Belly Laughs

Bust Stress

Remembering Robin
Comedic Brilliance & Heartbreaking Darkness
The mission of AIS is to improve the health of the community and the world by setting the standard of excellence of stress management in education, research, clinical care and the workplace. Diverse and inclusive, The American Institute of Stress educates medical practitioners, scientists, health care professionals and the public; conducts research; and provides information, training and techniques to prevent human illness related to stress.

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CONTENTMENT

We value opinions of our readers.
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Contentment is a quarterly newsletter published in March, June, September and December with news and advertising designed with the general public in mind. It appeals to all those interested in the myriad and complex interrelationships between stress and health because technical jargon is avoided and it is easy to understand. Contentment is archived online at stress.org. Information in this publication is carefully compiled to ensure accuracy.

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AIS Daily Life Stress Board

Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury-Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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We talk about a lot of different techniques for stress management: a healthy diet, regular exercise, adequate sleep, relaxation strategies and social connections to name a few. Personally, I have found massage to be a lifesaver for building in consistent recharge time each week where I intentionally let my brain and body be guided into relaxation mode. Recently I was introduced to a new type of “massage” – one I consider to be massaging my brain due to the fact it enhances circulation to parts of the brain that often get left out of our day to day activities, such as perceiving amusement, irony and joy.

Humor is like massage for the brain. It initiates the relaxation response, shifting brain chemistry towards positivity, creativity, and collaboration. Physically, humor decreases levels of toxic cortisol and inflammation in the brain and body, while increasing neural efficiency, energy production, circulation, and over all health. Our current chaotic and constantly connected society is filled with stressful triggers that keep our brain-body systems stuck in a state of chronic stress, speeding up the development of both physical and mental disabilities and illness. Even if stress is not initiating the disease, it clearly speeds up the development of anything potentially harmful to our being. According to the American Institute of Stress, 75-90% of all medical visits are stress related, and unmanaged stress costs US business upwards of $300 billion dollars due to lost productivity and sick days.

By incorporating intentional healthy humor to our lifestyle at both home and work, we send a simple message to the brain that for now we have what we need to survive, and give ourselves permission to enjoy the present moment being able to look at life through a more positive, playful lens. When we share humor and play with others, we build a stronger support network for ourselves, which also results in diminished fear of isolation, dropping stressors down to more manageable levels where they can be perceived as challenges rather than threats. This seemingly simple shift from chronic stress to an acute challenge radically changes the physiological response in the brain and body to one that is adaptive rather than destructive and enables us to grow stronger rather than burn out or break down.
In this edition of Contentment, we hear from the Humor Experts themselves, my friends at the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. Mary Kay Morrison takes a timely look at the passing of one of our beloved comic geniuses, Robin Williams, who despite using humor regularly also suffered with lifelong depression. Neurohumorist Karyn Buxman provides a better understanding of what humor really is, and specifically how it can be applied intentionally to improve measures of healthy, happiness, and even performance at work. We conclude with a look at just a few key humor and stress research articles where you can find more details on this dynamic interaction between play and relaxation geared towards minimizing the negative effects of stress in our ever-busy lives and quick tips to add more humor to your day.

To help your cognitive process as you read the remaining stories, why not start with a little laughter therapy right now? Here are a few of our favorite funny videos from social media the last few weeks:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcnFbCCgTo4
Robin Williams on Golf

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4Y4keqTV6w
Most contagious laugh ever: Doug Collins
First we got your brain...

Now we need your heart.

Can we count on you for a dollar?

The American Institute of Stress helps people learn to manage their stress every single day. We help veterans returning from war find a sense of normalcy again. We help students who are stressed about exams, busy schedules and bullies reach their fullest potential. And we help people like you deal with whatever life throws at you! With your ongoing support, we will continue to be there providing people with relief for today and hope for tomorrow.

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GET INSIDE OUR HEAD

It’s Not Our Credentials That Make AIS So Impressive, It’s the Fellows That Go with Them.

The American Institute of Stress is a non-profit organization established in 1978 at the request of Dr. Hans Selye (the Founder of the Stress Concept) to serve as a clearinghouse for information on all stress related subjects. AIS Founding Fellows include:

Paul Rosch  Linus Pauling  Alvin Toffler  Bob Hope  Michael DeBakey  Herbert Benson  Charles Spielberger

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The death of Robin Williams brings to the forefront the significance of the work of those who study depression, stress and diseases of the brain. It has also sparked an interest in research examining the links between creativity and mental illness. It appears that Williams’s comic genius often masked his mental illness. Is astonishing brilliance only possible when paired with extreme darkness?¹ I suspect that this debate will continue with a renewed focus because of the suicide of this beloved comedian. In a quick review of the comments found in social media, there seems to be emerging a sense of hope that his death will put an increased focus on the neuroscience of depression and mental illness.

