

Humor as a Cost-Effective Means of Stress Management

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U.S. workers consume 15 tons of aspirin a day. One in four workers suffers from an anxiety related illness. Soon job stress may be the #1 reason for worker's compensation. "Terminal professionalism" seems to be a sign of the times. But taking oneself too seriously can have some unpleasant side effects.

WHAT IS STRESS? Stress is the body's response to any demand or pressure. These demands are called stressors. Stressors include major life events, such as death of a loved one or divorce. They entail chronic strains such as living in an abusive relationship. Stressors also consist of occasional strains, such as getting a flat tire in heavy traffic. (Source: Fact Sheet HE-2089, 11-91, Florida Cooperative Extension Service)

RESPONSE TO STRESS: Stress requires the body to make adjustments physically, psychologically, socially and even spiritually to maintain the necessary balance for survival. Too much stress (distress) can manifest itself in a number of ways.

Psychologically, one who is experiencing stress may undergo increased anxiety and tension. Stress is also manifested in such ways as moodiness, irritability, inability to concentrate, crying, changes in eating patterns, changes in sleeping patterns, decreased libido, worrying, mood swings, frustration, nervousness, and depression. He or she may exhibit a negative attitude, low productivity, confusion, lack of creativity, lethargy, forgetfulness or boredom.

Socially, stress may be exhibited by isolating oneself from others, loneliness, or fewer contacts with friends. Communication may be hampered due to preoccupation with stressful events or impeded by negative mood swings, such as lashing out at others, nagging or clamming up.

The physiology of stress affects all major body systems. Breathing tends to be more rapid but shallow, not allowing for full air exchange deep in the lungs. The heart rate quickens and is accompanied by an increase in blood pressure. The person may experience a feeling of their heart "racing" or "jumping out of the chest." The circulatory system exhibits vasoconstriction with the blood supply being shifted to muscles and major organs. "Cold hands" are often an excellent indicator of one's stress level.

During stressful events, an increase in epinephrine is seen via the sympathetic nervous system. The immune system becomes depressed resulting in an increased susceptibility to viral and bacterial infections. These can range from a minor cold to a major illness.

During a stressful experience, muscles become tense, preparing for the "Fight or Flight" response. A person may develop headaches or a variety of muscle aches, clenching of the jaws or grinding of the teeth, tight neck, shoulder and back muscles and clenched fists. As for the digestive system, the person may encounter a variety of symptoms ranging from cold sores around the mouth to nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea.

Nearly everyone is aware of the rising costs of health care in this country. These increasing costs are an escalating burden on employers. The Wellness Councils of America found that the average cost of providing medical benefits for one employee in the United States in 1992 was approximately \$4000. By the year 2000, this estimate will balloon to nearly \$12,000 per employee. These rising health care costs are cutting into the corporate bottom line. It is estimated that nearly 50 percent of corporate profits are devoured by employee health care costs. (Source: Healthy, Wealthy and Wise--Fundamentals of Workplace Health Promotion, Wellness Councils of America, Omaha, Nebraska, 1993)

Wellness and health promotion at the worksite has seen significant growth in recent years. Recent and long-term studies have shown that worksite health promotion programs have made an impact on significant decreases in health care costs. The good news is that humor is a cost effective and simple way to ward off many of the detrimental effects of stress.

WHAT IS HUMOR? Humor is that which lends itself to laughing, smiling, or amusement. It is considered a positive emotion and may be used synonymously with a sense of joy. It has characteristics that make it a viable coping mechanism. That which appeals to one person's sense of humor may be offensive to others. Everyone's sense of humor is unique.

According to Dr. Vera Robinson, author of *Humor and the Health Professions*, there are three functions of humor: psychological, social, and communication. Psychologically, humor acts as a major healthy coping mechanism, relieving anxiety and tension. It serves as an outlet for hostility and anger, provides a healthy escape from reality, and lightens heaviness related to critical illness, trauma, disfigurement, and death. When employees are working on a job that is repetitive, humor can increase length of time on task by reducing tension and boredom. And studies show that humor doesn't detract from tasks requiring increased concentration. Granted things can sometimes get out of hand. Therefore, it's important to also have a high performance norm and high expectations of the staff.

