



# HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON  
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

## A LITTLE LEVITY BALANCING HUMOUR WITH WORK

Injecting humour into our lives, particularly our work lives, is just what the doctor ordered. A little levity can go a long way in helping employees get the job done in a positive and relaxed spirit. Laughing doesn't just feel good, it's good for you. It helps relieve stress, tension and anxiety. It increases heart rate and blood circulation, lowers blood pressure, stimulates the digestive tract, boosts the immune system, cleans the respiratory system, reduces muscle tension and increases the release of endorphins, which are natural painkillers.

In addition to the physical impact humour has on us, there are far-reaching psychological benefits as well. When you laugh about something with someone, you're sharing. And that's a valuable human endeavour. Feeling part of a supportive environment - where people are serious about the benefits of humour - can build teamwork, breed creativity and encourage commitment. Laughing at the workplace can instantly dispel negativity. And it can help us get through challenging problems and conflicts.

### **Humour and humans**

According to the Leisure Information Network ([www.lin.ca](http://www.lin.ca)), the notion that humour and laughter play an important role in protecting the individual from stress and enhancing one's sense of well-being has been well documented. For example, Freud viewed a sense of humour as the highest of the defence mechanisms, describing it as "a rare and precious gift". Similarly, Dixon (1980) suggested that humour might have evolved in humans as a cognitive alternative to stress, allowing the

individual to take a more playful perspective on a stressful event and thereby reduce the often harmful emotional consequences.

In order to gain some understanding of the frequency and types of humorous encounters that people experience over the course of a typical day, continues LIN, and also to examine the relationship between daily humour and emotional well-being, Mannell and McMahon (1982) had 31 university students keep a "humour diary," recording all experiences of humour for one day. The subjects were also asked to complete self-report mood measures in the morning and evening of the same day. These subjects reported an average of 18.1 daily humour incidents, 13.4 of which involved overt laughter. In addition, the frequency of humour incidents in the day was significantly related to changes in moods from morning to evening. More specifically, subjects who had more experiences of humour during the day showed an increase in positive moods such as vigour and enthusiasm, and a decrease in negative moods such as anxiety, fatigue, and hostility. These findings supported the hypothesis that humour as a form of playfulness contributes to psychological and emotional well-being.

### **What humour works?**

The kind of humour that works best in the workplace is uplifting, positive and respectful. Funny personal stories or well-timed interjections of humour, more than punchlines or practical jokes, will add to almost any situation. Think of the last time you laughed at work. Was it a surprising comment from someone that helped turn an intense meeting into a relaxed one? Was it a seminar speaker who broke the ice

with a personal anecdote? How about a colleague who popped his head into your office with a tidbit from his latest comedy of errors. Or the boss who made you laugh when demonstrating her cat's penchant for perfectly executed surprise attacks on humans.

For most of us, being together about eight hours a day brings an equal amount of challenges and opportunities. Helping change the environment to one in which we prefer to spend our time can help decrease the challenges and increase the opportunities. When faced with personal conflicts or dilemmas, we find ways to resolve them - whether by addressing the situation on our own or getting support from colleagues, supervisors or through EAP counselling and services. And to keep the environment positive and cheerful, we can deliberately seek out or create random acts of humour.

## What's risky?

Organizations that not only tolerate but encourage laughing out loud tend to be happy, productive places. But, like in most things, balance is important. For humour in the workplace to be a positive thing, there must also exist a great degree of sensitivity - to each other and to the company. Humour is highly personal and there are many factors that can lead someone to interpret a simple joke as an offensive attack. The key is to be aware that not everyone shares our sense of humour.

If you're planning on sharing a joke and anticipate a widespread positive response, think first that, unless you know your co-workers extremely well, there's a good chance someone in the group may surprise you with their reaction. It will be more comfortable for you and those around you if you rely on spreading humour through your own good nature and energy, than on potentially offensive jokes. When it comes to questionable humour, it is always better to be safe than sorry. And, of course, racist, sexist or derogatory comments and jokes aren't just unfair, they can be illegal, so should be avoided altogether.

## A little decorum

Workplace culture is big factor in dictating our

behaviour. Sharing a laugh can be just as acceptable in the executive offices as it is in the lunch room, but decorum always takes precedence. Our first priority at work is the job at hand and respecting company policies, but that doesn't mean there can't be room for a little levity as well. We don't want to be caught bellowing out inappropriate guffaws just as potential customers are touring the plant, nor do we want them to think we're a completely humourless bunch. A good balance of respect, appropriateness and human spirit should guide our own behaviour and the organization's expectations.

## More humour please

- Start a humour library. Keep a collection of comic strips, funny articles, quotes or jokes- anything that makes you laugh. Then when you're having a bad day or a stressful moment, look through your library to get you - and perhaps your colleagues - chuckling again.
- When it comes to workplace learning, look for training films that combine humour with instruction (John Cleese of Monty Python's Flying Circus fame produces such films).
- Strike a Good Humour Committee at work. Arrange for Charlie Chaplin films at lunch or a funny pet picture wall in the cafeteria or a collection of funny books to lend out or a week-long lunch-hour talent contest (always good for a laugh!).
- Make a note of when you're laughing at work. Try to repeat the situation for next time.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors. No problem is too big or too small to bring to your EAP. We're here to help - 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

All contact between you and your counsellor is confidential.

**English Service:** 1-800-387-4765  
**French Service:** 1-800-361-5676  
**General Information:** 1-888-814-1328