For those who study, practice and promote healthy humor and laughter, additional questions emerge regarding his tragic death. Did he purposefully use humor as therapy for his own despair? Was his ability to evoke laughter in others an attempt to suppress his own depression?

In AATH (The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor), there has been an ongoing focus on exactly how humor can be applied as a therapeutic intervention.² AATH has currently defined therapeutic humor as “any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual.” http://www.aath.org/general-information

Laughter is a universal human trait, but there is certainly not a universal understanding of humor. Cognitive, emotional, behavioral, psychophysiological, and societal factors all contribute to the complexity of humor studies.³ The multifaceted nature of humor can pose numerous challenges for valid research and the very study of humor in general is considered by many to be an inexact science. Each person has an individual humor style that mirrors his or her unique personality. Our humor being is an intriguing combination of both nature and nurture. Using humor as a therapeutic intervention for stress and depression is considered a pioneering effort.⁴ Research by Brown indicates that the op-
posite of “play” is depression. Experiential play is a critical component for learning. Play seems to generate neural connections while promoting creativity, critical thinking, and social bonding. Choice, risk taking, and exploration are the foundation for humor development and also form the basis for learning through play. Williams was an only child and seemed to spend much of his childhood alone in imaginative play. Brain imagining provides us with the information that play activates numerous areas of the brain. While many people assume that play is for children, our brains are really designed to play throughout our lives.

Williams certainly explored and exhibited playfulness in his comedic work. However, it is difficult if not impossible to identify the humor style of Robin Williams. Information from brain imaging technology continues to provide data that can be interpreted in numerous ways. It would have given researchers extraordinary data to have access to images from Robin’s brain when he was at his comedic best. Research may eventually give us clues about how humor might have an impact on the diseases of the brain including toxic stress and depression. In the meantime, researchers studying brain scans are analyzing an increasing and invaluable source of this information. Not surprisingly, this material is accompanied by lively debates about how to interpret this relatively new data.

So the questions continue. Did Williams purposefully use humor to combat his struggle with depression? If so, how successful were his attempts? What can we learn from his legacy of comedy and of his efforts to bring laughter to so many? Is there a relationship between finding respite and relief from depression in efforts to create humor for others?

This vigorous dialogue on depression and stress gives renewed significance to the AATH mission “to serve as the community of professionals who study, practice and promote healthy humor and laughter.”

References
In today’s fast-paced society, we’re all faced with some degree of stress—cranky customers, irritable bosses, stubborn employees, budgets, deadlines, telephones, paperwork, a bad hair day, a no hair day…. For many of us, a straightjacket may be nearer than we think. “Terminal professionalism” is a sign of the times. But taking oneself too seriously can have some serious repercussions.¹

**WHAT IS STRESS?**
Stress is the body’s nonspecific response to any demand or pressure and these demands are called stressors. A stressor might be a major life event, such as the death of a loved one or divorce. Stressors could be chronic such as living in an abusive relationship. Stressors can also be occasional, like getting a flat tire in rush hour traffic.²

**RESPONSE TO STRESS**
Stress requires our bodies to make adjustments physically, psychologically, socially and even spiritually to maintain the necessary balance for survival. Too much stress (distress) can reveal itself in a number of ways. Maybe you
recognize these signs in a co-worker, family member, or even yourself:

**Psychologically:** When we are experiencing stress, we probably feel increased anxiety and tension. We may exhibit moodiness, irritability, inability to concentrate, crying, changes in eating patterns, changes in sleeping patterns, decreased sex drive, worrying, mood swings, frustration, nervousness, and depression. As if that wasn’t enough, we may also demonstrate a negative attitude, low productivity, confusion, lack of creativity, lethargy, forgetfulness, or boredom.² ³ Have you ever had one of those days when you feel so frustrated that you just want to go home and kick the dog... and then you remember you don’t even own a dog!

