

Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne

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Online First Publication, November 9, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cap0000262>

CITATION

Bakker, A. B., & van Wingerden, J. (2020, November 9). Rumination About COVID-19 and Employee Well-Being: The Role of Playful Work Design. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cap0000262>

Rumination About COVID-19 and Employee Well-Being: The Role of Playful Work Design

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted normal life and has resulted in considerable stress. One important reason for reduced well-being is rumination about COVID-19. This study used proactivity theory to propose that playful work design (i.e., the process through which employees proactively create conditions within work activities that foster enjoyment and challenge) may buffer the impact of rumination on employee well-being. In May 2020, we collected data at two time points among 501 employees of a large bank cooperation. At Time 1, participants reported about rumination about COVID-19 and playful work design, and 1 week later (Time 2), they reported depressive symptoms, exhaustion, and vigor. Results of hierarchical regression analyses showed that rumination about COVID-19 had a negative relationship with well-being (increased depressive symptoms and exhaustion, decreased vigor). Designing fun was negatively related to exhaustion and positively related to vigor, whereas designing competition was positively related to vigor. As hypothesised, designing fun (not designing competition) moderated the link between rumination and well-being. Rumination was positively related to depressive symptoms and exhaustion and negatively related to vigor when participants scored lower on designing fun. These findings suggest that employees may use playful work design to deal with ruminative thoughts about COVID-19.

Public Significance Statement

COVID-19 has disrupted daily life, and many people ruminate about the impact of the crisis. We argue and show that employees who repeatedly think about COVID-19 and the possible undesirable consequences can redesign their daily work tasks so that these tasks are more fun and employees protect their daily well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19, employee well-being, playful work design, proactive behaviour, rumination

Since the beginning of 2020, we have been inundated with news about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This has resulted in increased feelings of anxiety and depression (Polizzi et al., 2020). People who are confronted with negative life events are at risk for increased mental and physical health problems (Luhmann et al., 2012) because they tend to experience intrusive ruminative thoughts. Rumination refers to repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and on the possible implications of these symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). This impairs one's ability to solve problems and results in a range of negative consequences (Lyubomirsky & Tkach, 2003). In the present study, we

propose that individuals may use playful work design (PWD) to alleviate the impact of rumination about COVID-19 on well-being. PWD refers to the process of proactively creating conditions during work that foster enjoyment and challenge (Bakker et al., 2020; Scharp et al., 2019).

Although those who ruminate sometimes feel that rumination helps to manage their emotions, it is an ineffective regulation strategy. Rumination involves a mental representation of the negative event, which leads to short-term as well as prolonged stress reactions (Brosschot et al., 2006). Indeed, research has shown that rumination is negatively related to problem solving, motivation, and concentration (Smith & Alloy, 2009) and positively related to anxiety and depression (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2018). Building on this literature, we predicted that rumination about COVID-19 predicts depressive symptoms. In addition, we hypothesised that rumination about COVID-19 will undermine work-related energy (i.e., exhaustion and vigor) because rumination does not stop while working. Thus, rumination will deplete considerable cognitive and energetic resources. Accordingly, we proposed in Hypothesis 1 that rumination about COVID-19 is positively related to (a) depressive symptoms and (b) work-related exhaustion and negatively related to (c) vigor.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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The cathartic perspective of play proposes that engaging in play provides a person with relief (Des Camp & Thomas, 1993). When individuals play, they have an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude. Consequently, when playing, individuals detach from outside stressors and become completely absorbed in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In the present study, we propose that people may proactively redesign their work to be more playful. PWD refers to the process through which employees proactively modify their work activities (and optimise their personal experience) without changing the design of the job itself (Scharp et al., 2019). They may do so by making the work activity more fun, for example, by reframing a work situation to provide oneself and others with amusement (Barnett, 2007). Employees may also do so by creating a form of competition with themselves, for example, by trying to beat the clock when performing tasks. Since PWD may result in a range of personal and social resources (Bakker et al., 2020), we predicted that PWD is negatively related to (a) depressive symptoms and (b) exhaustion and positively related to (c) vigor (Hypothesis 2).

