think it's a really great jumping off point to, to make some changes For sure.

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, and I think each person's gonna be different. I, you know, talk about this in the book, like I think one that a lot of folks sort. this type of advice wrong is that, oh, okay, so this is gonna apply to me. I try to give a wide breadth of different things cuz I think some things are gonna resonate and some aren't.

And with regards to this particular model, it's not about making it balanced, but it is about if everything that you're doing falls in the yielding and agonizing category. That it, , it's at least an artifact that suggested you something is amiss and you know, and requires reevaluation. And unfortunately so many of us fall in that category.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Right. And these things can [00:45:00] change over time. So we, my family just moved from California where we had our hail hike to New England and now we have leaves. On our lawn that did not used to exist. And I was like, well talk about agonizing, like these leaves covered every single inch of grass on my front yard.

It was stressing me out that all the new neighbors would be mad at me cuz I'm not raking my leaves and they're blowing into their yard. But it felt so agonizing and we ended up hiring someone to do it. , but we don't wanna have to pay for those services all the time. So we've been talking about next season.

at least teaching our kids how to mow lawn and making , making them do the lawn. So we might still pay for someone to do the leaves, but basically sharing the agonizing chores among all four of us, rather than paying a lot of money for one person or just having one person in the family have to take it on.



**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, in the parenting chapter, these aren't my ideas cuz I was kind of blown away by them. But you know, [00:46:00] I went and, , because they're anecdotal, but I think a lot of us. Don't realize how young kids can actually start to contribute. And so I've seen a lot of positive benefits of the, of what you just described, where people are, you know, wait a second.

So my 11 year old can do their own laundry. Like,

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. , of course. . Yeah.

**Mike Rucker:** or at least just test it out for a week or two. And so I've seen so many. , just to be frank, this has primarily happened with, , moms, but I've seen so many moms just pleasantly surprised. Like, oh my gosh, , I've been able to actually exchange this agonizing activity by sharing that with my child, and I was already giving them allowance, so it kind of already fit into the framework of their family design.

Um, and I meant how that's not provocative, allowing kids to essentially, , fend for themselves, , and take ownership. Things are gonna have to do eventually, and all of a sudden, wow, the hour's back in your day and you, you know, but it[00:47:00]

**Jill Stoddard:** hours that we could give back to them and have fun as a family if we're all contributing to the more agonizing

**Mike Rucker:** and there's two sides of that, right? Yeah. You could give it back, you could give back that time, and you're a better version of yourself. As I, I think that's an, you know, it only takes a few hours a week to kind of, Right to ship, , where Okay. You know, I, I can handle the rest of it. I don't know if I, I mentioned it yet, but, , another study that I love again, it's easily Google it.

Um, is that a word? Googleable

**Jill Stoddard:** Go Googleable. I think it is. Yeah.

**Mike Rucker:** Um, it, it's a Stanford, Harvard MIT study, that essentially brings in the, the research of the hedonic flexibility principle. But what we know about that is that if we are living a joyful. We have more capacity to, to do the harder stuff. We're able to, , spend time on betterment because we have that increased vitality and we just have, , whether you want to call it ego [00:48:00] depletion or willpower, we have the ability to say, okay, I, , I've had my fun.

Now let's tackle this thing in a more joyful way instead of going, ugh. You know? So again, I love kind of using the metaphor of an upward, um, spiral.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Yeah, me too. You, you also talked, I mean, back to the parenting thing you had talked about, and I think this would apply to not just parenting, but that you can make a mental shift from, this is an obligatory burden to, this is a voluntary choice and I don't need to be your playmate all the time, but I can choose.

To do this in a way that's fun for both of us. And I think that can apply across context, not just parenting, but that it sometimes does require that mental shift, that this is a good thing, this is worth doing. This creates benefit across, you know, different areas if we allow ourselves

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, the simple

**Jill Stoddard:** to make an important

**Mike Rucker:** mental frame is I get to do this versus I have to do. . And so if you get your own buy-in, right, like, wait, I [00:49:00] essentially co-created this, whatever it is, then at least you know that you, you know, have some skin in the game versus, , this is just another thing I have to do, right?

**Jill Stoddard:** so you dedicate, this is making me think of a funny story that might be TMI to share on the podcast, but I'm gonna do it anyway. But you dedicate an entire chapter to friendship and the benefits of bundling friends and fun. And you start with this story that, I think most parents can relate to, which is that like painful, obligatory kid party at the trampoline park.

