

# Humor – It Works!!!

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“A good laugh is like manure to a farmer—  
it doesn’t do any good until you spread it around.”

– Michael Pritchard

## Educational objectives

The purpose of this program topic is to help participants:

- ☺ understand the therapeutic value of humor  
understand how humor can enhance the everyday  
quality of life
- ☺ learn how to use humor effectively
- ☺ learn how to incorporate humor into everyday living

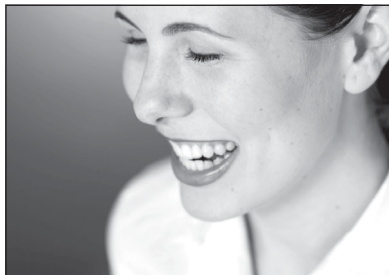
## Introduction

Have you ever heard someone say, “She sure has a good sense of humor”? What did they mean by *humor*? Webster’s Dictionary defines humor as a “quality of imagination, quick to perceive the ludicrous or to express oneself in an amusing way.” Other terms used to define humor are *fun*, *caprice*, and *state of mind*. When we speak of humor, we most often are thinking of disposition, state of mind, amusement, and – yes – laughter. In fact, we often use the term *humor* interchangeably with laughter. The word *humor* comes from a Latin word meaning liquid or fluid. In ancient Greece, a person’s disposition or temperament was believed to be controlled by four humors or fluids. If these fluids were in proper balance, a person was said to be “in a good humor.”

## The Importance of Humor

Your sense of humor is a powerful tool in improving your daily mood and emotional state. Humor helps you maintain a healthy lifestyle. It is increasingly promoted by health care professionals.

Benefits of humor were recognized by the ancients. Kings and rulers hired court jesters to entertain them. Perhaps they didn’t put a label on this action, but they

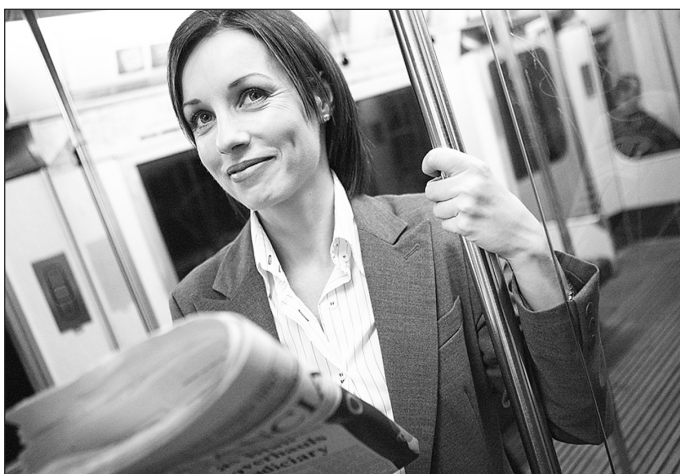


enjoyed it and they knew it made them feel better. It wasn’t until the early 1900s that scientists began to study the physiological and psychological effects of humor on the human species.

The first person who really brought the benefits of humor into public awareness was Norman Cousins, editor of *The Saturday Review*. In 1964, Cousins was diagnosed with a crippling, extremely painful form of arthritis. Cousins, ignoring his doctor’s less-than-hopeful diagnosis, began looking for ways to relieve stress. He found that if he watched funny movies for 30 minutes, he could enjoy two hours of restful pain-free sleep. He documented his experiences in *Anatomy of an Illness* in 1969. However, until the *New England Journal of Medicine* published Cousins’ case study in 1969, therapeutic uses of humor had not been considered.

Another example of the therapeutic value of humor can be seen in the work of West Virginia’s Dr. Hunter “Patch” Adams. Adams practiced his humor by wearing a clown costume while visiting patients. In 1999, a movie was made about Patch Adams. Hospitals, doctors, and nurses are now using humor techniques with their patients. Adams, who continues to promote the healing power of humor, states, “Joy is more important than any drug.”

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## How Humor Works

Good humor or laughter can be therapeutic in a number of ways. Humor works to improve physical reactions in our bodies, and humor also helps us in everyday experiences. Researchers at Loma Linda University in California have published the results of their studies on laughter. According to their studies, laughter can lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, increase muscle relaxation, enhance the immune system, decrease pain, and provide a general sense of well-being.

### Humor works to help in:

- ☺ **Reducing Stress** – In a 1988 study at Loma Linda University, researchers noted a significant drop in the stress hormones cortisol and adrenalin in participants who watched a 60-minute funny video. Reduction of stress hormones is important because those hormones can affect the immune system and weaken its ability to deter diseases.
- ☺ **Reducing Pain** – Laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain killers. Studies have shown that surgical patients who had humor as part of their postsurgical treatment had less perception of pain as compared with patients not having humor in their treatment.
- ☺ **Improving Cardiovascular System** – Laughter increases the heart rate and the breathing rate, bringing oxygen into the body. This stimulates the circulatory system.
- ☺ **Lowering Blood Pressure** – With an improved cardiovascular system, lymphatic fluids are increased, which promotes lowering of the blood pressure.
- ☺ **Promoting a Sense of Well-being** – When a person hears a joke, the brain processes it through both hemispheres before laughter begins. Laughing in a tense situation may be difficult, but laughter can put the situation into perspective and provide temporary relief from worry. A sense of humor helps us process and appreciate life's moments that can provide joy and delight. Bill Cosby has made the statement, "If you can laugh at it, you can survive it."