**Socially:** We may isolate ourselves from others, feel lonely, or make fewer contacts with friends. Communication may be hampered due to preoccupation with stressful events or hindered by negative mood swings, such as lashing out at others, nagging, or clamming up.⁴ We find ourselves thinking or saying, “Just leave me alone!”
Physiologically: Stress affects all our major body systems.³ Breathing tends to be more rapid but shallow, not allowing for full air exchange deep in the lungs. The heart rate quickens and blood pressure increases. We may experience a feeling of the heart “racing” or “jumping out of the chest.” The circulatory system shifts the blood supply from the surface of our bodies to muscles and major organs. Have you ever noticed your hands feeling cold, but you weren’t in a cold environment? If you don’t suffer from anemia, or a vascular disease (such as Raynaud’s), your hand temperature is often an excellent indicator of your stress level.

During stressful events, the immune system becomes depressed resulting in an increased susceptibility to viral and bacterial infections.⁵, ⁶ Cumulative stressful events can often lead to illness. For example, you get behind on a couple of projects and come down with a cold... a co-worker gets downsized and you inherit his clients and the next thing you know, you’ve got bronchitis... a virus deletes precious files on your hard drive and now you’ve developed walking pneumonia... then you’re notified that your department is being audited and before you know it, you end up in the hospital on a ventilator!

During a stressful experience, muscles become tense,⁷ preparing for the “Fight or Flight” response. A person may notice headaches or a variety of muscle aches, clenched jaws or grinding teeth, tight neck, shoulder and back muscles and clenched fists. Have you ever found yourself gripping your steering wheel a little too tightly? (Hint: Your knuckles aren’t typically blanched white...) Here’s a quick tip: Note the position of your tongue. If it’s resting in the bottom of your mouth, you’re probably feeling relaxed. If it’s pressed tightly against the roof of your mouth, chances are you’re experiencing some tension.

As for the digestive system, we may encounter a variety of symptoms ranging from cold sores around the mouth to nausea, vomiting, constipation or diarrhea.⁸ There’s nothing like numerous emergency trips to the bathroom to keep that cycle of stress building!

Nearly everyone recognizes the rising healthcare costs in this country. These costs put an escalating burden on employers as they cut into the corporate bottom line. Experts estimate that stress related ailments are costing the nation $300 billion every year.⁹ The good news: Humor is a cost effective and simple way to ward off many of the detrimental effects of stress.

WHAT IS HUMOR?
E. B. White once said, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.” Many a scientist has attempted to define humor but few, if any, can agree on a definition. Psychologist Steve Sultanoff, Ph.D. defines humor as the intellectual mindset expressed through the emotional feelings of mirth and the physical expression of laughter. This incorporates
the intellectual mindset (wit) with the emotional feeling (mirth) and the physiological expression (laughter). I define humor as a feeling of delight, wonder or release that comes from surprise, perspective or insight.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE HUMOR

While nothing is black and white, humor can basically be categorized by that which is constructive and that which is destructive. Constructive humor raises self-esteem, is supportive, includes people, reduces tension, confronts stereotypical ideas, breaks down barriers, relaxes people, stimulates new ideas, and creates energy and a positive atmosphere. Destructive humor lowers self-esteem, belittles others, excludes others, creates tension, perpetuates a stereotype, creates barriers, creates defensiveness, closes off creative thought, and focuses on negatives. In its most simplistic form, it boils down to laughing with someone versus laughing at someone. When promoting humor as a means of stress management, the emphasis should be on constructive humor.

According to Dr. Vera Robinson, humor has three functions: psychological, social, and communication. Psychologically, humor acts as a major, healthy coping mechanism, relieving anxiety and tension. It serves as an outlet for hostility and anger, provides a healthy escape from reality, and lightens heaviness related to minor and major stressors. When people must work on a job that is repetitive, humor can increase the

GETTING STARTED!

Studies confirm that you gain many more benefits by being an active participant in humor rather than a passive observer. Here are some ideas that will put humor to work for you!