And it made me think of this time that my sister-in-law and I, oh, she might kill me, that I'm telling this story. We took our kids to a trampoline park and we were bored to tears. Forward to tears, right? Just like sitting on the sidelines, watching them do their thing, looking at our watches, like, when is this gonna be over?

And I don't remember whose idea it was, but we were like, well, why are we sitting here? Why don't we jump? There's no age limit. Like let's [00:50:00] go get the socks and jump on the trampoline. And what we hadn't taken into account that is that. Two middle aged moms on trampolines. We realized very quickly we don't quite have the same, um, pelvic floor muscles that we used to.

And I, the two of us, I don't know if we have ever laughed so hard in our lives, even though we were quite literally peeing our pants and it was , it was hysterical, and we were having a blast. And of course, this is another example of something we continue to reminisce about.

**Mike Rucker:** But it's great. I, I love it because I, I will share too. That I did the same thing just three weeks ago and, , I, , entered the Dodge ball area and I just, every kid decided that my groin was Target. So yeah, it was

**Jill Stoddard:** Of course they did. There's a grown up in the dodge ball

**Mike Rucker:** So I had a lot of fun except for, uh, you know, having to, uh, be a little bit more prudent than everyone else [00:51:00] there.

But yeah, I'm right there with you. It was a,

**Jill Stoddard:** my God. Oh, that's amazing. Well, can you talk a little bit about this friendship and fun and maybe give some suggestions for how we might incorporate more fun into our friendships?

**Mike Rucker:** again, I think it needs to be deliberate, right? Like one of the episodes I really enjoyed, , listening was when you had, , Adam Dorsey on, you know, cuz I know he talked about this as well, but, , those connections we now know are so important, right? Like loneliness as a construct and, , the ill effects of it are, are so important.

These friendships of convenience can be interesting and certainly you can find friendship there. But what I suggest in this chapter is that really finding. F Friends that you do find fun, , to try and connect with at least a few of them so that you don't feel like everything that we've talked about in the podcast that doesn't come from the sense of obligation.

Like, I've gotta be this person's friend because you know, I gotta sit here on the bench and watch our kids play baseball. With just a [00:52:00] little bit of effort. You can generally find people, , I just moved as well, so Right. It becomes problematic. I talk about that in the book too. Getting to North Carolina, as you know, someone in their late forties.

Trying to find new friends did require for me to put myself out there. And I think later in life I've kind of transitioned from an extrovert to an introvert. And so whether or not that's true, I can at least say that wherever you are on the

spectrum of that, , trying to go out and find new friends does require you to be a little bit deliberate about it.

But there are some easy ways. So you asked me specifically what are some of the strategies? I think finding an affinity for what you really wanna. , and then trying to connect around that is a great way for me. I really like music, so I sought out folks that didn't really know who I, , who I am, but that we had this connection and so we essentially went on play dates and it was a great way to get connect with these folks, especially if there's an activity that takes you out of having that, , what we call in, in social psychology, [00:53:00] storming, norming, and forming that are so exhausting,

if you're already like, , playing football, Engaging in an activity that you guys both like it, it takes the, the load off of having to talk and cuz you're like, you just both look at each other and smile cuz you're doing something that you like and then you can unpack that using a common language.

And so there are online opportunities to do that. Meetup dot coms one that I suggest in the. You can certainly just survey, , without being weird about it, the, the friends of convenience that you do have and see if any of them you know, might make sense to further connect with. Or you can be deliberate about connecting with old friends, which I think is so important now too.

And yes, you can do that by Zoom. You know, my best friend lives in Piedmont, California, and. , we definitely make sure to connect with each other, but even if it does require some resources, I think going to see old friends. So you feel that sense of connection, , is as important as well, so

**Jill Stoddard:** There's such an ease with old [00:54:00] friends. You know, you have to be a little bit more on when you're establishing a newer relationship. I, I was thinking about when I was reading the book thinking, oh, what, what can I do being in this new, new play? Some meeting people. And what did I do when I moved to California way back when?

, and I'm not a athlete. I don't play sports. And there was a time my now husband was on a kickball team and I would go watch because that was fun. But I would always wear high heels because they always needed a, a sub woman on the team and I never wanted them to make me play because it would be the opposite of fun for me.

