



# DIVERSIFY

## YOUR *pursuits*

*Why a toolkit of hobbies could be a better buffer for wellbeing than regularly practising just one pastime*

The phrase ‘jack of all trades, master of none’ is thought to have originated in the 14th century. Working-class men, or ‘the common man’, were often referred to collectively as ‘Jack’, a variant of John, and were known to work all hours, doing odd jobs on top of their main employment to top up their income.

A farmer might try his hand at gardening, swapping the plough for the pliers, or a market trader might do some painting and decorating, pulling the paintbrush out of the toolbox and taking it for an experimental spin.

Often this extra work wasn’t completed to the same high standard as their day jobs: the idiom was born. In the 16th century, the phrase had begun to take on the barbed meaning with which it’s used today. It was around this time that satirical pamphleteer Robert Greene employed its quasi-Latin equivalent to criticise an upcoming writer as a ‘Johannes factotum’ or a ‘Johnny-do-it-all’ – sadly for him, the writer turned out to be William Shakespeare.

But this is exactly the case in point when it comes to the modern outlook on pastimes, which disparages those who take up many hobbies rather than focusing on perfecting one or two. The fact is there are many rewards to be reaped from the former, more diverse approach, including sustainability, resourcefulness and resilience, plus the ability to keep calm and carry on when the going gets tough. A toolkit of hobbies could offer you a more reliable wellspring of wellbeing than mastery of one.

For some time now, research has shown that hobbies benefit both mind and body. They relieve stress and combat low mood and act as a salve for anxiety and depression. They’ve also been shown to be life-protecting. In a niche but eye-opening study, a positive association was found between the duration of survival

of participants after breast surgery and the number of hobbies they had. Additionally, some activities have been associated with reduced risk of dementia. Spending time doing things you enjoy can it seems help you now and in the future.

That said, when it comes to general wellbeing, cultural leisure pursuits in particular have been less studied, with most of the evidence holding up exercise as a poster boy or girl for hobbies on the whole, which isn’t the case for many people.

A pioneering US study in 2010 involving professor Sarah D Pressman and a team of colleagues judged a ‘leisure activity’ as ‘any pleasurable activity that individuals engage in voluntarily when they are free from the demands of work or other responsibilities’. This officially opened scientists’ eyes to more quotidian pastimes, such as aspects of socialising and spending time in nature that aren’t usually included under the umbrella term of hobbies, but still make people feel good.

The study’s more inclusive definition was derived from vocabulary first evolved in *Theories of Emotion*, a book edited by Robert Plutchik and Henry Kellerman in the 1980s, which suggests that positive emotions serve three basic functions: ‘as breathers from stress, as sustainers of coping effort and commitment, and as restorers’.

Activities that act as ‘restorers’, the study’s authors explain, require little mental effort and so can replenish depleted energy resources. This might be as a result of positive social interactions, for example, feeling protected or looked after. Other leisure activities, such as a nap or a coffee break – in the context of a day – or a holiday in the longer-term, are considered ‘breathers’. They reduce stress by way of diversion.

This is to say that hobbies are eclectic – ranging from kite-surfing to solitaire – but their overarching function is the



same: to help people feel better about and fare better in life. You might take from this that the more downtime you have, the better, but a study undertaken by three research scientists from the University of Glasgow revealed it's not so clear-cut.

In 2015, they considered the impact of cultural activities on life satisfaction using data from Understanding Society – the UK's largest longitudinal household panel study. It's generous with its list of activities, accounting for 78 different cultural and sports activities, with the former grouped into seven categories by the scientists (reproduced in part – see right).

On average, survey participants had engaged in nine different activities over the course of the previous year and the study found that the greater number of pastimes practised, the more satisfied they were with their lives.

Jennifer Brown, who now works at the James Hutton Institute but was affiliated with the University of Glasgow at the time of the study, explains that social interaction, which is recognised as a key contributor to happiness and wellbeing, might be behind this: 'We can speculate that doing a variety of hobbies means we are engaging in more social interactions, which therefore involve more people.'

On top of this, the scientists also discovered that the frequency of participation in any one leisure activity didn't push life satisfaction ratings up. In 2017, Daniel Whitley and Craig Bickerton delved further into the same data and found that regular engagement wasn't necessary for some pastimes to have a positive impact on subjective life satisfaction.

So, is it the case that the more hobbies you have, the merrier you are, regardless of how often you engage in them? Jennifer is careful not to draw any concrete conclusions from her study alone: 'We established an association between life satisfaction and doing a variety of activities, but this does not

imply causation. It might well be that someone with high life satisfaction has more time on their hands and is able to be involved in more activities, for example.'

A second theory is that different interests benefit people in different ways, culminating in a collectively positive effect on wellbeing. It's possible that a combination of activities that act as 'breathers' and 'restorers' are just as essential as more physically demanding sporting activities. Variety, perhaps, really is the spice of life – the secret to ticking all those resilience-building boxes.

Practically, there are many advantages to arming yourself with a toolkit of different pastimes that can be picked up or put down as and when you fancy. Not least because if life is one thing, it is unpredictable. Injuries – think twisted ankles coming between you and your trail-running dreams or strained wrists and fingers caused by one too many hours crocheting – and changes in circumstance can turn habits and routines inside out without warning.

Also, some hobbies translate across borders much better than others. A notebook, sketchpad or headphones require little space and no additional team players. Having many interests enables you to indulge in the one that suits any particular life moment.

Times and perceptions will continue to shift. A few centuries ago, a jack of all trades would have been mocked for something that many people today see as an example of good business sense. Could it be time to reclaim this age-old practice of diversification and apply it to downtime with pride? Who knows, maybe you'll have the same success as Shakespeare while you're at it.

Words: Jenny Rowe

## PICK AND MIX

*Aside from a new sport, here are some other leisure activities you could dip into in your downtime:*

### Active-creative

- Carnival or street performance
- Circus skills
- Dance
- Drama, opera or musical theatre

### Sedentary-creative

- Computer art or animation
- Music
- Paint, draw, print or sculpture
- Photography or film
- Textile, wood or other kinds of crafts
- Writing

### Reading hobbies

- Book club
- Book event
- Library or archive visits
- Reading

### Popular entertainment

- Carnival or circus
- Film or cinema
- Street art
- Video or electronic art

### Theatre and concert hall

- Ballet or other dance
- Classical music
- Opera
- Play, pantomime or musical
- Rock, pop or jazz

### Cultural education

- Museum or art-gallery visits

### Heritage visits

- Archaeological site
- City or town with historic character
- Historic building, park or garden