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The Link Between Happiness and a Sense of Humor

5 When I die, I want to go peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather. Not screaming in terror, like the passengers on his bus. If you laughed at that joke, it is because three things happened in your brain in lightning-fast succession. First, you detected an incongruity: You imagined my grandfather lying peacefully in bed, but then you realized he was actually driving a bus. Second, you resolved the incongruity: My grandfather was asleep at the wheel. Third, the parahippocampal gyrus region of your brain helped you realize I wasn't being serious, so you felt amusement. And all of that gave you a little bit of joy.

10 I realize that after that analysis, you're probably not laughing anymore. "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can," according to the writer E. B. White¹, "but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." Fair enough. Humor is a serious business for happiness, however, and cultivating the skill of finding humor in life, even during the darkest times, can be the secret to keeping us from despair.

15 Researchers have theorized that a sense of humor is made up of six basic variables: the cognitive ability to create or understand jokes, an appreciation and enjoyment of jokes, behavior patterns of joking and laughing, cheerful or humorous temperament, a bemused attitude about life, and a strategy of using humor in the face of adversity. A *sense of humor*, then, can mean either being funny or enjoying funny things.

20 Consuming humor brings joy and relieves suffering. In a 2010 study from the *Journal of Aging Research*, the researchers gave one group of senior citizens "humor therapy" – daily jokes, laughter exercises, funny stories, and the like – for eight weeks. A control group did not receive this therapy. At the end of the experiment, the people in the first group reported feeling 42 percent happier than they had at the beginning. They were 35 percent happier than the second group, and experienced decreases in pain and loneliness.

25 However, the type of humor you consume and share matters. Humor can be positive, when it's not intended to belittle or harm others, or when one laughs at one's own circumstances. It can also be negative, when it attacks others or when one belittles oneself. Positive humor is associated with self-esteem, optimism, and life satisfaction, and with decreases in depression, anxiety, and stress. Negative humor follows the exact opposite pattern: While it can feel good in the moment, it exacerbates unhappiness.

30 For humor to be effective in increasing happiness, timing is everything. If you have ever made light of a tragedy and no one laughed, you might have tried to mitigate the faux pas by asking, "Too soon?" Researchers studying humor in the face of tragedy have found that jokes can indeed help people cope with grievances and loss. However, the joke can't be too close to or too far from the event in time. Tell a joke during a horrific natural disaster and you will be shunned; tell one about the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and most people won't know what you are talking about. But get it right, and you can provide tremendous relief.

¹ E. B. White (1899-1985): American writer

35 Having this sense of comedic timing requires what social scientists call “humor creation ability”, an ability
that the authors Jennifer Aaker² and Naomi Bagdonas³ of the book *Humor, Seriously*, credit with many
other benefits, such as success in business. Being funny, however, is the one dimension of a sense of humor
that does not appear to boost happiness, which is sometimes called the sad-clown paradox. In a 2010
40 experiment published in *Europe’s Journal of Psychology*, researchers asked people to write captions for
cartoons and come up with jokes in response to everyday frustrating situations. They found no significant
relationship between being funny (as judged by outside reviewers) and happiness or unhappiness. Another
study found that professional comedians score above population norms on scales measuring psychotic
traits.

45 Laughter itself is what brings a lot of humor’s benefits, not necessarily making other people laugh. Laughter
also acts as a social lubricant, making interactions easier even when there is no humor involved. Indeed,
one study found that only 10 to 15 percent of laughing is due to anything even remotely humorous. Much
of the rest is meant to display emotions such as agreement or simple conviviality. Pay attention to your
ordinary interactions today and you will appreciate this.

50 Several actionable⁴ lessons come from this brief tour through the science of humor, which we can use to
improve our quality of life.

1. Reject grimness.

55 The most obvious piece of advice is not to be grim and humorless. I have written in this column about the
guilt some people feel about acting joyful in a world so filled with legitimate concerns. Some feel that
lightheartedness is inappropriate when we are concerned about crises and injustice. But it is a mistake to
think this way, insofar as grimness is not winsome to others, and thus hurts your cause. Of course, there
are instances in which humor is misplaced – remember that timing is everything – but fewer than you think.
Some of the best eulogies I have ever heard were also the most hilarious.

60 Researchers have found that two particularly humorless ideologies are religious fundamentalism and
militarism. Therefore, I’m not surprised that the current fundamentalist and pugilistic⁵ ideological climate in
the United States (and many other countries) is also so humorless, or that political fundamentalists are so
ready to use their offense at humor as a weapon. To be happier, don’t participate in the war on jokes.

2. Don’t worry about being funny.

65 My late mother loved jokes, but she couldn’t repeat them. Whenever she started telling one, before she
even got to the end, she would be laughing so hard that no one had any idea what the punch line was.
While her joke technique wasn’t so hot, she had inadvertently found one of the secrets to happiness: It’s
better to consume humor than to supply it.

It’s also a lot easier. Funny people tend to have particular innate neurological characteristics, and unusually
high intelligence. Meanwhile, people who enjoy funny things simply prioritize humor, cultivate the taste for

² Jennifer Aaker (b. 1967): American social scientist

³ Naomi Bagdonas (b. 1987): American media consultant

⁴ (here) having practical value

⁵ violent

70 it, and give themselves permission to laugh. To get the happiness benefits of humor, let others tell the jokes; listen and laugh.

3. Stay positive.

The evidence is clear that negative, hurtful, or excessively dark jokes are a corrosive force on your and others' well-being. This kind of humor tends to be nihilistic as opposed to lighthearted; its presupposition is "Nothing matters, so I am going to make fun of something precious, like my life, or yours."

75 The negative happiness effects are fairly straightforward in some cases, such as mocking someone hurtfully, saying you wish you were dead, or telling a joke that denigrates a group of people. But other cases might be less obvious, such as our patterns of social-media use. That caustic⁶-but-hilarious meme you are about to post on social media might feel satisfying in the moment, but it will likely lower your sense of well-being, as well as that of those who laugh at it.

80 There is one more excellent reason to work on your appreciation for humor right now: It can ease the terrible burden⁷ we have collectively carried for the past year and a half. As the research outlined above shows, humor has an almost anesthetic quality to it, lowering the focus on pain and allowing us to remember the joys in life.

85 This idea is nothing new. The Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio⁸ finished *The Decameron* in about the year 1353, as the Black Death ravaged Europe, probably killing almost a third of the population. The book consisted of 100 comedic stories told by 10 fictional young friends – seven women and three men – quarantining together at a country estate to avoid the pestilence. It was massively popular, relieving the fear of sickness and tedium of isolation for people across Europe as the plague dragged on. It did not avoid the themes of sickness and death, but did not emphasize them, either. The point was that life can be pretty
90 hilarious even under rotten conditions – but finding it so depends on our attitude.

And so it is today. Life has sadness and tragedy in abundance. But at the same time, it's pretty funny.

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⁶ sarcastic

⁷ (here) the Covid-19 pandemic

⁸ *Giovanni Boccaccio* (1313-1375): Italian author from Florence