



HOW TO FEEL ALIVE AGAIN: PUT DOWN THE PHONE AND FOCUS ON FUN

Catherine Price

When is the last time you had fun?

Think about it. When's the last time you felt exhilarated and lighthearted? When's the last time you didn't feel judged, by yourself or other people? When's the last time you were engaged, focused, and completely present, undistracted by thoughts about the future or the past? When's the last time you felt free? When's the last time you felt alive?

Maybe you were laughing with a friend. Maybe you were exploring a new place. Maybe you were being slightly rebellious. Maybe you were trying something for the first time. Maybe you felt an unexpected sense of connection. Regardless of the activity, the result was the same: You laughed and smiled. You felt liberated from your responsibilities. When it was over, the experience left you energized, nourished, and refreshed.

If you are having trouble thinking of a recent moment that fits that description, I hear you. Until recently, I didn't feel like I was having much fun myself.

And then two things happened that transformed me.

The first occurred as a result of the birth of my daughter. After years of debating whether to have a child, followed by more than a year of trying, I became pregnant in the middle of 2014. Instead of expressing our nesting instincts through reasonable, small-scale projects, like closet organization or rethinking our spice rack, my husband and I decided that my pregnancy would be the ideal time to embark upon a full kitchen renovation—as in, one that involved ripping the room down to the studs and removing the back wall of our house in the middle of an East Coast January.

With a shared love of creative projects (and control), we also decided to design it ourselves. In my husband's case, this resulted in him spending hours researching kitchen faucets. In my case, it meant figuring out how to incorporate salvaged architectural elements into the kitchen, such as a mirrored Victorian armoire front that I had found in a dead neighbor's basement (long story) that I decided would make a perfect façade for a cookbook case and pull-out pantry.

I also spent hours on eBay searching for interesting details that we could add to the kitchen, a quest that left my search history littered with entries such as "vintage drawer pull" and "antique Eastlake door hinge 3x3." (Even today, my eBay watch list still includes items such as "Victorian Fancy Stick and Ball Oak Fretwork or Gingerbread—original finish" and "Old Chrome Art-Deco Vacant Engaged Toilet Bathroom Lock Bolt Indicator Door.")

As my belly grew bigger and our house colder, we had a running joke with our contractors—who by that point had become friends—about which project would be finished first, the kitchen or my pregnancy. It turned out that I won that contest, not because they were slow, but because I had an emergency C-section five and a half weeks before my due date. Eventually the kitchen renovation was finished, the armoire front became the pantry façade of my dreams, and I could finally stop my eBay searches.

Except I didn't stop. Even though I no longer had any plausible excuse for spending thirty minutes at a time trawling through listings for antique door hardware, I still found myself picking up my phone and opening eBay on autopilot, often during middle-of-the-night feeding sessions with my daughter. I'd cuddle her in one arm and hold my phone with the other, using my thumb to scroll. It didn't matter that all of the doors in

our house already had knobs and hinges. I was searching for architectural salvage in the same way that other people consume social media: eyes glazed, hypnotized by the stream of images on my screen. The photos were less glamorous, but the compulsion was the same.

And then one night, while I was in the midst of yet another session, I looked away from my screen for a moment and caught my daughter's eye. She was staring up at me, her tiny face illuminated by my phone's blue light.

This must have happened countless times before, given how often newborns eat and the fact that at that point in my life, my phone was basically an appendage. But for some reason—maybe the fact that I have a background in mindfulness, maybe delirium caused by sleep deprivation—this time was different. I saw the scene from the outside, as if I were floating above my body, watching what was happening in the room. There was a baby, gazing up at her mother. And there was her mother, looking down at her phone.

I felt gutted.

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And there was her mother, looking down at
her phone.

The image hovered in my mind like a photograph of a crime scene. How had this happened? After all the work I'd done to cultivate self-awareness, how had I become a zombie so mesmerized by images on my phone (of door hardware, mind you!) that I was ignoring the baby—*my* baby—cradled in my arms?

This was not the impression I wanted my daughter to have of a relationship, let alone her relationship with her mother. And I didn't want this to be the way I experienced motherhood—or my own life.

In that moment, I realized that—without my awareness or consent—my phone had begun to control me. It was the first thing I reached for in the morning and the last thing I looked at before bed. Any time I had a moment of stillness, it appeared in my hand. On the bus, in the elevator, in the bed, I always had my phone.

