

# The Real Wellbeing Benefits of Hobbies and Pastimes

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Donna Dalby

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## Key points

- Research has found that having a hobby is linked to a greater sense of wellbeing and social connection.
- If you're not sure how to start, then experiment with a few things to determine what you like. Roping in a friend and scheduling time in the diary can also help.
- There's so much value in spending time doing something you love, so don't let your initial apprehension stop you from starting in the first place.

It's easy to roll your eyes at the notion of "hobbies". For one thing, there'll be phases in your life when, between work, family and getting your tax return in, it doesn't seem realistic to find the time to start birdwatching, say, or making a model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Except that, in fact, there's a mountain of evidence that shows that hobbies are extremely beneficial for both body and mind. Finding an enjoyable pastime can help to reduce stress, enhance wellbeing, improve social connection, and even stave off depression or anxiety.

Recently, for example, medical researchers from the University of Wollongong released a paper called Happy Hookers, which examined the meditative effects of crocheting. Of the 8,000 crocheters surveyed, 89.5 percent reported the practice made them feel calmer and 82 percent felt happier.

These results do not come as a surprise to Inouk Mackay, Senior Mental Health Coach from MindStep, a mental health program run by Australian Unity's partner Remedy Healthcare. "Hobbies create balance in our lives, often bringing enjoyment, relaxation, new skills, and giving us something to talk about with others," explains Inouk.

## The all-important social factor

The power of a hobby to bring people together is particularly valuable, agrees David Helmers, Executive Officer of Men's Shed, the community-based not-for-profit organisation with 1,270 branches across Australia.

"Hobbies are very closely related to social interaction," he says. "It can be the most bizarre hobby in the world, but through them you generally form an affiliation with like-minded people."

This ability to foster connection is more precious than ever in the modern world, where social isolation is increasingly rife. In short, we're living more solitary lives and have become less plugged into our neighbourhoods as a whole. And the pandemic didn't help—in fact, it was a brutal reminder of how profoundly important social interaction is to us all, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics revealing that one in five Australians experienced a mental health disorder during the first two years of COVID-19.

## Experiment with what you like

Pursuing a hobby could then be a positive way to reconnect with people of a similar ilk, while doing something that you actively enjoy. The problem is that many of us have neglected this area of life for so long that we frankly have no idea where to begin.

When you're in that stage of life when you're frantically juggling work and family commitments, something inevitably has to give. All too often, your leisure activities are the first to get the chop, as David ruefully agrees. "I can speak from my own experience here," he says. "Since I became a father, I don't think I ever went surfing again."

If you're unsure what to do, consider resurrecting a hobby from the past that's fallen by the wayside. Another tactic is to enlist a like-minded friend to take up the new hobby with you. Not only for the initial moral support, but also to help you stick with it.

"Of course," says Inouk, "it might be as simple as going back to an old hobby you previously enjoyed and experimenting with how it feels to re-engage with it again. If it's right for you then your brain will kick into gear and remind you yes, this was something I used to enjoy and will do again."

For others though, there may be the yearning to find something different. "Different is good, challenging yourself is good," says Inouk. "But make sure you experiment with a few ideas before you make up your mind. If you don't try, how can you possibly know if it's a good fit for you?"

## Beating the nerves

Admittedly, joining a new group can often seem intimidating. But don't let the initial apprehension deprive you from what could turn into a truly life-affirming pursuit.

For David, the beauty of Men's Shed is that it's a more general and accessible proposition that offers a range of activities. "It's very open, just a bunch of blokes in a shed," he says. Even so, from his experience, the biggest challenge in starting or rekindling a hobby is taking that first step. "The hardest thing we have with Men's Sheds is getting the men to walk in the door in the first instance. Sometimes, people need a bit of pushing."

David's advice is simple: don't let some initial apprehension deprive you from what could turn into a truly life-affirming pursuit.

To conquer the butterflies, Inouk agrees that it can be hard, but we should focus on the benefits. "It might involve taking a bite of that 'courage pill', especially if you're joining a group-based activity. But we know that if anxiety or fear is present, it will dissipate over time if you just allow yourself to stay there and do your best to engage," she says.

## Understand the value

Of course, finding your new hobby is only half the challenge—you then need to find the time to regularly do it. Realistically, the only way to make that happen is to schedule time for it.

"Commit to it in your diary as you would an important appointment," says Inouk. "We know that if we commit to something on paper, we are much more likely to follow through."

Remind yourself that dedicating some time to an activity you enjoy isn't a self-indulgence, but a form of respite that'll allow you to return to your regular duties with a refreshed outlook. Taking that bit of me-time, in other words, can help you to show up with a better frame of mind, whether that's as a parent, carer, grandparent, or simply a friend.

"We all need to make some time for ourselves —personally, I'm terrible at it, I know," says David. "But I've learned that it's very important, and that if you want to have healthy, productive time for all the other significant things in your life, then you also need to make healthy time for yourself too."

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