



Healthy & Resilient You

No Final Exam Required

Rediscover the Joy of Learning



Have you ever had that “I’m back at school and totally unprepared” type of dream? The one where you’re sitting in high school algebra, and the teacher hands you a test you didn’t study for? Or maybe you’re in college, staring down a final exam for a class you somehow forgot to attend all semester.

It’s probably our second-least favorite flavor of recurring school nightmare, right behind the one where we show up naked in the cafeteria.

With summer winding down and a new school year beginning, it feels like a fitting time to ask: Why do our learning years still haunt so many of us when learning didn’t start out scary?

When Learning Started Keeping Score

As children, we ask question after question. We poke, experiment, take things apart, make up games, and investigate anything that catches our attention.

Somewhere between finger painting and final exams, learning became serious business — measured in grades, test scores, deadlines, and correct answers.

By adulthood, we’ve added a new set of measures that make learning feel worthwhile only when it

leads to a degree, certification, promotion, raise, or other practical result.

There’s nothing wrong with learning to reach a goal. But when every interest needs a payoff, something important gets lost: Learning stops feeling like discovery and starts feeling like a transaction.

We might talk ourselves out of trying a new skill because we may not master it right away. Or we may decide that following an interest is a waste of time because it won’t lead to more money or a step up the professional ladder. (Oh, the grown-up horror!)

Joking aside, it’s sad to realize we’ve forgotten that curiosity is valuable all on its own.

Curiosity Gets Extra Credit

Curiosity isn’t just the feeling that sends us down internet rabbit holes. Research shows that it can prime the brain for learning.

In one study, participants read trivia questions and rated how curious they were to learn each answer. While they waited for the correct response, researchers showed them a random face.

Later, participants remembered more correct answers—and more faces—when they had been highly curious about the original question. During those high-interest moments, their brain scans also showed greater activity and interaction in systems linked to reward and memory.

In other words, when curiosity switched on, the brain became better at taking in and remembering even unrelated information.

That's useful, but curiosity may offer more than a memory boost. In one daily-life study, people reported feeling more curious on happier days and less curious on days when they felt more depressed. Another study linked curiosity and active information-seeking with greater wellbeing and less loneliness.

These studies don't prove that curiosity automatically makes us happier. But they do suggest that staying curious can help us feel more engaged, connected, and open to what life can still teach us.

Take Learning Out for Recess

Clearly, there are compelling reasons to return to the place where curiosity opens the door to possibility. These low-pressure moves can help make learning feel like play again. (And don't worry: There's no final exam, and absolutely nothing will be graded.)



Start a “Huh?” List — Curiosity often begins with something small and wonderfully random. Why do cats purr? How does sourdough starter work? Who decided which side of the road we drive on? Write down your questions without judging whether they're useful, intelligent, or important enough to pursue.



Choose Something Delightfully Useless — New skills and knowledge don't have to advance your career, generate income, or turn you into a more impressive dinner guest. Choose

something simply because it interests you. Learn a card trick. Identify the birds in your neighborhood. Read about an obscure historical mystery.



Be Bad at Something on Purpose — Being a beginner can feel uncomfortable because you're guaranteed to make mistakes. That's also what makes it freeing. Give yourself permission to experiment, laugh, and improve without needing to prove anything. Try guitar, painting, dancing, whittling, gardening, macramé, or another skill you have no natural talent for, at least not yet.



Ask Someone to Geek Out — Most people enjoy sharing their interests with an attentive listener. Invite a friend, relative, coworker, or neighbor to tell you about something they love. Maybe they know how engines work, grow perfect tomatoes, follow every detail of space exploration, or can explain why your favorite song sounds the way it does. Their enthusiasm may inspire a new interest for you, and you'll strengthen a connection in the process.



Stop While It's Still Fun — Short bursts can keep exploration from turning into another assignment. Give yourself ten minutes to watch a tutorial, read an article, practice a skill, or tumble down an interesting rabbit hole. Then stop, even if you haven't finished or accomplished anything. You can always return later if the interest sticks. If it doesn't, there's no unfinished homework hanging over your head.

Finally, remember that learning comes more easily when exploration feels like recess rather than another assignment. Your goal isn't to become great at every new interest — it's to experience the joy and excitement that come from trying.

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