



# *Meditation* Games

Although games like hide-and-seek and technicolour building blocks may be well and truly behind us, research has shown that adults still have plenty to gain from playtime. **KATELYN SWALLOW** writes.

**A**s children, we bandage imaginary wounds, cook imaginary meals and drive imaginary cars in offbeat attempts to mimic adult behaviour. Through imagination we explore the world around us, form relationships with other children and learn valuable lessons such as sharing, giving and why you shouldn't jump off high things or eat Play-Doh.

The importance of 'play' – or basically any activity that is spontaneous, pleasurable and where the means are considered more valuable than the ends – to our early development is well researched and widely known. But as we grow and begin to learn in other ways (through study, practice and employment), games and imaginary realities kind of lose their charm, and play falls to the wayside.

Director of Play Therapy Australia and experienced social worker Donna Berry says, "The majority of us are born with the capacity to play but this is often altered by our early experiences. As a child, play is encouraged and seen as necessary, but by the time we become adults many of us have forgotten how to play due to environmental factors, our health or other social influences. Play is no longer seen as a priority, and can be viewed as time wasting or even a sin."

What may come as a surprise to many is that play is just as relevant in our busy commitment- and responsibility-filled adult lives as it was when we were kids. But instead of being about learning and development, play functions as both a form of therapy and meditation. "By adding spontaneous playfulness into our daily routine we are giving ourselves the best activity for our emotional, social and physical health," says Berry. "It can ward off depression, keep our creativity alive and improve our relationships. Research also suggests that play can actually transform the neural connections in our brain, releasing a protein that can help reduce the onset of Alzheimer's disease in older people."

### How play works

The equation between play and improved wellbeing seems simple: play is fun and fun makes us happy. Unfortunately, this equation doesn't work for all things that we deem 'fun' – like watching Netflix or getting a manicure. Play has a unique set of enjoyment-based benefits because it exercises your creativity and engages both your mind and body.

In the 2003 essay 'The Healing Potential of Adults at Play' by Dottie Ward-Wimmer, a paediatric nurse, certified professional counsellor and registered play therapist, she says, "Infants, driven



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by curiosity in their quest for survival, playfully explore with their entire bodies the universe around them that is then translated into an inner world...for adults, play continues as an important vehicle because it fosters numerous adaptive behaviours including creativity, role rehearsal, and mind/body integration."

Most types of play recruit both hemispheres of the brain: the analytical left as we decide what to do next, and the more creative right as we enjoy the activity at hand. If play is physical – involving body movement – it also has the potential to release endorphins: neurochemicals that play a role in the reduction of pain and in improved mood. In the same vein, the social aspect of some types of play can help boost oxytocin, a hormone linked to human 'bonding' and which can help build relationships with increased loyalty and trust.

Science aside, playfulness and the use of our imagination in any way can act as a diversion from our static routine and

help us to relax and unwind. Imagination, possibly one of most under-utilised tools of the adult mind, can even help us tackle the big issues that may be bringing us down. Aspects of role-playing, such as imagining a future conversation with a colleague, can give us greater insights into our relationships and unpack our own fears and doubts. And the repetitive nature of a playful activity such as colouring in can help our brains switch off and relax.

Just five to 10 minutes of any daily activity that might constitute as play, Berry says, is all that is needed for improved health. And what is most important in those five to 10 is to remove yourself from the stressors and goal-oriented nature of our digitised world. "It's just about taking some time out to have fun," she says. "It can be anything from playing with our children or pets, more structured forms of play such as board games, creative pursuits including the mindfulness colouring-in books, or various forms of free play and music."

