

Play is good for grown-ups, too

Scientists tell us it is critical to our health and well-being. So even as adults, let's make time for fun like we did as kids.

Sirene Lim

Singapore ranks among the most overworked countries in the Asia-Pacific, with high stress levels affecting mental health, amid an over-achiever culture. Its 45-hour work-week was three hours more than the next closest, China, in a study by a UK business transformation firm, The Instant Group. And Singapore's average annual leave of just seven days puts it third, behind Thailand and China.

Part of the solution to our adult unhappiness and feelings of burnout could be something we've left behind for years – play.

Think back to when you were little and play was seen as something essential to your development. Perhaps for many, childhood play was not as valued as it could have been, amid an emphasis on academic success. Indeed, many people believe play is only for the pre-school, viewing child-like playfulness as something we all need to outgrow.

However, science now tells us that we might be doing it wrong.

There is growing research across various disciplines, such as evolutionary biology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, sociology and anthropology, that confirms the centrality of play in human lives and across all age groups.

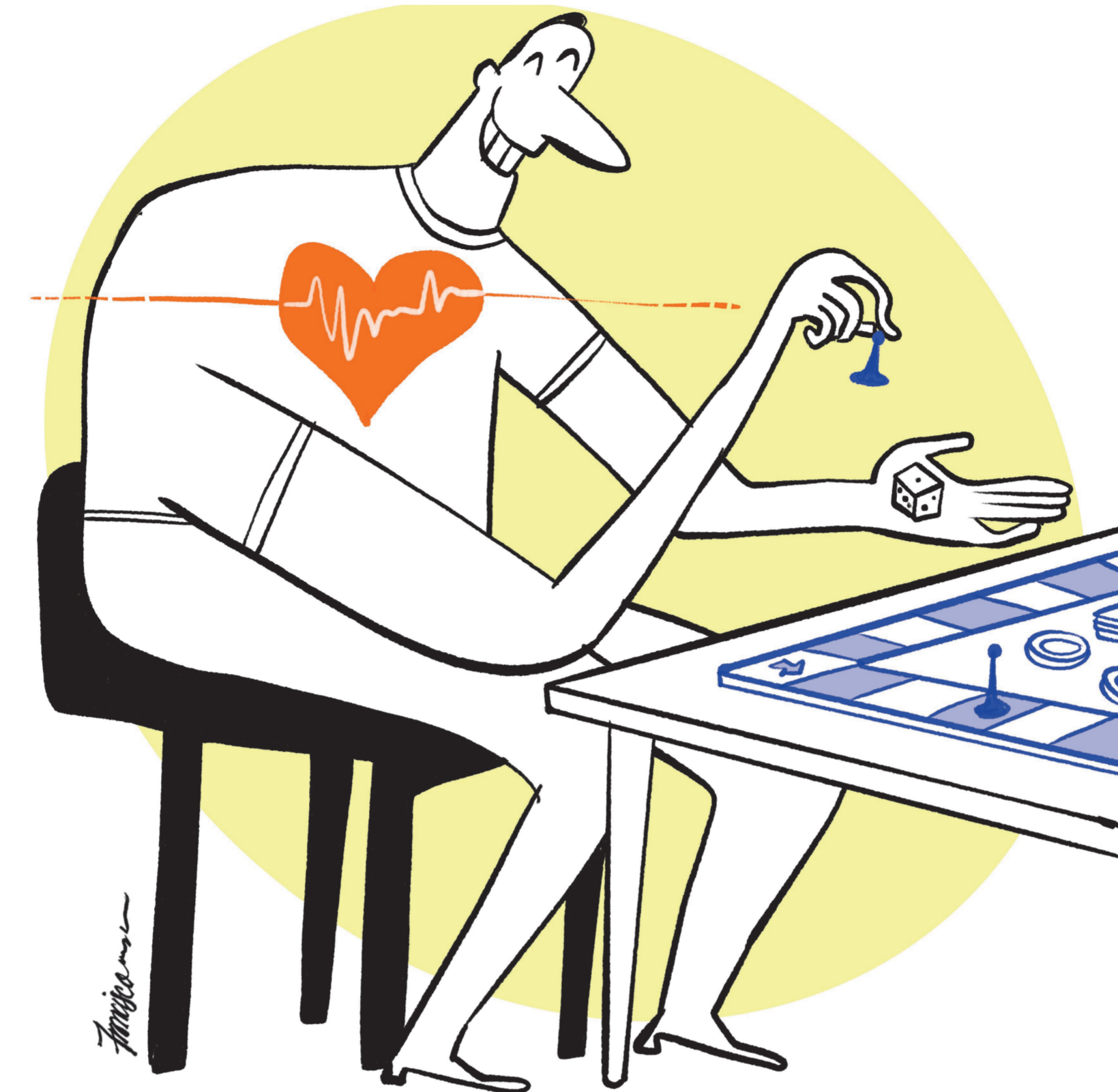
SERIOUSLY, WHAT IS PLAY?