Socially, humor lessens the hierarchy between individuals, establishes rapport, and decreases social distance. Humor solidifies a group. Victor Borge once said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." Workers that can share a laugh develop rapport. Much office humor is "inside" humor or "you had to be there" humor. While this kind of humor can make folks feel like part of the gang, it can also make others feel excluded. Be careful that this humor is used constructively, and not to shut out others.

As for communication, humor helps convey information. It opens the door for communication by allowing one to bring up a secretly serious subject to see how it will be received while providing an 'out' such as "I was only joking." Humor gains and holds the listener's attention. Over 80% of conflict results from problems with communication. Humor can help establish rapport and neutralize emotionally charged interpersonal events.

There are also physiological effects related to humor and laughter. For example, laughter increases respiratory activity and oxygen exchange. During "belly laughter," air is inhaled deep into the lungs and forced out at high speeds. Smokers or those with respiratory conditions frequently experience coughing after laughter, continuing the good air exchange.

As for the cardiovascular system, laughter stimulates one's heart rate and blood pressure followed by a relaxation phase that is accompanied by a decrease in both heart rate and blood pressure. According to Dr. William Fry, a leading researcher in the field of psychoneuroimmunology, laughter provides an excellent cardiovascular workout, which requires no special equipment and no limit to the number of times in which it can be used. (Source: "Physiology of Laughter" in *Humor and Aging*.) Laughter also produces vasodilatation, putting color and warmth into the face and hands.

In the immune system there is an increase in Immunoglobulin A, which fights upper respiratory tract insults and infections. There is also an increased spontaneous lymphocyte blastogenesis resulting in an increase in the number and activity of natural killer cells, which attack viral infected cells and some types of cancer cells and tumors. An increase in activated T cells (lymphocytes) is seen, as well as an increase in gamma interferon; an increase in Immunoglobulin G and Complement C. (Source: *Humor & Health Journal* 5, (5), "PNI Research Summary" p.6)

Other systems also demonstrate changes during humor and laughter. Muscles experience a stimulation phase followed by a relaxation phase that results in decreased muscle tension, often resulting in diminished pain. In the sympathetic nervous system there is an increase in the production of catecholamines resulting in increased levels of alertness and memory, enhancing learning and creativity. There is also a measurable decrease in stress hormones such as epinephrine and dopamine. Laughter stimulates both hemispheres of the brain at the same time, coordinating all the senses and producing a unique level of consciousness and a high level of brain processing. Internal organs are massaged resulting in increased peristalsis and improved digestion. Tears of laughter (and grief) provide an exocrine response, carrying away toxins found in cells under stress.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE HUMOR: While nothing is black and white, humor can basically be categorized by that which is constructive and that which is destructive. Destructive humor lowers self-esteem, belittles others, excludes others, creates tension, stimulates laughter at someone, perpetuates a stereotype, creates barriers, creates defensiveness, closes off creative thought, and focuses on negatives. Constructive humor raises self-esteem, is supportive, includes people, reduces tension, stimulates laughter with others, confronts stereotypic ideas, breaks down barriers, relaxes people, stimulates new ideas, and creates energy and a positive atmosphere. When promoting humor as a means of stress management, the emphasis should be on constructive humor.

Because everyone's sense of humor is highly individualized, one does risk offending others when using humor. However, there are some basic guidelines to help reduce the risk. Dr. Christian Hageseth, author of *The Laughing Place*, suggests that there are four components to effective, positive humor: relationship, rapport, setting, and timing. When using humor with others, do they understand who you are and what relationship you have with them; such as employee/boss, teacher/student, parent/child/, staff/customer? Do they have a sense of rapport or a feeling of safety with you? As for setting, it's important to remember that anyone who can hear, see, or experience the humor is part of the setting, regardless of whether or not that person was an intended member of the audience. Timing is twofold. First there is the timing of humor in relationship to an event. At the peak of a crisis, humor will fall flat. While most humor is in some way associated with some type of pain, some time will have to elapse before it is found to be funny. The amount of time necessary is unique to each experience. Timing is also important in the communication of a humorous joke or story. The more it is practiced, the easier timing becomes.

