

THE
LAUGHTER ISSUE

Ode

FOR INTELLIGENT OPTIMISTS

Why we laugh

- » How laughter evolved—and how it makes us human
- » Why laughing at work makes serious business sense
- » Medicinal mirth: The health benefits of hilarity
- » Does God have a sense of humor?

Why is this woman laughing?
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a funny thing happened

on the way to

the office

Laughing at work keeps workers—and workplaces—healthy.

By Nancy Mann Jackson

JOHN MORREALL, PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS studies at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, tells the story of a police officer who responded to a domestic violence call after having completed a course of humor training. As the officer walked to the front door, she heard the sound of an argument inside. Suddenly a television crashed through the window, landing in the yard. She knocked on the door. "Who is it?" yelled an angry voice. "TV repair," the officer replied. Her riposte caught the quarreling husband and wife off guard, amused them and made handling a tense situation easier.

Dealing with volatile situations like domestic violence is all in a day's work for police officers. But these days—as people have watched their investments evaporate,

their retirement plans disappear and the unemployment rate rise—even the most serene work environments have become stressful. By letting loose with a little laughter, employees can do themselves a big favor. "That wonderful 'Whew!' we experience after laughing hard isn't just a feeling," Morreall, also a humor consultant, writes in *Humor Works*. "While we are laughing, muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure rise, but when we stop, they all drop to levels lower than before we started laughing. And this relaxation lasts up to 45 minutes." Funny as it may seem, laughter is crucial to keeping workers—and workplaces—healthy.

Laughter exercises the lungs and increases blood circulation. It triggers hormones called "catecholamines" that

heighten alertness and releases endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. Laughter enhances the immune system, helping us prevent and fight disease, even activating some of the same pleasure centers in the brain as cocaine and sex. Plus, laughter reduces stress. What's not to like?

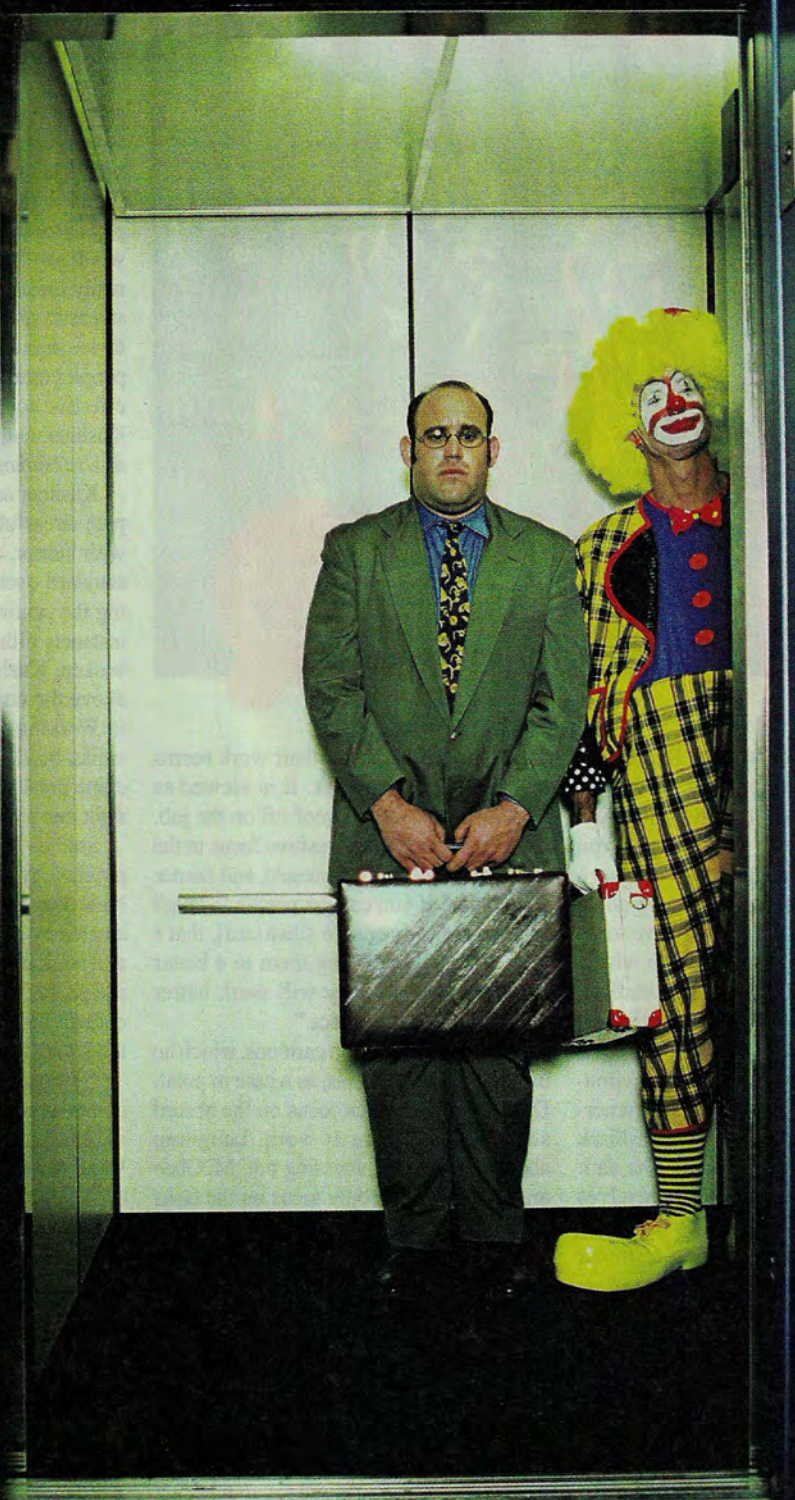
Stress is the No. 1 reason for workers' compensation claims. Stressed-out employees tend to be less productive and make more mistakes. And as stress depresses the immune system, people become more vulnerable to illness and consequently miss more days of work. Laughter acts as a buffer against stress. (See "The medicine of mirth" on page 46.)