*"Two things reduce prejudice: education and laughter."*

– Laurence J. Peters

## Benefits of Humor

### Physical health benefits:

- ☺ Stronger immune system
- ☺ Improved cardiovascular health
- ☺ Reduced stress hormones
- ☺ Reduced pain
- ☺ Lower blood pressure

### Mental health benefits:

- ☺ More sense of control
- ☺ Increased joy and happiness
- ☺ Reduced anger and anxiety
- ☺ More positive, optimistic mood

### Leadership and work-related benefits:

- ☺ Improved conflict management
- ☺ Easier team-building
- ☺ Better communication skills
- ☺ Less stress
- ☺ Improved morale
- ☺ Higher productivity

*"Humor is something that causes a tickling of the brain. Laughter was invented to scratch it."*

– Hugh Foot

## Using Humor Effectively

For humor to be effective, it must not be hurtful or offensive to others. Laughing with ourselves and others, and not at others, is the key using humor effectively. In other words, make fun of the situation, not the person.

Humor occurs when the response to a situation is very different than the anticipated response. Laughter loosens our fixed thoughts and enables us to see something beyond the ordinary as amusing.

Humor can be used to "break the ice" in a tense or serious situation. Humorous situations can uplift the mood of individuals or groups. After visiting a terminally ill relative, several family members were talking when one asked if anyone had a stick of gum. A cousin searched her purse and said, quite seriously, "No, but I have a suppository." For a few minutes, the seriousness of the situation was relaxed. The family could embrace one another while laughing at an unexpected response to a simple question.



Successful motivational speakers know that laughter is the shortest distance between two people, and they use their personal experiences to bridge that distance. They use personal experiences that other people can relate to, and they make fun of the situation. We remember information delivered to us with humor much longer than information shared without a humorous point of reference.

*“Humor can be like salt – a little can be good, but too much is bitter.”*

Humor can also spread goodwill. Humor is a way of unifying a group – shared humorous experience increases the bonds between families, friends, or co-workers – as it creates rapport with others. Ben Franklin said it well, “Joy is not in things; it is in us.”

Joke-telling is not the only way to transmit humor. Here are three tips to get you going:

- ☺ **Put humor in your surroundings.** Have light-hearted sayings on posters, on calendars or self-stick notes, or in frames on your walls.
- ☺ **Use humor as a tool rather than as a weapon.** Laughing with others builds confidence, brings people together, and pokes fun at our common dilemmas. If humor is Appropriate, Timely, and Tasteful (AT&T), you can “reach out and touch” people positively with humor.
- ☺ **Life doesn’t need to be boring or dull.** It should be fun. Build humor into your family culture. Tell funny stories on yourself. Let your children and grandchildren know that it is OK to laugh at yourself.

## Make Humor Part of Life

How can you make humor a part of your everyday life? Leigh Anne Jasheway, author, stand-up comic, and stress management expert, suggests more than a dozen steps you can take to replace stress in your life with laughter in her book, *Don’t Get Mad, Get Funny!*



Using laughter to de-stress can be an inexpensive way to put humor in your daily life. Start by making funny friends. Identify the people you know

who use humor often and well. Maintain regular contact with those people. When you feel overstressed, make sure that you seek advice from one or more funny friends.

All of us have funny stories to tell. The best way to hold onto your funny life stories, and those of close friends and relatives, is to write them down. One glance at the stories in your collection will reveal that they almost always deal

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with situations that were embarrassing or “not funny” when they happened, but they are now among your most treasured and humorous memories.

### Activity:

Have each member share an embarrassing experience.

“Joke Formulas” can provide structure and help us see the jokes life plays on us. Some of these formulas, with examples, follow.

- ☺ **Comparison:** Compare something to something out of the ordinary or just funny in nature.  
Example – “I’m so agitated I could wash a load of laundry in my sleep.”
- ☺ **Definition:** Redefine a word comedically.  
Example: “Stress – is what happens when your brain says no and your mouth says, ‘Of course, I’d love to.’”
- ☺ **Lists:** Think of phrases or words on a theme, some or all of which are funny.  
Example: Top 3 Ways to Lose 10 Pounds Overnight  
3. Donate a 10-pound bag of sugar to a food pantry.  
2. Move somewhere with less gravity.  
1. Donate a few organs.

**Activity:** Ask participants to use one of the joke formulas to write an example of the formula.

## Resources

- Goodman, Joel, *Laffirmations: 1001 Ways to Add Humor to Your Life*, Health Communications, Inc., 1995.
- Goodman, Joel, *Taking Humor Seriously*, The Humor Project, Inc., ([www.humorproject.com](http://www.humorproject.com))
- Jasheway, Leigh Anne, *Don’t Get Mad, Get Funny!*, Whole Persons Associates, Inc., 1996.
- McGhee, Paul E., PhD, *They Who Laugh, Last, Health, Humor and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*, 1999 (<http://laughterremedy.com>)
- Warnock, Peter, “You Don’t Have to Be Funny to Use Humor,” *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1988.
- Humor Therapy ([www.holistic-online.com](http://www.holistic-online.com))
- Humor: How Does it Work? ([www.holistic-online.com](http://www.holistic-online.com))
- Laughter Is Really Good Medicine ([www.ohioline.osu.edu](http://www.ohioline.osu.edu))
- The Benefits of Humor ([www.laughterremedy.com](http://www.laughterremedy.com))