Finally, we propose that the use of PWD is particularly important when individuals ruminate a lot about the COVID-19 crisis. By making work activities more playful, individuals distract themselves from their thoughts and worries. Thus, PWD offers a respite from negative thoughts and may facilitate detachment from the COVID-19 crisis—which helps to recover (Sonntag, 2012). Moreover, PWD is particularly important when individuals ruminate about COVID-19 because designing the work tasks to be more fun is intrinsically motivating and may generate social resources (Bakker et al., 2020). For example, using exaggerated nonverbal behaviours and drama to joke with colleagues during a video call may lower job stress and satisfy the basic needs for autonomy and relatedness. In addition, designing tasks to be competitive (e.g., by using deadlines, beating the clock) will satisfy the needs for autonomy and competence and will foster a sense of mastery. These personal and social resources can be used to lower the impact of rumination about COVID-19. Thus, we predict that PWD moderates the relationship of rumination with well-being (depressive symptoms, exhaustion, vigor). This relationship is weaker for employees who score higher (vs. lower) on PWD (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study was conducted in May 2020, when The Netherlands was in a partial “lockdown” for several weeks. In collaboration

with the human resources department of a large banking corporation, we approached bank employees with the request to participate. Participants received an email with a link to the survey for 2 consecutive weeks. The survey started with an informed consent procedure. A total of 1,416 employees participated at Time 1 (T1), and 501 individuals also participated at Time 2 (T2; response rate = 35%). Two thirds of the panel group were female (63.7%). On average, participants were 45.37 years of age ($SD = 10.54$) and worked 33.57 hr a week ($SD = 4.28$). In total, 35 participants (7.0% of the panel group) had a supervisory position. Most of the participants (89.8%) worked from home. To test whether there were differences between the panel group and the group that only participated at T1, we conducted a series of chi-square tests and t tests. The groups were compared in terms of gender, age, number of work hours per week, leadership position, and work location. The results revealed no significant differences (all $ps > .05$). Ethical approval for this research was provided by a Dutch university (Reference 20-044a).

Measures

Participants rated all statements on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise indicated. We adjusted the time frame of the items so that they referred to the previous week. All scales showed acceptable reliabilities (see Table 1).

Rumination about COVID-19. Rumination about COVID-19 was assessed at T1 with a modified version of the rumination subscale of the cognitive emotion regulation questionnaire (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2018). We used the original items but made sure that each item specifically referred to COVID-19—for example, “This week, I was preoccupied with what I think and feel about the coronavirus.”

Playful work design. We used the 12-item instrument developed by Scharp et al. (2019) to assess playful work design at T1. The measure includes two dimensions, namely designing fun and designing competition. Example items are “This week, I used my imagination to make my job more interesting” (designing fun) and “This week, I tried to make my job a series of exciting challenges” (designing competition). Participants used a 7-point scale to respond to each statement (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*).

Exhaustion. Exhaustion was assessed at T2 with the eight-item subscale of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti et al., 2010). The scale includes four positively worded items and four negatively worded items, such as “This week, I often felt emotionally drained during my work.”

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between the Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Rumination (T1)	5.18	1.15	(.94)					
2. Designing fun (T1)	3.23	1.08	.12**	(.92)				
3. Designing competition (T1)	3.29	1.07	.15***	.66***	(.87)			
4. Depressive symptoms (T2)	1.81	0.87	.33***	-.05	-.04	(.80)		
5. Exhaustion (T2)	2.94	1.21	.22***	-.20***	-.07	.48***	(.91)	
6. Vigor (T2)	4.71	1.37	-.11*	.31***	.31***	-.46***	-.66***	(.88)

Note. Cronbach’s alpha on the diagonal. $N = 501$. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Depressive complaints. Depressive complaints were assessed at T2 with four items from the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Lewinsohn et al., 1997). An example item is “This week, I felt sad” (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*).