I was prompted to ponder the issue of adults and play after a recent birthday celebration, when the adults gathered around to play cards while the children and teenagers played Uno at their own table. It was hilarious to see the number of player-joker-strategist personas awaken. It was a safe and silly space for us to step outside our daily grind, be someone else, and bend the normal rules of thought and action.

At both tables, moments of quiet focus were interspersed with laughter, harmless jeers and accusations such as: "That's not fair, you cheated!" By the end of the evening, our egos remained intact, and we enjoyed one another's company. We felt alive.

Researchers agree that play is mostly a psychological state of mind. It stems from a biological need and an unconscious desire for joy and satisfaction.

Play is self-chosen, not done for any external reward and may not appear to be productive. Imagination and creativity lie at its heart. Many of our play activities extend from childhood: Children engage in pretend play



and block construction, adults enjoy cosplay and Lego-building. Whether young or old, we daydream – play with ideas – and make up stories.

While some people may consider their work or leisure as play – because "It's fun and nobody's forcing me to do this" – play in its true essence doesn't have a fixed form or purpose but is simply enjoyable. This could range from playful bantering to planned and non-competitive board game sessions, badminton, paint-by-numbers, or even flipping a bottle cap while waiting for a table.

Our brains thank us when we make time to goof around,

flooding us with feel-good neurotransmitters like dopamine and endorphins, but that's not all. Dr Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play in the United States, reminds us that "we are built to play, and built by play".

Engaging in play on a regular basis can help us confront and cope with life's stresses. This is because play allows us to rehearse roles, try new ideas, and encounter messiness and unpredictability in a safe enough manner.

In play, we are less afraid to make mistakes because there is no such thing as failure in that context.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF PLAY

Adult play has not been a mainstream focus in psychological research until recent decades. But there is growing evidence that play in adult lives could help with global health challenges such as obesity, diabetes, dementia, anxiety and depression.

Play is also usually accompanied by playfulness and humour. This is crucial to our continued development as life can throw us curveballs – the loss of one's job, or an unfortunate accident.

The key to coping is flexibility and mental resilience, even in the face of everyday change and

challenge. We get to exercise these mental muscles in play.

The concept of neuroplasticity – that the brain can change itself through appropriate experiences – has helped give credence to the body-mind-spirituality connection in support of self-healing methods beyond a passive dependence on medication.

Engaging in play, at any age, can stimulate multiple brain regions to promote cognitive flexibility, positive emotions, boost self-esteem and improve social interaction.

There are now more psychological interventions harnessing the transformative

power of play in healthcare settings – ranging from improvisational theatre and music-making to reduce depressive symptoms or pain, to creative dance as one of several non-pharmacological interventions in dementia care.

A study published in 2019 found that Type 1 diabetes patients who engaged in daily play activity with a family caregiver obtained better emotional support and improved their illness-related communications, helping them reframe their situation and cope better with their arduous daily self-care routines.

Colleagues from the Singapore University of Social Sciences, where I conduct research, have partnered with the National Archives of Singapore to create "Come! Let's Chat", a social game informed by principles involving reminiscence therapy for seniors with dementia.

FEELING ALIVE IN GOOD COMPANY

So why don't we engage in play more often if we enjoy it so much?

Perhaps we resist and don't give ourselves permission to play. Or perhaps we think we need a lot of time when it could just be 10 minutes of doodling over a cup of coffee, or freeing up our imagination by staring at the clouds.

Common sense tells us that play and playfulness can be a potential source of preventive medicine. But because we don't seem to be getting enough of this in our present-day rat race, perhaps more research needs to be conducted on how we can better preserve a wide range of play-for-wellness experiences (beyond digital games), especially in adulthood, before we are diagnosed with a health condition.

Let's step away from our two-dimensional screens to engage in something more social, tactile and kinaesthetic to protect our mind-body-spiritual selves.

In Singapore, the rhythm of family activities seems regulated by the school calendar, with parks and museums getting busy only during the school holidays. It's as if families go on a playing binge during these breaks.

As we mature, we often squeeze playtime out of our busy schedules, which influences our children's routines as well. Yet, play should be embraced as a necessity for our overall wellness in childhood, and adulthood.

Play is not something we should grow out of, but something we need to continue to grow into. Its benefits for our mental health make for happier families, and by that measure surely extend to the workplace, if we are able to deploy the resilience and perspective that play provides.

As for the card game sessions, I've committed to organising more of them. My friends and family get more quality time together while having fun. Game on.

