

The Importance of Relaxation and Vacation for Healthcare Workers: Playtime!

Simulation & Gaming
2024, Vol. 55(6) 981–984
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DOI: 10.1177/10892532241280461
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Keywords

leadership, gaming, simulation, vacation, stress, medical, homo ludens, resilience

Dear readers of Simulation and Gaming,

We hope you have recently enjoyed a great vacation (or are about to have one), since we are writing this editorial in the midst of August (4 months ahead of the publication!) just coming back from vacation. And made it the topic of the article, for it is important. One can only perform well if one is able to relax well! A topic is often forgotten or ‘not to be debated in working hours’. But it is important. Especially in healthcare, where workers operate in high-stress environments such as the operating room where the mental, emotional, and physical demands can be duly overwhelming. Chronic stress, long working hours, and constant exposure to traumatic situations all contribute to burnout, a condition that significantly impacts healthcare professionals’ well-being and their ability to provide quality care across various professions. To mitigate these effects, it is indeed essential for healthcare workers to engage in regular relaxation and take a longer time off work, as going on vacation. Hence, let us elaborate a bit on the importance of leisure, particularly through the lens of gaming. Can gaming – as a leisure activity – truly and positively influence healthcare workers’ performance?

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And what is the 'Power of the Play' exactly?

The term *Homo Ludens*, coined by Johan Huizinga in 1938, refers to the idea of humans as beings who do play, whether they label it so themselves, or not (Huizinga, 1949). Huizinga argued that play is a fundamental aspect of human culture and civilization, providing a vital outlet for creativity, relaxation, and social interaction. In the context of healthcare workers, the concept of *Homo Ludens* underscores the importance of play ('power of the play') and leisure as essential components of a balanced life, necessary for maintaining mental health and professional efficacy. Relaxation for the mind may indeed result from playing physical as well as mental games!

Nowadays, and depending on its form, gaming is more and more recognized as a popular form of leisure activity that provides physical, cognitive and emotional benefits. Games, whether video games, board games, or sports, engage individuals in activities that require strategy, problem-solving, and teamwork, often providing a much-needed distraction from the stresses of everyday life. Apart from the physical benefits of engaging in sports games, research indicates that gaming can have several positive effects on mental health as well, including reducing stress, improving mood, and enhancing cognitive flexibility (Lavigne & Anderson, 2016). For healthcare workers, who frequently experience high levels of stress, engaging in gaming during vacations or leisure time can be particularly beneficial. Games offer an immersive experience that can help individuals detach from work-related stressors, promoting relaxation and mental rejuvenation. Regular participation in leisure activities, including gaming, has been shown to reduce levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and enhance overall well-being (Luijten & Merckelbach, 2015). For healthcare workers, who are at a higher risk of burnout than many other professions, these stress-reducing effects are particularly valuable. By providing a mental break from the demands of their profession, gaming can help prevent burnout and improve job satisfaction.

Another benefit of gaming, especially when playing multiplayer games, is that games can greatly facilitate social interaction, offering healthcare workers an opportunity to connect with colleagues or friends offline or online, in a non-professional context. And using play contributes to our socialization, helping to strengthen relationships, build teamwork skills, and providing emotional support, crucial to building resilience that is so very much needed in high-stress professions (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2016). Indeed, multiplayer and cooperative games encourage collaboration and communication, which can improve social cohesion among healthcare teams. Stronger social bonds within a healthcare team can lead to better teamwork and communication in the workplace, ultimately improving patient care (Kappes & Parks, 2020). Next to building relationships and resilience, many games do require strategic thinking, quick decision-making, and problem-solving skills, which can have positive cognitive effects. These skills are directly applicable to the fast-paced and decision-heavy environment of healthcare. Engaging in such activities during time off can help maintain and even enhance cognitive functions (Granic et al., 2014). And lastly, we

must consider the fact that gaming can also serve as a form of emotional release, allowing healthcare workers to process their emotions in a controlled environment. This can be especially beneficial in dealing with the emotional toll of working with patients who are suffering or dying (Russoniello et al., 2009).

While gaming and leisure activities have numerous benefits as highlighted above, it is also important to acknowledge potential risks. Excessive gaming can lead to negative outcomes such as gaming disorder, characterized by impaired control over gaming, increased priority given to gaming over other activities, and continuation of gaming despite negative consequences (World Health Organization, 2020). Healthcare workers, due to their demanding schedules, may be particularly vulnerable to these risks if gaming becomes a primary coping mechanism rather than one part of a balanced approach to relaxation. It is thus essential to balance gaming with other forms of relaxation, ensuring it is not a source of additional stress to the body and / or mind.

Additionally, the sedentary nature of those gaming activities other than sports or exergaming poses a risk for physical health issues, such as obesity and musculoskeletal problems. Therefore, balance healthcare workers must balance gaming with other forms of physical activity to maintain overall health.

Why our focus on healthcare workers for gaming benefits and the importance of vacations? Perhaps because one of your editors is dealing with unique challenges that can lead to high levels of stress and burnout on a daily basis. Challenges, that may affect the ability to provide highest quality care if one does not counterbalance stress well. Incorporating regular relaxation and vacation time into the schedule is truly essential for maintaining mental and physical health. Gaming, when engaged in moderation, offers a valuable form of play that aligns with the concept of *Homo Ludens*, providing cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that can enhance healthcare workers' well-being and job performance.

So, we're on a mission here! While we here focus on the importance of vacation for the health professional, it is ofcourse important for every professional. As many countries suffer from the shortage of workers' issues, workers in various professions are at risk.

Understanding the importance of play and the potential benefits of gaming, hopefully inspires healthcare and other organizations to encourage their staff to take regular breaks and vacations, promoting a healthier and more effective workforce. In the meantime: do take your well-deserved time off work – and do not feel guilty about it. It will only leverage your spirit and your future work output and relationships. We do hope you enjoy your next vacation!

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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