Vigor. Vigor was measured at T2 with the three-item subscale of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006). An example item is “This week, I felt bursting with energy.”

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between all study variables. To test whether employees working on location ruminated more about COVID-19 than those who worked from home, we conducted a *t* test. Results showed that there was no difference between the two groups in rumination, $t(499) = 0.74, p = .46$. Further, we compared leaders ($n = 35$) with followers ($n = 466$) regarding the frequency of use of playful work design. Results indicated that leaders ($M = 3.85$ on a 7-point scale) engaged somewhat more often in designing fun than followers ($M = 3.18$), $t(499) = 3.63, p < .001$. However, there was no significant difference between leaders ($M = 3.44$) and followers ($M = 3.28$) in terms of designing competition, $t(499) = 0.84, p = .40$.

Hypotheses Testing

According to Hypothesis 1, rumination is positively related to (a) depressive symptoms and (b) exhaustion and negatively related to (c) vigor. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a series of

hierarchical regression analyses in which rumination and the two PWD dimensions were entered in a first step, the two-way interaction terms in the second step, and the three-way interaction term in the third step (see Tables 2, 3, and 4). As predicted, rumination had a main effect on each of the T2 well-being indicators: depressive symptoms ($\beta = .35, p < .001$), exhaustion ($\beta = .24, p < .001$), and vigor ($\beta = -.16, p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 stated that PWD is negatively related to (a) depressive symptoms and (b) exhaustion and positively related to (c) vigor. Results in Tables 2–4 show a nuanced pattern: Designing fun and designing competition were unrelated to depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.06, p = .288$; $\beta = -.06, p = .302$), differentially related to exhaustion ($\beta = -.28, p < .001$; $\beta = .08, p = .176$), and each positively related to vigor ($\beta = .20, p < .001$; $\beta = .20, p < .001$), respectively. These findings offer only partial evidence for Hypothesis 2.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 proposed that PWD buffers the relationship of rumination with well-being (depressive symptoms, exhaustion, vigor). The results in Tables 2–4 show that the interaction effects were significant for designing fun but not for designing competition. Rumination was negatively related to well-being when designing fun was low rather than high. The beta weights for the three well-being indicators were depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.13, p = .029$), exhaustion ($\beta = -.19, p = .002$), and vigor ($\beta = .13, p = .03$). Additional examination of the significant interaction effects was carried out by graphically plotting the interactions and performing simple slope tests for participants scoring low versus high on designing fun.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between rumination and depressive symptoms was weaker among employees

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Results for Depressive Symptoms

Variable	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1							
Constant	1.81***	1.74	1.88	0.04		.12	.12***
Rumination	0.30***	0.23	0.38	0.04	.35***		
DF	-0.05	-0.15	0.04	0.05	-.06		
DC	-0.05	-0.15	0.05	0.05	-.06		
Step 2							
Constant	1.81***	1.73	1.90	0.04		.13	.01
Rumination	0.29***	0.22	0.37	0.04	.34***		
DF	-0.05	-0.15	0.05	0.05	-.06		
DC	-0.05	-0.14	0.05	0.05	-.06		
Rumination × DF	-0.09*	-0.18	-0.00	0.05	-.11*		
Rumination × DC	0.05	-0.04	0.14	0.05	.06		
DF × DC	0.00	-0.06	0.06	0.03	.00		
Step 3							
Constant	1.81***	1.73	1.90	0.04		.13	.00
Rumination	0.28***	0.20	0.36	0.04	.32***		
DF	-0.05	-0.15	0.05	0.05	-.06		
DC	-0.05	-0.15	0.04	0.05	-.06		
Rumination × DF	-0.11*	-0.20	-0.01	0.05	-.13*		
Rumination × DC	0.06	-0.04	0.15	0.05	.07		
DF × DC	0.00	-0.06	0.06	0.03	.00		
Rumination × DF × DC	0.02	-0.03	0.08	0.03	.04		