• Associate Professor Sirene Lim is the vice-dean of the S R Nathan School of Human Development at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Four-day week can work – if staff, employers can deal with challenges

It is important to distinguish between the different types of experiments conducted and to pay attention to the type of feedback and results revealed.

Miriam Marra

It sounds like a dream for many people currently working five days a week: How about just doing four days and having a long weekend?

When the weekends feel too short and the pressure of holding down a full-time job pushes workers to the limit, a four-day working week may appear very attractive. How does this happen in practice, though, and can it become commonplace? Well, recent news about four-day

working week trials show different outcomes.

Results from the biggest trial in the UK (involving more than 60 companies and nearly 3,000 employees) showed that 89 per cent of participating companies are still implementing the four-day week, and 51 per cent have decided to make it permanent. The study reveals a drop in employees' burnout and fewer people leaving jobs, which is consistent with other studies.

A few days ago, the supermarket chain Asda concluded its own experiment with a four-day working week,

deciding not to continue with it.

But, at the same time, South Cambridgeshire Council has declared its trial, involving 450 desk staff and refuse collectors, as successful. It claims a boost in productivity, a 39 per cent reduction in staff turnover and estimated savings of £371,500 (\$644,300), mostly in staff agency costs, in what was the biggest-ever public sector trial in the UK.

It is important to distinguish between different types of experiments conducted by organisations. Taking these most recent examples, South Cambridgeshire Council's trial was based on a work schedule where staff received 100 per cent of their pay for 80 per cent of their time, with a target of completing 100 per cent of their work.

A similar working-time reduction was central to the larger UK four-day week experiment, where participating companies from a range of sectors and sizes were given the choice of implementing different solutions, maintaining 100 per cent pay with a meaningful reduction in work time.

CAN THE WORK PHYSICALLY BE DONE?

Asda's four-day working week trial required squeezing 44 hours into four days rather than five, for the same pay. Employees were asked to work a daily 11-hour shift, and some found this was

too physically demanding and exhausting. It was also difficult for those with care responsibilities or who relied on public transport.

Notably, while Asda has decided not to continue the experiment, it announced that the trial of a flexible 39-hour week (over five days) will continue until the end of the year. Flexible work solutions do not stop at the four-day working week, if organisations are willing to explore them.

It is important to pay attention to the type of feedback and results that are revealed. For instance, the report on South Cambridgeshire Council's results mostly focuses on performance improvements in key work areas, but the analysis of the results needs to include some clear employees' feedback. Staff views are key to understanding the success of these experiments.

An interesting point made by South Cambridgeshire Council is that it trialled the four-day working week because it cannot compete with other employers on salaries alone, and it is important for recruiting new staff and retaining the existing ones. The four-day working week can indeed be part of a package of benefits for employees, and this may be crucial for the public sector when faced with limited resources.

WILL IT MOTIVATE EMPLOYEES?

Nevertheless, we need to

consider possible risks in this approach. For example, is it a reason for employers not to offer adequate or higher pay in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis? Or is it a reason for employees to work multiple jobs? While the latter is an individual choice, it should not be caused by the former.

The four-day working week, like other flexible-work solutions, should be offered by employers who want to recruit talented and motivated employees, invest in them, and offer them time and opportunities to upskill. All of this will help staff to be more productive in their jobs.

Other European countries have also considered the four-day working week. They include Portugal, which has just completed a successful six-month trial with 41 companies. In February 2024, Germany started its own four-day-week trial with 45 companies.

Greece, however, has recently taken the opposite approach. Some companies and businesses providing 24/7 services can now move to a six-day working week instead of the traditional five days (or a 48-hour week instead of 40 hours). The Greek government has explained the legislation as a way of addressing a shortage of skilled workers and low productivity levels. But, interestingly, these are also motives behind the Portuguese and German four-day working week trials.

Past research has shown that

longer working hours and working weeks do not necessarily mean higher productivity. This is true especially in a country where people already work for too long (considering the legally declared worked hours), and more inefficiently, with stagnant wages.

IS IT THE BEST FLEXIBLE OPTION?

In general, the wisdom of a four-day (or six-day) working week as a countrywide approach is highly debatable. Businesses opt for tailored hybrid approaches to flexible work that are not limited to the four-day working week, and depend also on firms' finances and culture, as we show in our recent research.

Importantly, workers also have different preferences and make trade-offs with employers. They may call for flexible work patterns that change where, and not just when, they work.

Ultimately, with the right arrangements in place which are tailored to business needs and framed within policies supported by modern governments, companies may manage these changes in work effectively to ensure an engaged and productive workforce.

• Miriam Marra is an associate professor of finance and co-director of equity, diversity, and inclusion at Henley Business School at the University of Reading in the UK. This article was first published in The Conversation.