I noticed other changes, too, that, when I took the time to think about them, seemed like they also might be linked to my phone. My attention span was shot; I couldn't remember the last time I'd made it through even a magazine article without feeling a compulsion to pick up my phone to check for something (really, *anything*). I was spending much more time texting with friends than talking with them, and was doing things that objectively made no sense, such as checking and rechecking the news even though I knew doing so made me feel bad, or searching for new real estate listings even though we had no intention of moving.

Hours that I might previously have devoted to *doing* things, like playing music, learning a new skill, or interacting with my husband (as opposed to sitting in the same room together, parallel-scrolling) increasingly were spent staring at a screen. I'd morphed from an interesting, interested, independent-minded person into someone who had

been hypnotized by a small rectangular object—an object whose apps were programmed by people working for giant companies that stood to profit from getting me to waste my time.

I'm not saying that technology is evil and that we should throw our phones and tablets into a river. Some of our screen time is productive, essential, and/or enjoyable. Some of it provides relaxation or escape. But it's also gotten out of control. I've become convinced that our phones and other wireless mobile devices (which are sometimes referred to as "WMDs"—weapons of mass distraction) are pulling our internal compasses seriously offtrack, insinuating themselves into our lives in ways that aren't just scattering our attention; they're changing the core of who we actually *are*.

And now my phone had infiltrated one of the most sacred spaces of all: my relationship with my daughter. This was not okay. As my husband would attest, I am so primed toward poignancy that I can become nostalgic for an experience while I am in the midst of having it—a character trait that having a child has only made worse. Life is short; kids grow up so quickly. I didn't want to coast through my days distracted and only half-present.

I wanted to *live*. And that meant I needed to change, fast.

I have a longstanding habit of turning my personal issues into professional projects, and it occurred to me that my husband and I were hardly the only people who were losing ourselves to our phones; it was just that, at that point, very few people were paying attention to what was happening. In fact, the more I looked up from my phone and observed the world around me, the more concerned I became.

I felt like I was caught in a modern, real-life version of “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: I could see that all of us were acting like addicts, but since *everyone* was afflicted, we were deluding ourselves into thinking that our behaviors were normal and okay.

I also realized that, while there were a number of books that sounded the alarm about the possible negative mental and physical effects of spending hours each day exposing our brains to the nonstop stimulation of the internet (and consuming content that polarizes and divides us), there weren’t any that offered a solution. So, shortly after my soul-searching moment with my daughter, I started working on a book called *How to Break Up With Your Phone* about how we can (and why we should) create healthier relationships with technology. I wrote it because I wanted to wrest back control from my devices—and to help other people do the same—so that I could get back to actually *living*.

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By the end of the process, I had created a plan for how we can have healthier, more sustainable long-term relationships with our phones, and I had followed it myself. The result was not perfection (it’s impossible to have a perfect relationship with anything, let alone a device that’s designed to addict you), but the effects were transformative. I got my attention span back. I felt more creative and less stressed. I became more present with my husband and daughter. By helping me reclaim my own time, creating better boundaries with technology had given me an opportunity to take back my life.

And that led to the second event, which led me to write my most recent book.

As part of my research for *How to Break Up With Your Phone*, my husband and I had been taking regular twenty-four-hour breaks from all screens, usually from Friday to Saturday nights. We thought of these breaks as digital sabbaths and were continually amazed by their effects on time—both in terms of the sheer amount that opened up, and in the way that avoiding screens made our perception of time slow down. Instead of allowing our time to be filled, we now were in charge of how we wanted to fill it. Without apps to distract us, we found ourselves with more hours in the day—hours that we were free to use on things that we truly enjoyed.

There was just one problem: I no longer knew what I enjoyed. It turned out that, for all of its benefits, “breaking up” with my phone was only the first step. If I *really* wanted to reclaim my life, I had to remember how to live.

This came to a head one cold Saturday afternoon in early 2017, in the midst of a digital sabbath, when I found myself on our living room couch as our daughter took a nap and my husband ran some errands. This should have been a blissful moment in early parenting: I was alone, it was quiet, and I had at least an hour in front of me that I could spend however I liked. But when I tried to think of an offline activity that I wanted to do, I couldn’t come up with anything. I didn’t feel like reading a book; I wasn’t hungry; there wasn’t anyone to talk to. My mind was drawing a blank.

Around the same time, I had been reading a book called *Designing Your Life*, in which two Stanford professors use design principles to help people build “well-live, joyful lives.” In it I’d come across an exercise that had primed me for this particular moment.

The exercise asks you to decide how full your “tanks” are in four areas—love, work, health, and play—so that you can identify the parts of your life that need attention.

