

Why You Should Let Yourself Be Bad at a Hobby

Somewhere along the way, we decided that everything we do has to be worth something. The guitar has to become a side gig, the sourdough starter has to earn its keep on Instagram, the weekend run has to shave time off a personal best. I felt this pressure myself when I picked up watercolor painting two years ago and immediately started wondering whether I could sell prints. That instinct, I've come to believe, ruins the whole point. You should let yourself be genuinely bad at a hobby, because the freedom to do something purely for enjoyment is one of the few things left that no one can grade, sell, or optimize.

Consider what happens when improvement becomes the goal. The moment I started measuring my paintings against artists online, painting turned into a chore I could fail at, and my Sunday afternoons filled with quiet frustration instead of calm. Research on motivation backs this up. Psychologists distinguish between intrinsic motivation, doing something for its own sake, and extrinsic motivation, doing it for a reward, and studies consistently show that dangling external rewards in front of an enjoyable activity can drain the joy right out of it. A hobby you're bad at protects the intrinsic kind. There's no promotion to chase and no audience to disappoint, so the activity gets to stay yours.

Being bad at something also teaches you a skill that mastery never will, which is comfort with imperfection. Most of our lives are spent performing competence, at work, in school, even in conversation. A hobby with no stakes is a rare space where clumsiness carries no cost. I still can't paint water that looks like water, and honestly, it doesn't matter, because the twenty minutes I

spend failing at it are twenty minutes my brain isn't grinding on deadlines. That kind of low-pressure play has real value. It restores attention, lowers stress, and reminds you that you're allowed to exist outside your résumé.

So give yourself permission to be terrible at something. Buy the cheap paints, join the beginner class, and abandon any thought of getting good. The goal was never the output. The goal was the strange, underrated pleasure of doing a thing badly and loving it anyway, and that's worth protecting from the part of you that wants to turn everything into a project.