But it was the same recreational league. , so for anyone in southern California, it's called Vai, it's awesome, V a v i. And they created the first ski ball league, ,

like at David Buster's, where you throw the hole in the ball in the hole. And you know, we had a whole huge grand championship like the way they do the brackets and the final four basketball.

And we won the whole entire , [00:55:00] entire ski ball champ. And got so many tickets. I want a rice cooker like, you know how many tickets you would need to have a rice cooker at the Daven Buster store where you buy your tickets and this, like, this experience, even though it wasn't necessarily something we all had a.

Preexisting love for ski ball. There was something about it that is, it was, I mean, it was just so playful and we had so much fun and I think just sharing that activity with my teammates, even the ones I may not have had a lot in common with, it just bonded us. It was a blast.

I'm like, I gotta find something like that. Now in my new town, I'm not sure what, but I'll have.

**Mike Rucker:** Another great way to do what you just described is pair fun with kindness and try and find a way to volunteer. And there are a lot of really fun ways like, so one I talk about in the , as a child, I lived in the Sacramento area and there was an American River cleanup where you got to get in your scuba diver gear and go look for stuff, , down the [00:56:00] American river.

So you were, , cleaning up the pollution, but you're also finding all sorts of really crazy stuff. And similar to what you just described, there was a prize for the craziest stuff. And so one of my fond memories, it wasn't my father, but somebody else, , discovered a, maybe it was my father, , Discovered a uh, typewriter.

And so one the most keys found in the river cuz they allowed him to count each key. I thought, I'll never forget that one. Cuz it, you know, the years prior it was keys, right? Cause so many people lose, you know, their keys when they're

**Jill Stoddard:** Yes. Oh, that's hilarious.

**Mike Rucker:** um, and my daughter and I, you know, again, when we were living in California with Duke Beach cleanups and we meet the coolest people and most of those organizations that have these types of volunteer event, That, , include children or generally make them fun because they know that's a way to, , attract folks.

And I, in my own experience, just really cool people attend those types of things. So it's another, , if you're just looking at like, how do I get started? Cuz you move to a new area, , [00:57:00] those types of opportunities can be, , another great way to go find cool.

**Jill Stoddard:** That's a great suggestion. You talking about diving and looking, I was almost thinking about like treasure hunting and it reminded me of geocaching. Do you know geo cach?

**Mike Rucker:** Yeah, my daughter and I just did that, , in, in a interesting, um, so I think it's, you know, geocaching adjacent, but we just did a huge scavenger hunt in, , Durham, , where we were essentially looking for Alice in Wonderland. Was it? It was really cool. But yeah,

**Jill Stoddard:** awesome. Well that's, that's one of those things that we, I haven't done in a while. That is so fun and such a fun thing to do with kids. I think that, , that is another thing listeners could try. You just get an app, it's the Geo Cash app, and you find these little treasures anywhere in your town or where you're on vacation and you essentially go for this scavenger hunt.

And it is again, and I think part of what makes. Fun and related to kind of this question of friendship or parenting is that it's often something you do together and that there's like this real [00:58:00] bonding that goes on when you're on an adventure, having fun together. And then also, , the final, like when you actually accomplish the, what am I trying to say?

I'm having such word finding

**Mike Rucker:** Well, what I would suggest is, All of what we've described, you know, in a very macro fashion, is a shared goal, which we know whether it's work or personal life, you know, it, it just means that you have a common language now around something that's pretty cool, right? And so, yeah, like, and then you don't have to think about how am I gonna present myself?

You're like, Hey, we are connected together in the shared interest. And it's, it's just good fertile ground for having more fun, you know? Bias is the activity in, in the favor of really enjoying it.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Well, Mike, I could literally talk to you about this forever. This is, it's such a great book. There is so much more in this book. Possibly. My favorite part was, I think it's a whole chapter. Where you talk about how to



actually take a vacation and the [00:59:00] best right way to do it. So I really encourage listeners to pick this one up.

You will not regret it. Mike, if people wanna find you, find out more about you, about the book, , where can they find you?

**Mike Rucker:** So my website's, michael recorder.com. I write about the science of fun, and that's a good place. , all of the social channels and emails and stuff. You can contact me through that website, michael recorder.com. And then the Fun Habit is available everywhere right now, if you're interested in the book.

**Jill Stoddard:** Fantastic, and we will link to all of that in our show notes. Thank you so much for being here. This was a very fun conversation.

**Mike Rucker:** Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure.

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