Note. $N = 501$. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; DF = designing fun; DC = designing competition.
* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Results for Exhaustion

Variable	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R ²	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1							
Constant	2.94***	2.84	3.04	0.05		.10	.10***
Rumination	0.29***	0.19	0.40	0.05	.24***		
DF	-0.33***	-0.47	-0.20	0.07	-.28***		
DC	0.09	-0.04	0.23	0.07	.08		
Step 2							
Constant	2.95***	2.84	3.07	0.06		.11	.01*
Rumination	0.27***	0.17	0.37	0.05	.22***		
DF	-0.33***	-0.47	-0.20	0.07	-.28***		
DC	0.10	-0.04	0.23	0.07	.08		
Rumination \times DF	-0.22***	-0.34	-0.09	0.06	-.19***		
Rumination \times DC	0.09	-0.04	0.21	0.06	.08		
DF \times DC	0.00	-0.08	0.09	0.04	.01		
Step 3							
Constant	2.95***	2.84	3.07	0.06		.11	.00
Rumination	0.27***	0.15	0.39	0.06	.22***		
DF	-0.33***	-0.47	-0.20	0.07	-.28***		
DC	0.10	-0.04	0.23	0.07	.08		
Rumination \times DF	-0.22**	-0.35	-0.08	0.07	-.19**		
Rumination \times DC	0.09	-0.04	0.22	0.07	.08		
DF \times DC	0.00	-0.08	0.09	0.04	.01		
Rumination \times DF \times DC	0.00	-0.08	0.08	0.04	.00		

Note. $N = 501$. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; DF = designing fun; DC = designing competition.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

who designed their work tasks to be more fun. Simple slope tests indicated a positive significant slope among participants low in designing fun (simple slope = 0.386, $t = 8.63$, $p < .001$) and a more gradual but still significant slope among participants high in designing fun (simple slope = 0.172, $t = 2.22$, $p = .027$). The pattern for exhaustion is illustrated in Figure 2. The relationship between rumination and exhaustion was significant for participants low in designing fun (simple slope = 0.487, $t = 5.82$, $p < .001$) and nonsignificant for participants high in designing fun (simple slope = 0.053, $t = 0.51$, $p = .614$). For vigor, we see the predicted opposite pattern in Figure 3. The relationship between rumination and vigor was negative and significant for participants low in designing fun (simple slope = -0.343, $t = -3.84$, $p < .001$) and nonsignificant for participants high in designing fun (simple slope = -0.013, $t = -0.12$, $p = .906$).

In sum, the findings indicate that Hypothesis 3 was supported for the designing fun dimension of PWD but not for the designing competition dimension. Finally, the Designing Fun \times Designing Competition interaction as well as the three-way interaction was not significant for any of the outcomes.

Additional Analyses

Common method variance may threaten the internal validity of findings when self-report questionnaires are used to collect data at the same time from the same participants. We therefore separated the predictors from the outcomes and measured them 1 week apart. Also, note that participants were unlikely to be guided by a cognitive map that included our difficult-to-visualize interaction effects (cf. Chang et al., 2010). Neverthe-

less, to check the robustness of the findings, we conducted a series of additional regression analyses in which we controlled for the T1 scores of the dependent variables. The results showed that the stability coefficients for depressive symptoms, exhaustion, and vigor were rather high, with β values of .70, .71, and .66 (all $ps < .001$). This means that a considerable part of the variance in the outcomes is explained by previous levels of the same variable. Consistent with this observation, the significant Rumination \times Designing Fun interaction effect disappeared for depressive symptoms ($\beta = -.05$, $p = .23$) and vigor ($\beta = .05$, $p = .23$). However, the interaction effect continued to be significant for exhaustion ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .01$). These results seem to indicate that the investigated well-being constructs are rather stable over a 1-week period and that designing fun is able to buffer an increase in exhaustion.