## Play what?

Break free of the preconceived notions of play and into an entire new world of fun with these totally adult activities:

### Mermaiding

#### What is it?

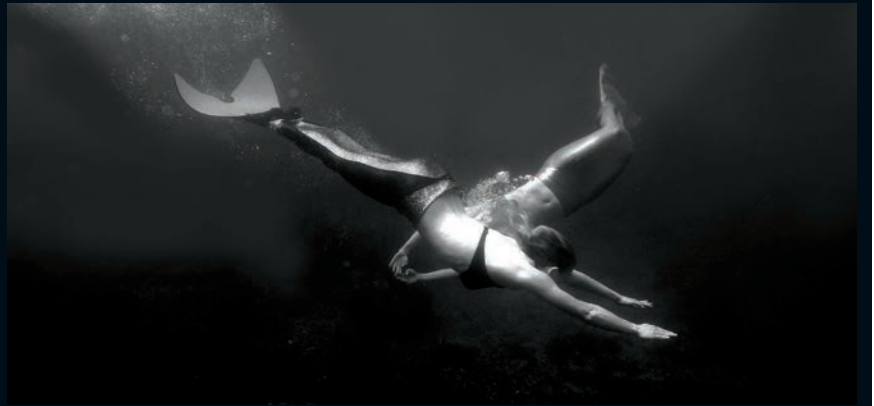
Mermaiding, as the name indicates, is a relatively new kind of water-based activity. It involves the use of a monofin (a single fin that you put both feet into) to propel yourself forward in the water, as though you were – in fact – a mermaid.

#### The benefits:

Founder of No Ripples ([noripples.com.au](http://noripples.com.au)) Michaela Werner says mermaiding is a great way to engage with your inner child and feed your imagination. “We are really making people’s fantasies come true,” she says. “Every little girl wants to be a mermaid, but then we grow up and we lose that imagination; we try to encourage that kind of creativity again and to make it a social experience,” she says.

#### Try it:

Werner runs two one-hour classes every Saturday for both children and adults.



The classes involve stretching, breathing and core strengthening exercises, as well as time spent in the water learning the key movements involved in mermaiding. “There are so many different ways to use the monofin: you can swim on your front, back or side,” says Werner. “We spend time swimming underwater, we swim through

hula hoops and we pick up objects. I also teach my clients how to blow beautiful oxygen rings that spiral up from the bottom of the pool or ocean. It’s a lot of fun.”

Fins can also be purchased online, but it’s recommended that you first attend a class, or practise in shallow water, if you are not already a strong swimmer.

### Colourtation

#### What is it?

The adult version of the colouring in you probably performed in your first years at school, Colourtation (colour-meditation) involves colouring specifically designed patterns to particular instructions as a form of stress release and mindfulness.

#### Benefits:

Evolving from neuroscience research, Colourtation can help improve sleep and energy levels while reducing fatigue and stress. “When watching clients on EEG brain measurement machines, it is clear that colouring in allows for focus on the task while also allowing the brain to relax,” says author of the *Brain Science* and *Anti-Stress* colourtation books Dr Stan Rodski ([colourtation.com](http://colourtation.com)). It’s thought these benefits are a result of concentrating on a mindful, repetitive and structured task without the pressure of possible failure.

#### Try it:

Dr Rodski suggests 20 minutes of colouring each day for optimum benefit. This includes 15 minutes of ‘free’ colouring for relaxation, and five minutes at the end of the session where you perform colouring activities designed to awaken and strengthen the brain. For example, colouring with your non-preferred hand. Rodski’s *Brain-Science* and *Anti-Stress* books are available in bookstores and online.

### Calisthenics

#### What is it?

Calisthenics is a melting pot for both sport and art. It includes elements of gymnastics, theatre and colourful costumes in its synchronised group routines. “It combines so many different aspects of art in terms of musical theatre, singing, dancing – ballet, in particular – and acting,” says Robynmore Calisthenics College coach Natalie Bond. “And then there’s also movements unique to calisthenics, such as rod twisting and club swinging.”

#### Benefits:

Calisthenics routines and training help to improve flexibility, strength, aerobic fitness and concentration. Bond says it’s also a great activity to relieve stress, form friendships and improve self-confidence.

“It’s a really great way for women to feel independent and in control of themselves,” says Bond. “It’s playful in the sense that there is a lot of acting involved and the themes that are chosen are quite expressive and emotive, and the focus involved in learning the routines helps to realign your mind and relax after a hard day at work.”

#### Try it:

Calisthenics clubs are active nationwide, offering varying age-group categories and competition levels. Depending on the level chosen, participants can spend up to four hours per week training with their teammates and learning the routines, and most recreational clubs will host an annual concert to show off your hard work. New goal, anybody? **NH**



Crown Calisthenics Club

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