"Even if you're lucky enough that you still have a job," says Paul McGhee, humor researcher and president of the humor

EMERGENCY OPERATIONS
IF YOU ARE TRAPPED IN AN ELEVATOR
DO NOT PANIC
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO FORCE THE DOORS OPEN
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO JUMP OR LEAN AGAINST THE DOORS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO UNLATCH THE DOORS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A STAIRWAY
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A STORAGE AREA
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A SHELTER
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO SLEEP
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO EAT OR DRINK
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO SMOKE
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE FIREARMS OR OTHER DANGEROUS WEAPONS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE FLAMMABLE OR EXPLOSIVE MATERIALS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE LIQUIDS OR GASES
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER HAZARDOUS MATERIALS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER VALUABLE ITEMS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL BELONGINGS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL EFFECTS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL PROPERTY
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL EFFECTS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL PROPERTY
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL EFFECTS
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO USE THE ELEVATOR AS A PLACE TO STORE OTHER PERSONAL PROPERTY

IN CASE OF FIRE
USE STAIRWAY
FOR EXIT

DO NOT USE
ELEVATOR





THE TRIKE RACE, ORGANIZED BY THE FUN DEPARTMENT, MAKES LAUGHTER COMPANY POLICY.

consulting firm The Laughter Remedy in Wilmington, Delaware, “you have more work to do than you used to and more anxiety hanging over you because you could be next. Employees have to have a lot of emotional resilience if they’re going to be effective, and employers have to do something to help them deal with what’s being thrown at them. There’s all kinds of evidence showing that humor is effective in doing that.”

People who work in high-stress environments, such as police officers or emergency health-care providers, develop black humor as a coping mechanism. The dark laughs help people distance themselves from negative emotions so they can function properly. McGhee believes a similar process can be useful in the office and on the shop floor. “It’s the same idea today in the corporate environment. A life may not be on the line, but people are feeling that same level of anxiety.” McGhee’s remedy? Laugh it off. He conducts workshops and gives talks about how humor affects productivity and how to develop humor skills.

IT’S NOT ALWAYS AN EASY SELL, ACCORDING TO MCGHEE. “We think of play as the opposite of work,” he says. “For a lot of companies, inviting people to play or bring

their sense of humor to their work seems incompatible with work. It is viewed as inviting employees to goof off on the job. But people need some positive focus in the midst of all the work demands, and humor can do that. If you can get people to laugh in response to [negative situations], that’s very effective in getting them to a better emotional place. They will work better once they get to that place.”

McGhee cites Dilbert cartoons, which he uses in his presentations, as a case in point. Dilbert cartoons often focus on the absurd situations that arise at work. Laughing about it, instead of stressing out, McGhee argues, can help people focus on the tasks at hand and be more efficient in getting them done. “In talking to people after programs, I often find that they have collected a few Dilbert cartoons ... and put them on a wall near their desks or in a place where no one else can see them,” McGhee says. “With this reminder to lighten up, they can laugh—at least mentally, if not out loud—at their own situations.”

Laughter isn’t only good for your health; it’s a social lubricant. We all encounter work situations in which tension is high because of looming deadlines, office rivalries, commercial pressure—or all of the above. That tension can be eased with a funny

story or a self-deprecatory remark, which is why many managers kick off meetings with a joke. Even office bullies can be deflated with humor. The next time someone pays you a back-handed compliment at work, say thanks as if you think the person really means it and watch how quickly the sarcastic smirk disappears. “Knowing how to use humor is a valuable tool in [helping people] establish habits like teamwork and effective communications,” says Malcolm Kushner, author of *The Light Touch: How to Use Humor for Business Success*.

Kushner says the best managers anticipate stressful situations and defuse them with humor, a technique that can become standard operating procedure for addressing the routine foul-ups of office life. For instance, if the copy machine is constantly broken, Kushner suggests hanging a sign above the copier that reads, “Temporarily in Working Order.” People will laugh or smile, he says, and the next time the machine breaks they’ll be less likely to jump right into anger.