Discussion

This study shows that rumination about COVID-19 is negatively related to employee well-being. In addition, we found that playfully designing work tasks to be more fun can buffer the impact of rumination about COVID-19 on employee well-being. Employees who repeatedly experienced intrusive ruminative thoughts about the crisis but used their imagination, fantasy, and humour to proactively redesign their work tasks reported lower levels of depressive symptoms and exhaustion and higher levels of vigor. This finding is fully consistent with the central proposition of this study. By proactively changing their work activities to be more fun without changing the design of the job itself (Scharp et al., 2019), employees optimise their personal experience of work. PWD may take the form of using

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Results for Vigor

Variable	B	95% CI for B		SE B	β	R ²	ΔR ²
		LL	UL				
Step 1							
Constant	4.72***	4.61	4.83	0.06		.14	.14***
Rumination	-0.22***	-0.33	-0.11	0.06	-.16***		
DF	0.27***	0.12	0.42	0.08	.20***		
DC	0.28***	0.13	0.43	0.08	.20***		
Step 2							
Constant	4.74***	4.61	4.87	0.06		.15	.01
Rumination	-0.21***	-0.32	-0.09	0.06	-.15***		
DF	0.29***	0.14	0.45	0.08	.21***		
DC	0.27***	0.12	0.42	0.08	.20***		
Rumination × DF	0.14*	0.002	0.28	0.07	.11*		
Rumination × DC	-0.05	-0.19	0.09	0.07	-.04		
DF × DC	-0.05	-0.14	0.04	0.05	-.05		
Step 3							
Constant	4.74***	4.61	4.87	0.06		.15	.00
Rumination	-0.18***	-0.31	-0.05	0.07	-.13**		
DF	0.29***	0.14	0.45	0.08	.21***		
DC	0.28***	0.13	0.43	0.08	.20***		
Rumination × DF	0.17*	0.02	0.32	0.08	.13*		
Rumination × DC	-0.06	-0.21	0.08	0.07	-.05		
DF × DC	-0.05	-0.14	0.04	0.05	-.05		
Rumination × DF × DC	-0.04	-0.12	0.05	0.04	-.04		

Note. N = 501. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; DF = designing fun; DC = designing competition.
* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

humour in interactions with colleagues or of using fantasy when confronted with repetitive work activities. Actively using these tactics during work creates a more interesting work experience and satisfies basic psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The psychological and social resources generated by this self-determined behaviour can be used to buffer the impact of rumination about COVID-19. Additional analyses showed that this effect was most robust for exhaustion (vs. depressive symptoms and vigor) because the Rumination × Designing Fun interaction term was still significant after correcting for previous levels of exhaustion. This strengthens our belief that redesigning work to be

more playful influenced well-being. However, examining changes in outcome variables can reduce, yet not resolve, the ambiguity about the causal order of variables.

Interventions should focus on encouraging employees to playfully design their work activities so that they foster enjoyment. This can be done by organisations and their managers by providing autonomy support—so that employees are free to execute their work in a way that fits their personal preferences. In addition, organisations may offer (online) training interventions in which employees learn how to redesign their work to be more fun and more challenging. The present study has shown that some employ-

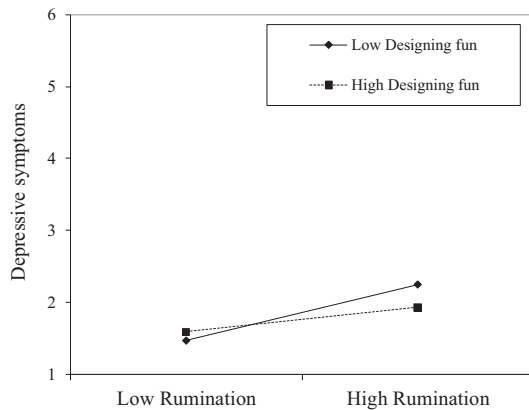


Figure 1. Interaction effect of rumination and designing fun on depressive symptoms.