A diligent student of anything involving self-improvement, I had immediately pulled out a pen. Love, health, and work were all close to full. But play? Or, as the authors put it, “activity that brings you just for the sake of doing it”? I could hardly think of anything that would qualify. As I sat there, contemplating my empty play tank, I asked myself a question that I’d been posing to people while researching *How to Break Up With Your Phone*: What is something you’ve always said you wanted to do but supposedly don’t have time for? The idea is that you probably have more time for it than you realize; you just need to reclaim some of the minutes and hours you’re spending on your phone.

The first answer that came to my mind was “learn to play the guitar.” I have played the piano since I was five, and during college my grandmother (with whom I was very close, and who played guitar herself) had given me money to buy one for my birthday. A friend had taught me a few chords, but it had been years since I’d taken it out of its case; it had spent almost two decades in a closet, attracting dust and guilt.

The a related memory popped into my head: a flier I’d seen for a music studio.

Technically, the flier had been for a *children’s* music studio—it was advertising a class called “Baby Beyonce.” But this had sparked my curiosity to the point that I had looked the studio up online, and had learned that it was run by a guy known as Mister John. Who has a devoted following among Philadelphia parents due to the fact that instead of traditional children’s fare like “Wheels on the Bus,” he features artists of the week such as Alicia Keys and David Bowie (and, yes, Beyonce). While poking around on the site, I’d

seen a tab for Grown-Up Fun and had learned that he also ran a beginner's guitar class for adults. This had intrigued me but I hadn't taken any action on it. (I'd probably gotten distracted by whatever website was open in the neighboring browser tab.) But the next day, when I was back online, I signed up.

I was nervous—I was joining the class midseason, with my knowledge of the guitar limited to about three chords. But it turned out that the class, which met on Wednesday nights, was low-stakes and BYOB; my fellow students were mostly other parents who seemed to value having an hour and a half to hang out with other adults, without babies, as much as they did the music instruction itself.

With that said, we legitimately learned to play the guitar; before long, I felt capable of holding my own at any campfire singalong. Thanks to the class, I had found a new hobby that I enjoyed, and was regularly experiencing the satisfaction that comes from acquiring a new skill. And now, when I found myself with a pocket of free time, I was much less likely to waste it on my phone. Instead, I pulled out my guitar and practiced.

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These changes were more than enough to make the class worthwhile, but it didn't take me long to notice that there was something much bigger going on. When I was at the studio, I felt engaged and energized. The time seemed to fly by; every week I looked up at the clock and couldn't imagine how ninety minutes had already passed. It was an hour and a half in which I was totally free from my responsibilities, with no one to take care of but myself. As a rule-following, conscientious adult, the liberation almost felt rebellious.

During class, my shoulders were looser. My breathing was easier. My mind felt stimulated but also relaxed. Every time I went, I came home feeling rejuvenated and refreshed. Wednesday nights quickly became a highlight of my week.

Even more intriguingly, the class infused me with an exuberance that buoyed me for days. I was more playful around my husband. I was more present with our daughter. I felt less resentful of my obligations and less burdened by my lists of to-dos. Sure, it was nice to have a new hobby, but I also felt like I had a new source of *energy*. Something inside of me had been ignited that I hadn't even realized had gone dark. The more of this energy I experienced, the more ravenous for it I became.

What was this feeling? It was deeply unfamiliar, but I couldn't put my finger on what to call it.

And then one day, it hit me: I was having *fun*.

But not "fun" in the mild, casual sense in which we often employ the term. This wasn't the feeling of doing something "fun" for yourself, like getting a pedicure, or buying a new TV. It wasn't the "fun" that we try to portray on social media, or the "fun" people seek by getting hammered at a bar.

This was something different, something much more powerful and life-affirming. I decided to call the feeling “*True Fun*” to distinguish it from these other uses, and I became obsessed with figuring out how to have more of it. My hope was that if I could identify the factors that had generated it, I could transform True Fun from an occasional serendipitous occurrence to something I could seek out and create.

I started thinking of other times in my life when I’d experienced the feeling I now call True Fun.

True fun, I realized, is the feeling of being fully present and engaged, free from self-criticism and judgment. It is the thrill of losing ourselves in what we’re doing and not caring about the outcome. It is laughter. It is playful rebellion. It is euphoric connection. It is the bliss that comes from letting go. When we are truly having fun, we are not lonely. We are not anxious or stressed. We are not consumed by self-doubt or existential malaise. True Fun makes us feel alive.