TAKING ACTION:

Set the tone: If you're in a position of leadership, give the staff permission to have fun. "Walk your talk." Be willing to overcome the fear of foolishness. Don't be afraid to look a little silly: a goofy hat, tie, button, socks, etc.

Set the environment: Humorous posters, memos, and signs can lighten the surroundings. Bulletin boards displaying cartoons, jokes, and funny notes don't take a big investment but can provide an abundance of entertainment. Create a positive working atmosphere at the desks with toys such as Legos, Nerf guns, Silly Putty, Koosh balls and hula-hoops. Add some comic activities or theme days to the calendar. Encourage everyone to be involved: management, various departments, volunteers, patients and family members. A M.A.S.H. day where everyone dresses up like the characters on the favorite television show by the same name, or a western theme where everyone dons cowboy boots and bandannas can lighten the atmosphere for staff and clients. A little competition between floors or departments might increase interest.

Set the pace: If you agree that humor in the workplace is a valuable idea, don't delay taking action. No one is suggesting that management or staff attempts to be a stand-up comic or laugh constantly. What is suggested is that attempts are made to use humor routinely (see sidebar for additional ideas). Whatever forms of humor are chosen, it's important to practice them on a regular basis. When humor happens by accident, there is much to gain. But there are too many benefits to let humor happen strictly by chance-- make humor happen by choice, today.

GETTING STARTED!

Studies confirm that you gain many more benefits by being an active participant in humor rather than a passive observer. Here's some ideas that will put humor to work for you!

- Make a list of things that are fun for you and do one item daily
- See a movie of your choice (via theater or video, but popcorn either way)
- Have a marshmallow fight (you can eat the left over ammunition)
- Participate in a massage train (if you make a circle, no one gets left out)
- Take a joke break (these can be programmed into your computer)
- Practice standing ovations for yourself and co-workers
- Read something for enjoyment
- Write a silly limerick
- Send a humorous card (earn bonus points if for no special occasion)
- Leave a humorous message on your own answering machine
- Keep a humor file at your desk and refer to it daily
- Wear a funny button or pin
- Lighten up your work environment (cartoons/props/photos/toys/etc.)
- Can the Muzak for something fun and upbeat
- Plan a theme day (dress down day/wild west/beach day/etc.)
- Eat fun food (Snickers bars, Ho Hos, Cracker Jacks, etc.)
- Try your hand at juggling (scarves are the easiest to learn)
- Sing silly songs
- Buy your very own humorous prop, like a magic wand or goofy glasses
- Share your most embarrassing moment
- Start your day with 20 seconds of laughter (fake it till you make it)
- Hold a cartoon caption contest
- Have a good laugh-- at yourself

FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR

PSYCHOLOGICAL: Acts as a major coping mechanism; relieves anxiety and tension, serves as outlet for hostility and anger, provides healthy escape from reality, and lightens heaviness related to critical illness, trauma, disfigurement, and death.

SOCIAL: Lessens the hierarchy between individuals, establishes rapport, and decreases social distance.

COMMUNICATION: Helps convey information; opens the door for communication by allowing one to bring up a secretly serious subject to see how it will be received while providing an 'out' such as "I was only joking."

PHYSIOLOGY OF LAUGHTER

RESPIRATORY SYSTEM: Increases respiratory activity and oxygen exchange.

CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM: Stimulates heart rate and blood pressure followed by a relaxation phase; vasodilatation.

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM: Increases production of catecholamines resulting in increased levels of alertness and memory, enhances learning and creativity.

IMMUNE SYSTEM: Immunoglobulin A found in significantly increased levels of saliva with stimulation of humor and laughter, increased spontaneous lymphocyte blastogenesis, a natural killer cell activity.

MUSCLE SYSTEM: Stimulates muscles and relaxes muscle tension, often resulting in diminished pain.

BRAIN: Laughter stimulates both hemispheres at the same time, coordinating all the senses and producing a unique level of consciousness and a high level of brain processing.

DIGESTIVE TRACT: Internal organs massaged resulting in increased peristalsis, improved digestion.

TEARS (of laughter and grief): Provides exocrine response, carrying away toxins found in cells under stress.

(Originally published in *Managing Employee Benefits*, (1998).
Humor as a cost-effective means of stress management. Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 74-78.)