

# The Innate Power of a Playful Mindset: Cultivating Joy Through Imagination, Curiosity, and Reconnecting with the Child-Self

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As coaches, it is important for us to nurture our own experience of joy so that we can help clients facilitate theirs. In day-to-day adult life, joy can be elusive. Modern capitalist society does not prioritize joy, so it has become easy for us to put our individual experience of joy on the back-burner.

If adulthood does not explicitly require joy for execution of tasks and advancement, perhaps we can explore the notion of leaving our ‘adult selves,’ or our analytical and efficiency-driven mindset, to the side. For just a few minutes, instead of interpreting from the ‘doing’ mind that many operate from most of the time, can you connect with ‘being’? While engaging with this article I invite you to consider the idea of cultivating more joy from a place of curiosity and play, rather than judging your own perceived lack of joy.

### What is joy?

The etymology of the word ‘joy’ comes from the latin ‘gaudium’ meaning ‘rejoice.’ Therefore, joy is a celebration of life. There is liberation in asking: How can I celebrate my life? Wherever I am, exactly as I am, in this very moment?

Our inability to access joy is largely due to mindset. Approaching joy from a place of curiosity and introspection may reveal the very thing you need to accept that is blocking you from your joy. Consider:

- What does experiencing joy mean to me?
- Am I committed to embracing more joy in my life?

Joy is a choice. Are you willing to give yourself permission to add joy to your experience?

Joy can be seen as a current that connects us to childhood. Filling our lives with joy is a gift we give to ourselves. The things that bring us joy and curiosity are our greatest clues to the person we can become, if only we are brave enough to let ourselves experience happiness.

We often think of happiness as an endured state of being we are constantly pursuing. But we may consider it out of reach and achievement is difficult to quantify. This leads us to perpetually ask ourselves: *Am I happy? Will I be happy? How can I be happier?* We think that ‘once I am this, or have that thing, then I’ll be happy.’

These are loaded, heavy questions that are accompanied by guilt and judgment as we aim to define our own identity. But if we shift our attention to cultivating *joy*, there is a lightness that follows. *How can I add more joy to my life?* It doesn’t seem as daunting. Joy is attainable. Joy is one action, maybe once a day, or once a week, instead of an enduring pursuit.

### Cultivating Presence

Above all else, joy is accessible to anyone. It is inherent in us as human beings. Renowned meditation teacher and clinical psychologist, Tara Brach, shares that joy can be found through presence. It is important to find the space to be present with yourself and think critically about your intention around joy. If you are committed to increasing your joy, what is currently blocking more joy from filling your life? Perhaps you are missing opportunities for joy that are already there. Consider this: maybe you love to drink coffee. You have a cup every morning, but it has become a part of your routine, just something you do as you start the day. You are not experiencing the joy that the process of making and drinking coffee once gave you. Or your mind is preoccupied with other events of the day,

and you are not present with yourself and your experience to notice how much drinking coffee brings you joy. You are missing out on joy potential.

Tools to shift clients' mindset into a broader sense of curiosity and play can be used to uncover their innate sense of joy.

### Seeing the Possibility

Bringing clients to a sense of excitement and expansion when they envision their future will allow them to fill their lives with joy. At the beginning of a coaching relationship, I have clients imagine how good their life could possibly be, if they were to achieve what they really want. I invite the client to imagine a grounded, sensory image of the future. Inviting this sense of expansion, vision, and possibility allows clients to see where they can add and cultivate joy as they imagine a greater future through our work together. Creating a vision map of all the beautiful things they want to create for themselves, will instill a sense of joy into the conversation, the coaching container, and their implementation of their vision for the future. This shifts the focus of the work from problem to possibility.

### Unlocking Joy Through Writing

The practice of automatic writing can connect clients with their subconscious inclinations toward joy that might be harder to access when thinking critically. Sit down with a pen and a piece of paper, and ask yourself — what brings me joy? Just start writing. It doesn't have to make sense. See what comes up. Maybe images fill your mind, maybe memories. You might surprise yourself. Circumventing your judgmental mind by writing anything that surfaces in your thoughts opens a different perspective and self-insight.

To experiment though a different avenue, consider what brought you joy as a child. When we are younger than 10 years old, we are thought to be our freest, truest selves, unburdened by our cultural and societal expectations. Was there something you loved to do as a child? Could you incorporate that into your life again?

You might also try keeping a log (or a joy journal) of when you notice yourself feeling joy each day. Taking note of your experiences of joy will flag them in the brain and allow you to focus more on joy in the future, therefore cultivating more in your life as a byproduct. The brain creates more of where it places its focus.

### Inner Child Playdate

Though this is a trendy term, this practice invites joy in through play. Spend some time with your inner child by doing an activity your child-self loved to do. Maybe once a week you draw and color for an hour. Or you go on a bike ride, or dance around your room in a fancy outfit. People have found that spending time with their child-self has led to significant emotional healing, as well as spurred creativity.

### Moving Your Body

Studies have shown that joy can be cultivated through somatic movement. Spending a moment bringing ourselves out of our heads and back into our bodies eases tension and stress, promotes health, and unlocks joy. A simple way to do this is to play an upbeat song you love and dance (like no one's watching).

Similarly, the act of smiling—even if you don't feel happy—is scientifically proven to release endorphins, dopamine, and serotonin. We can 'trick' ourselves into feeling happier by simply smiling.

## Witnessing Joy

Though childhood can be a doorway to joy, one doesn't need to have had a particularly happy or joyful childhood to claim joy in their life now. For some, recalling a time of joy can be difficult. Instead, we can connect to the idea of joy, or to someone else's expression of joy, to imagine it for ourselves. Clients may identify the image of another person, whether in the media or known personally, that they consider to express joy and emulate them. Spending time around people that one considers to be joyful can also have an infectious effect in spurring one's own joy.

We say that we *cultivate* joy because it is a practice that we must tend and nurture should we wish it to grow and remain in our lives in a permanent way. We can teach ourselves to experience joy using these exercises, and teach our brains how to recognize it in our everyday life. With practice, noticing things that bring us joy and our somatic experience of joy becomes a habit.

It is helpful to remember that joy is something that you already have and you already are. It is an experience only you can define and cultivate for yourself. Joy is a practice and a responsibility you owe to yourself. Because a life without joy is not what we signed up for.