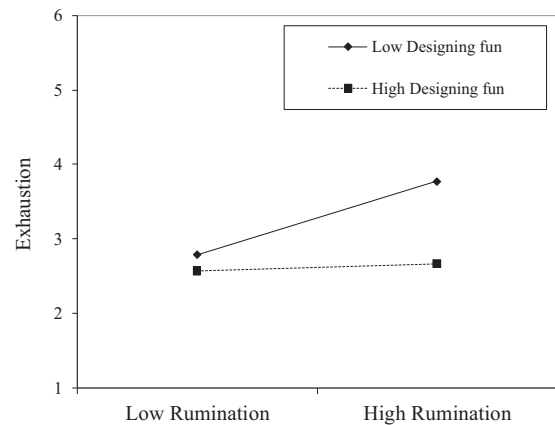


Figure 2. Interaction effect of rumination and designing fun on exhaustion.

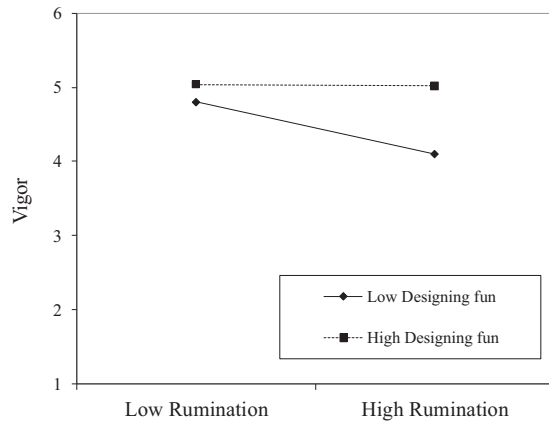


Figure 3. Interaction effect of rumination and designing fun on vigor.

ees have a natural inclination to engage in PWD and that leaders show more designing fun than followers. When individuals show such behaviours, they generally feel more invigorated and less exhausted. Moreover, they can use the energy that is mobilized to better deal with ruminative thoughts about COVID-19. Understanding effective ways of coping with the threat of COVID-19 will help mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on individuals' well-being.

Résumé

La pandémie de COVID-19 a perturbé la vie normale et engendré un stress considérable. Les pensées récurrentes sur la COVID-19 sont l'une des principales raisons de cette réduction du mieux-être. La présente étude recourait à la théorie de la proactivité pour postuler que le travail ludique (c.-à-d., le processus grâce auquel les employés créent, de façon proactive, des conditions qui favorisent le plaisir et le défi pendant les activités de travail) peut atténuer les effets néfastes des pensées récurrentes sur le mieux-être des employés. En mai 2020, nous avons recueilli des données à deux périodes différentes parmi 501 employés d'une grande coopérative bancaire. À la période 1, les participants devaient donner leur impression sur les pensées récurrentes au sujet de la COVID-19 et sur le travail ludique; une semaine plus tard (période 2), ils devaient rapporter leurs symptômes dépressifs ainsi que leurs niveaux d'épuisement et d'énergie. Les résultats des analyses de régression hiérarchiques ont démontré que les pensées récurrentes à propos de la COVID-19 avaient une incidence négative sur le mieux-être (augmentation des symptômes de dépression, épuisement accru, moins d'énergie). Le travail ludique était en corrélation négative avec l'épuisement et en corrélation positive avec l'énergie, tandis que le travail compétitif était en corrélation positive avec l'énergie. Comme il avait été postulé, le travail ludique (et non le travail compétitif) atténuait le lien entre les pensées récurrentes et le mieux-être. Les pensées récurrentes étaient en corrélation positive avec les symptômes de dépression et avec l'épuisement, et en corrélation négative avec l'énergie, lorsque les participants affichaient des scores inférieurs relativement au travail ludique. Ces constatations donnent à penser que les employés peuvent utiliser le travail

ludique pour gérer les pensées récurrentes au sujet de la COVID-19.

Mots-clés : COVID-19, mieux-être des employés, travail ludique (*playful work design*), comportement proactif, pensées récurrentes.

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- Received July 14, 2020
Revision received September 20, 2020
Accepted September 22, 2020 ■