Humor in the Healthcare Workplace: A Cure for Stress

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Stressors in Healthcare

What Can Help
Decrease stress from within.
Look at reality from a different perspective.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism
When the humor quotient rises the absentee rate declines.

Other Sources of Stress in our Lives
1. Aging
2. Family Members

“To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it!”
Charlie Chaplin

Humor
• Detachment from problems
• Enables us to experience joy even when faced with adversity
• Stress is an adverse condition – causes tension, fatigue, unpleasant emotions

Hans Selye on Stress
“The rate of wear and tear within the body.”
Job stress \(\rightarrow\) burnout.
Burnout: a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do “people work”.

Humor and Stress
Humor slows down the rate of wear and tear.
Humor is a coping mechanism to deal with external pressures and internal stresses that relate to health and illness.

Humor as an Empowerment Tool
• Gives us a different perspective on problems
• Provides an attitude of detachment
• We feel sense of self-protection and control in our environment
To Summarize

Humor helps:
- Detach from our problems
- Experience joy even when faced with adversity
- Slow down the rate of wear & tear
- Serve as a coping mechanism
- Gain a sense of self-protection & control in our environment

Theories of Humor

Relief/Release Theory
Primitive, adaptive response to stress
Humor used to restore homeostasis & a sense of well-being
Freud: humor provides a temporary relief from repressed feelings & uncontrollable situations; a release of psychic energy

Incongruity Theory
- Based on disjunction, or unexpected pairing, of ideas or situations
- Results from these unexpected connections
- Builds on the mental or intellectual components

Surprise Theory
- Builds on the surprise, shock, or unexpectedness of a situation.
- The situation appears perfectly logical and non-humorous until…..

Superiority Theory
Identifies the inferior or foolish actions of others.
Borders on ridicule – be careful!

Gallows Humor
Humor heard in healthcare situations but NOT shared with patients
A destressor used to cope with serious events

Compassion Fatigue
Feeling you have very little left to give.
Occurs when the nurse’s self-care program has been inadequate.
Finding humor in work and in life can help lift the spirit and replenish oneself.

Norman Cousins
Therapeutic Effects of Humor & Laughter
- Positive emotions can lead to positive effects
- Opens one up to joy, hope, confidence, and love
Physical Effects
- Stress creates unhealthy physiological changes
- Laughter creates the opposite effects – an antidote for stress

Anxiety’s Effect
- Reduction of helper T-cells
- Lowered activity of natural killer cells
- Lowered salivary immunoglobulin A

Stress – A Personal Thing
Stress:
- Not dependent solely on an external event
- Depends upon the person’s perception of the event and the meaning given to the event
- How you LOOK at a situation

Physical Effects of Humor
1. Improved mental function
2. Exercises & relaxes muscles
3. Improves respirations
4. Stimulates circulation
5. Decreases stress hormones and enhances immune system
6. Increases tolerance to pain

Improved mental function – makes you more creative
You think more broadly and associate more freely, noticing relationships that might have eluded you.

Exercises and Relaxes Muscles
- Use 15 facial muscles
- Skeletal muscles
- Chest & abdominal muscles
- Muscles of the GI tract

Improves Respiration
- Exercises the lungs & chest muscles
- Disrupts normal cyclic breathing, increases ventilation, clears mucous plugs, accelerates the exchange of residual air -- enhancing O2 levels
- Increases pulmonary ventilation

Humor Frees your Thinking to be More Creative, More Flexible.
Flexibility Decreases Stress
Stimulates Circulation
- Laughter is the cardiovascular equivalent of 3 minutes of strenuous rowing
- Quickens the respiratory & circulatory processes & produces a general sense of euphoria

Decreases stress hormones & increases immune defenses
- Lowers serum cortisol levels
- Increases activated T-lymphocytes
- Increases the number & activity of natural killer cells
- Increases helper/suppressor T-cells

Stress
- The adrenal glands release corticosteroids – converted to cortisol
- Cortisol has an immunosuppressive effect
- Laughter lowers cortisol levels thereby protecting the immune system

Increases Pain Threshold & Tolerance
- Humor can help reduce pain
- Postulated that laughter releases endorphins to make you feel better

Mental Effects of Humor
Cathartic Release
Purifies emotions & releases emotional tension
Laughter is a unique HUMAN reflex.
Its function:
Provide relief from tension

Humor & Patient Care
Conversational Humor – Witty and playful.

Compassionate vs. Caustic Humor
Compassionate humor:
- Humor from the heart
Caustic humor:
- Hateful and harmful

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compassionate Humor</th>
<th>Caustic Humor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creates bonds</td>
<td>Creates barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduces tension</td>
<td>Increases hostility and stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Includes all people</td>
<td>Perpetuates elite stereotypes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduces discomfort</td>
<td>Focuses on the negative</td>
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<td>Moves us toward health</td>
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**Humor & Work**

**Enhancing Creativity**
- Encourages looking at situations from a different perspective
- Deviates from the usual linear thinking process
- Moves thinking from convergent to divergent

**A Final Lesson**
Learn to laugh:
Sometimes your co-workers will know you’re laughing sometimes it’s better to keep it to yourself….just keep laughing.

**References**