Studies led by Alice Isen, professor of psychology at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, show that the positive mood created by laughter inspires people to think and work more creatively. In Isen’s experiments, people shown a few minutes of a comedy film performed better on creative tasks than those who hadn’t seen it.

“People who can maintain positive emotions have a longer attention span and are more creative in problem solving,” says Willibald Ruch, professor of psychology at the University of Zurich in Switzerland and author of *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic*. “If you have to deal with a work situation and you’re in a good mood, you have more access to alternative solutions.”

Computer chip maker Sun Microsystems has incorporated this philosophy of fun into its business. For years, company directors have carried out elaborate April Fool’s Day pranks. One year, Sun engineers disassembled an executive’s car and reassembled it in his office; another year, they reassembled every bit of a vice-president’s office at the bottom of a tank at the San Francisco Aquarium. Not only

do the engineers love it, but it's great PR, Kushner says. "It demonstrates their engineering prowess and their sense of humor."

BUSINESSES—FROM SMALL FIRMS TO multinational corporations like Kodak, IBM and Xerox—are starting to get the need for laughter at work—so much so, in fact, that humor consulting has become a recognized field. Some consultations involve one-time workshops or presentations, at which speakers like McGhee conduct group exercises to get workers thinking about ways to use humor in communication; other projects are ongoing, like the Fun on the Run programs conducted by The Fun Department. At this firm in Newark, Delaware, the staff organizes activities like bowling, go-carting or Ultimate Pictionary four times a year. Either way, the goal is to introduce laughter as company policy. "There's a reason schools have recess," says Nat Measley, "master of fun" with The Fun Department. "Everybody needs a break now and then. And when people are more creative and more productive on the job, that really affects the bottom line."

In Switzerland, Ruch and his team conduct humor training courses based on an eight-week program developed by The Laughter Remedy's McGhee. The courses encourage participants to "find the humor in their environment, laugh at themselves or use humor under stress," Ruch says. He offers a variety of techniques for keeping things light, such as exaggeration and understatement, and gives instruction on how to develop a sense of playfulness. Everyone is asked to keep humor diaries, in which they write down funny things that happen each day. "People learn that it's okay to talk about embarrassing things without feeling bad," Ruch says, "and it helps them shift from an outlook of 'What's wrong with my life?' or 'What's wrong with other people?' to a more light-hearted look at 'What's good and happy about my life?'"

To experience the full benefits of laughter in the workplace, though, top management must get involved. "Top-level executives always think they have to

be so serious, but if you poke a little fun at yourself, that's actually a leadership trait," Kushner says. "It shows confidence, and it motivates people."

He points to the Santa Cruz Medical Clinic as an example. Each of the more than 100 physicians at the clinic—including top brass—posts his or her baby photo on a bulletin board. Then there's a contest to guess who's who. "Baby pictures equalize the ground; they reduce everyone to the same level," Kushner says. "That's one of the most important things that humor at work does. It's not undermining authority, but using humor to reduce the difference. Rather than cracking a whip, you crack a joke and it enhances your authority."

And you don't need to be a stand-up comedian to generate laughter. When Kushner speaks to corporate groups about

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Malcolm Kushner,
author of *The Light Touch: How to Use Humor for Business Success*

humor in the workplace, he always tells them, "If you can't tell a joke well, you shouldn't. There are other ways of bringing humor into a conversation or a presentation. Use a personal anecdote; everybody's got some stories they've been telling for years. Think of the points you can make with them, and use them whether you're talking to one person or to 1,000 people."

Hey, have you heard the one about the police officer who responded to a domestic violence call after having completed a course of humor training?

NANCY MANN JACKSON has two preschoolers at home who keep her laughing.

the dark side of humor

Remember what your parents taught you: Laugh with, not at, other people.

LAUGHTER ON THE JOB CAN BOOST EMPLOYEES' morale and a company's bottom line—as long as it's not negative humor. "When you promote laughter in the workplace, you also have to teach what is good laughter and what is bad laughter," says Willibald Ruch, professor of psychology at the University of Zurich and author of *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic*. "It's very important to distinguish between laughing with someone and laughing at them. There's a line between ridicule and humor."

Ruch is studying the fear of being

laughed at for a research project that involves 22,000 people in 75 countries. He has distributed a 46-item questionnaire to at least 100 men and 100 women in each country. Thus far, he's found that in some countries, up to 20 percent of those surveyed

have an extreme fear of having others laugh at them. People who experience this fear may even interpret good-natured laughter in a negative way.

The research is a reminder that laughter can wound as well as heal. Ruch has found that many of those who fear the laughter have been bullied. "People are afraid others will laugh at them and induce shame," Ruch says. "In some cases, the people being laughed at will assume that they in fact are ridiculous." That's why sarcastic humor has no place in the world of work, Ruch argues. "If humor hurts, it might divide people."—N.M.J.