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One for the Books: How Reading Improves Your Well-being

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One for the Books: How Reading Improves Your Well-being

Have you every picked up a book and simply couldn't put it down? Or do you find yourself choosing other activities to pass your time? Whether you are an active reader or a self-described non-reader, you should know that reading for pleasure is actually beneficial to your life. So how do we define pleasure reading? Pleasure reading encompasses any reading done for fun, without the necessity to do so. Sadly, the number of Americans who choose to watch television instead of reading has grown dramatically, with current statistics showing more televisions per home than the number of human beings. According to a 2014 Pew poll, roughly 23% of Americans did not read a book in the past year.

If you are not an avid reader or even remotely interested in diving into a great read, these four reasons to read for pleasure might be motivation enough to get to into your local library or bookstore.

Four Reasons to Indulge in Pleasure Reading

1. Improved Mental Health

Every time you read, you are creating a new memory. In effect, you are exercising your memory muscles and helping to improve mental acuity. In fact, experts agree that reading reduces the likelihood of Alzheimer's disease. Reading also gives you a chance to escape and put yourself in someone else's shoes. Doing this through reading improves what is called theory of mind. Theory of mind is what enables human beings to understand the beliefs, desires, and intents of others. In comparison, watching television actually reduces theory of mind.

2. Improved Social Life

Reading books can improve your social life. Dr. Shira Gabriel, at the University of Buffalo, found that reading fiction books improves empathy and fulfilled the basic human need for social connection. Reading also gives you a chance to broaden your social circle by introducing you to new environments in order to attend a book club, for example.

3. Improved Literacy

According to linguistics expert Dr. Stephen Krashen, reading develops writing skills, increases reading comprehension and vocabulary, and improves spelling and grammar. Reading is also an excellent tool for developing familiarity with a new language. Studies have shown that students in second language programs that provided access to a lot of reading material did significantly better on reading comprehension tests. If you're interested in learning French, for example, pick up a

few French children's picture books and take a stab at reading them. You'll be surprised at how quickly you'll become accustomed to your new language of choice.

4. Relaxation Technique

According to a 2009 study conducted by the University of Sussex, reading has the ability to reduce stress and ease anxiety by as much as 68%. Experts at the Mayo Clinic say that it's beneficial to develop a bedtime ritual to tell your body that it's time to wind down, ensuring a good night's sleep. Approved activities for this routine include – you guessed it – reading a book! To use reading as a relaxation tool, you'll want to stick with print books and avoid e-readers, as research suggests that using electronic devices before bed can actually make you less sleepy.

How to Get Started

1. Choosing the Right Reading Material

Choosing the right reading material is one of the most important aspects to starting a pleasure reading habit. Don't feel like you have to stick with a book you find boring or unappealing just because you started reading it or the work is popular. If you are not engaged in the first 25-pages, put the book down and find something else!

If you're not sure what to read, ask friends, family, and your local librarian for recommendations. There are also several great websites that provide you with suggestions based on past reading, genre, and reader reviews:

- What Should I Read Next? (www.whatshouldireadnext.com),
- Your Next Read (www.yournextread.com/us/)
- Which Book (www.openingthebook.com/whichbook/)

2. Ideal Physical Environment for Reading

Environment is everything when reading. It's important to find a place with ample natural light as opposed to harsh fluorescent lighting. Comfortable seating is also a must. In order to reduce distractions while reading, it is often best to read in a quiet area or one that provides white noise, such as a café. The most important thing is to be at ease.

3. Quality not quantity

The quantity of material you get through is not important. Rather, focus on the content of what you're about to read. Try to find stories that lift your spirits, books that teach you a new skill, or magazines that motivate you to improve your life. Encourage young hesitant readers to indulge in a graphic novel or picture book to spark the joy of reading. Quality of material is especially when dealing with books for children and adolescents.

4. Magazines count!

You do not have to read classic works of literature to see benefits of pleasure reading. Good content magazines and journals provide an economical advantage while requiring less time commitment. Readers can find magazines on any topic under the sun and for all reading levels.

5. Overcoming the Money Hurdle

If the price tag is what's keeping you from enjoying a good book or magazine, visit your local library for free access to thousands of books, magazines, and journals. While there, make sure you take advantage of the interlibrary loan program, which can provide you with any reading material you might want. If you have an e-reader or tablet, you can download reading apps such as Kindle and Nook for discounted and sometimes free e-books. Classic titles (think Jane Austen and Mark Twain) are often free! Last but not least, try used book stores and thrift stores.

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