

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Fair: Using Humor to Decrease Stress and Increasing Productivity

Abstract

Extension professionals should consider using humor as a tool to reduce stress and increase productivity and job satisfaction. Research has long supported its positive effects in the workplace. The type of humor used is an important factor in determining its appropriateness because humor can be adaptive (positive) or maladaptive (negative). The Humor Styles Questionnaire developed by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) is a free online survey Extension professionals can use to measure their humor style, which can help the professional make the decision whether or not to say "a funny thing happened on the way to the fair...."

Keywords: [coping with stress](#), [humor](#), [reducing stress](#), [increasing job satisfaction](#)

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Introduction

Henry Ward Beecher said, "A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs. It's jolted by every pebble on the road." Job stress, time management, and balancing work and personal life are issues that educators in the field of Extension constantly struggle with (Place & Jacob, 2001). The pebbles of stress in the road Extension professionals encounter on a regular basis can jolt job satisfaction, health, and productivity. While Mirowsky and Ross (1990) found that genuine control reduces stress, it is near impossible to control another human being (think raging parent at a horse show or even potty training a toddler). It is more feasible, perhaps, to control our schedules, and time management is not a new concept among professionals in the work place. Nonetheless, as Extension professionals, we have seen firsthand how that can spiral out of control when important projects collide on the calendar or our responsibilities pull our energies in different directions. Declining budgets and increased responsibilities are becoming the norm around the country, putting a serious chink in the Time Management Armor.

It appears then that a variety of coping skills should be enlisted for situations that extend past time management and control as effective means of reducing stress. Consider... humor.

Cooper and Gramh (2001) found that a sense of humor was identified as one of the top 57 core competencies

necessary to be a successful county agent. Furthermore, research shows that humor **is** often regarded as one of the highest forms of coping with life stress (Martin, 1996; Andrews, Pollock, & Stewart, 1989). There is substantial evidence of empirical demonstrations of humor as a stress moderator. Not only can humor help one cope with a stressful situation, studies have demonstrated that individuals with a greater sense of humor are less adversely affected by stressful life events (Abel, 2008; Lefcourt & Thomas, 1998; Lefcourt & Davidson, 1991; Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Safranek & Schill, 1982).

To de-stress after absorbing negative energy from disagreeable conflicts and over-commitments to our schedules, there is evidence that simply watching humorous movies can lighten mood (Cann, Holt & Cahoun, 1999).

But Is It Appropriate?

Managers can use humor to reduce stress and enhance leadership, group cohesiveness, communication, creativity, and organizational culture (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). But would Extension professionals be deemed unprofessional or incompetent should they choose to use humor in the workplace? Rizzo, Bekelja, Wanzer, and Booth-Butterfield (1999) found that that managers who were perceived as higher in humor orientation were viewed as more effective in their positions by their subordinates. Romero and Pescosolido (2008) maintain that successful organizational humor can have a positive impact on group productivity, group viability, and development of group members, which contribute to overall group effectiveness.

Caution: research also shows that humor is a tricky thing. Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, and Kirsh (2006) found that humor's multidimensional components can be adaptive (coping, affiliative, self-enhancing) or maladaptive (self-defeating, belabored, aggressive, and rude). Aggressive and rude humor is unproductive at the very least and hurtful and damaging to those at whom it is directed. Lefcourt and Thomas (1998) and Martin (1996) maintain that the type of humor used makes a difference in outcomes. The four types of humor Martin (1996) identified in his research are affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating.

- Affiliative humor is a highly positive non-hostile type of humor that is used to reduce social tensions and smooth relationships. Spontaneous jokes and witty banter among friends are typical of this style of humor.
- Self-enhancing humor generally serves as a coping mechanism for stress. It is related to taking things lightly and a generally amused outlook on life.
- Aggressive humor is used to establish dominance or relieve frustration in social situations. Typical expressions include sarcasm, teasing, or ridicule.
- Self-defeating humor is expressed by being very self-deprecating and accepting or encouraging jokes at ones expense. A little of this style is usually good, and individuals who express this style strongly can be quite socially successful (e.g., "class clown"); however, it is frequently underlaid by emotional neediness and insecurity as well as avoidance.

Adaptive humor, such as self-enhancing and affiliative humor, would be the positive humor styles that build relationships and ease tensions, advantageous in the workplace. Maladaptive humor is inappropriate and should be discouraged. The delivery mode of one's humor (especially if one doesn't know his or her audience) can be just as important. Extension professionals should use the aphorism "when in doubt, leave it out" so as

not cause harm to others. For those who "just can't help themselves," it is suggested to use self referential or self directed humor. With this approach, should the humor be missed or taken the wrong way, the person delivering the humor has not insulted or offended the other person. (Think the comedic genius of Lucille Ball—every fix she found herself in only made herself look silly.)

Finding Your Humor Style

So which style of humor do you use? The Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) developed by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) is a good tool to measure your humor style to determine the feasibility of YOUR humor in the workplace. It measures four ways people express humor and has a reliability of "generally acceptable" (Kazarian & Martin, 2006). The inventory consists of 32 statements that are rated on how much the taker agrees with each and is available on line at: <http://humorstyles.com>. Answers are recorded and possibly used for research and/or otherwise distributed in an anonymous fashion.

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