It’s important to acknowledge that we can only focus on True Fun if our basic needs are taken care of—food, shelter, adequate rest, and physical safety are definitely prerequisites, and there are many situations that can make it difficult, if not impossible, to focus on fun, such as poverty, sickness, abuse, trauma, and job insecurity.

But with that major caveat aside, I’ve come to realize that we have multiple misunderstandings about fun, and that many of our arguments against making it a priority don’t stand up to scrutiny.

For example, I've had people tell me point-blank that they are not "fun people." But provided the prerequisites mentioned above have been met, there is no rule saying that only certain types of people get to have fun. Nor do we have to compete with each other for it; True Fun is not a scarce resource, accessible only to an elite few. And while it's easy to get caught up in materialistic striving and be tricked into believing that that if you were richer, you'd be having more fun, that's not true, either; sure, money can be helpful, but True Fun doesn't require wealth. While some of the changes I've made are things I've had to pay for (e.g., guitar class), many of them have been free, and some have actually *saved* me money. Once you realize that accumulating possessions doesn't lead to fun, you buy fewer things.

Some people think that they're not capable of having True Fun because they're anxious or depressed. This is a growing problem: the past decade has seen huge increases in rates of depression and anxiety among people around the world, and Americans in particular. Even if we haven't received an official diagnosis, many of us are suffering from emptiness, loneliness, boredom, and a general sense of languishing.

But I would argue that in many cases, we are mixing up the cause and effect: we are suffering from these afflictions *because we are not having enough fun*. True Fun isn't just a *result of* happiness, in other words; it's a *cause*.

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A lot of people claim not to have time for fun. But fun does not necessarily require us to become busier, or to add more activities to our already full schedules. Instead, the first step in having more True Fun is to create space by doing *fewer* things, so that you can take advantage of opportunities for True Fun in your life that already exist and spend your free time in more targeted ways.

On the flip side, there are folks who push back against putting more energy into fun because they are *already* having enough of it. In some instances, they may be right—in which case I encourage them to teach others their secrets. But for many of us, a lot of what we do “for fun” isn’t fun at all. Instead, we spend our leisure time on “Fake Fun,” a term I use to describe activities and possessions that are marketed to us as fun, that we work long hours to be able to afford, but that are ultimately meaningless or a waste of time—such as binge-watching shows to the point that our eyes glaze over, buying things we don’t need, or mindlessly scrolling through social media for hours at a time. Fake Fun is numbing and leaves us empty when we’re done. True fun, on the other hand, makes us feel nourished and refreshed.

One of the foundational issues we face, when it comes to making True Fun a priority, is that we’ve been conditioned to believe that the pursuit of fun—particularly *our own* fun—is frivolous, selfish, and self-indulgent, even immature and childish. (That is, if we think about it all.) We think that if we’re focused on fun, we’re not paying enough attention to the world’s problems or doing enough to help other people. As for our own *self*-improvement, we tend to focus our efforts on seeking “loftier” and more “serious” goals, such as achieving happiness, wealth, long-term health, and a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. We pursue these goals doggedly, reading self-help books, seeing therapists, taking antidepressants, sweating through workouts.

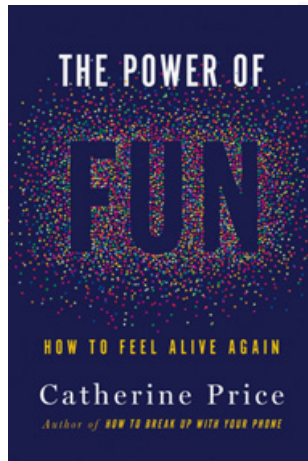
When you add in the time that's required to fulfill the obligations of adult life—going to work, doing your taxes, cleaning the house, raising kids—it's understandable that fun ends up as an afterthought. We enjoy it when we experience it, but when it comes to our priorities, it's often at the very end of the list.

But what we don't realize is that, far from being frivolous or selfish, the pursuit of fun will help us achieve all of these goals. Life is not a zero-sum equation: we can care about fun and be conscientious citizens who are committed to improving the world—indeed, fun can give us more energy with which to do so. And if we want our own lives to be satisfying and joyful, **True Fun isn't optional. It shouldn't be an afterthought. It should be our guiding star.** 🌟

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Dubbed “The Marie Kondo of Brains” by *The New York Times*, Catherine Price is an award-winning science journalist and speaker and the author of *How to Break Up with Your Phone*. She is also the creator and founder of Screen/Life Balance, which is dedicated to helping people learn how to scroll less and live more. Her work has appeared in *The Best American Science Writing*, *The New York Times*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *Slate*, *Men’s Journal*, *Self*, and *Outside*, among others.



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