* Make a list of things that are fun for you and do one item daily
* See a funny movie of your choice (and don’t skip the popcorn!)
* Have a marshmallow fight (you can eat the left-over ammunition)
* Participate in a massage train (if you make a circle, no one gets left out)
* Take a joke break (these can be programmed into your computer or phone)
* Practice standing ovations for yourself and co-workers
* Read something for fun
* Write a silly limerick
* Send a humorous card (earn bonus points if for no special occasion)
* Leave a humorous message on your own voice-mail
* Keep a humor file at your desk and refer to it daily
* Wear a funny button, pin, or piece of jewelry
* Lighten up your work environment (cartoons/props/photos/toys/etc.)
* Play fun and upbeat music
* Plan a theme day (60s/wild west/beach day/etc.)
* Eat fun food (Snickers bars, Ho Hos, Cracker Jacks, etc.)
* Try your hand at juggling (scarves are the easiest to learn)
* Sing silly songs (children’s songs or theme songs from sitcoms)
* Buy your very own humorous prop, like a magic wand or goofy glasses
* Share your most embarrassing moment
* Start your day with 20 seconds of laughter (fake it till you make it)
* Hold a cartoon caption contest
length of time on task by reducing tension and boredom. Studies also show that humor doesn't detract from tasks requiring increased concentration. Granted, things can sometimes get out of hand. Therefore, it's important for leaders to set the tone for humor while also establishing high expectations of their staff.

Socially, constructive humor lessens the hierarchy between people, establishes rapport, decreases the social gap, and solidifies a group. Victor Borge once said, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." People that can share a laugh develop a connection. Much office humor is "inside" humor or "you had to be there" humor. While this kind of humor can make folks feel like part of the inner circle, it can also make others feel excluded. Be careful that this humor is used constructively, and not to shut out others.

Destructive humor can increase the hierarchy between people. Teasing and sarcasm can actually be a form of bullying and is witnessed from the playground to the boardroom. Much of the conflict that occurs at home and in the workplace results from problems with communication. Humor can help by gaining and holding the listener's attention. Humor can help establish rapport and neutralize emotionally charged interpersonal events. Humor opens the door for communication and conveys information by allowing one to bring...
up a secretly serious subject to see how it will be received while providing an 'out' such as "I was only joking." There are also physiological effects related to humor and laughter. Think back to a time when you experienced a really good belly laugh. While you were laughing, you actually increased your respiratory activity and improved your oxygen exchange. During "belly laughter," air is inhaled deep into the lungs and exhaled forcefully. Smokers or those with a respiratory complaint, such as a cold or bronchitis, frequently experience coughing after laughter. This allows the body to further clear the airways and further facilitate the good air exchange.

In the cardiovascular system, laughter stimulates our heart rate and blood pressure. This increase is then followed by a relaxation phase, decreasing both heart rate and blood pressure. According to Dr. Michael Miller, researcher at University of Maryland Medical Center, laughter provides an excellent cardiovascular workout. This exercise requires no special equipment and no limit to the number of times it can be used. Great news! You can get rid of those expensive sweater hangers (also known as treadmills, stationary bikes, stair steppers...). You can laugh at your desk, in the break room, in your car—just pick a spot and begin!

Scientists are making exciting discoveries regarding humor and the immune system. For example, studies reveal an increase in Immunoglobulin

**FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL**: Acts as a major coping mechanism; relieves anxiety and tension, serves as outlet for hostility and anger, provides healthy escape from reality, and lightens heaviness related to critical illness, trauma, disfigurement, and death. Can also create sense of empowerment among individuals who feel oppressed or threatened.

**SOCIAL**: When used constructively, humor can lessen the hierarchy between individuals, establish rapport, and decrease social distance. When used destructively, humor can increase hierarchy between individuals and increase social distance.

**COMMUNICATIVE**: Helps convey information; opens the door for communication by allowing one to bring up a secretly serious subject to see how it will be received while providing an 'out' such as "I was only joking." Helps improve the retention of conveyed information through stimulation of the brain, and also provides a "mental hook" to connect information.
A, which fights upper respiratory tract infections. Additionally, there is an increase in the number and activity of natural killer cells, which attack viral infected cells and some types of cancer cells and tumors. An increase in activated T-cells (white blood cells) is seen, as well as an increase in gamma interferon and an increase in Immunoglobulin G and Complement C. Translated, this means that humor and laughter seem to be producing some very positive effects on our immune systems. They are not a replacement for traditional medicine but can be considered a positive complement to medical treatment.

Other body systems also demonstrate changes during humor and laughter. Muscles briefly tense up but then relax, often resulting in diminished pain. In the sympathetic nervous system, catecholamine production increases, resulting in improved levels of alertness and memory and enhanced learning and creativity—and in these times when we’re being asked to do more and more with less and less, who couldn’t benefit from some increased creativity? Stress hormones such as epinephrine and dopamine exhibit a measurable drop.

Laughter stimulates both sides of the brain at the same time, coordinating all the senses and producing a unique level of consciousness and a high level of brain processing, as well as improving recall. Internal organs are massaged, so that laughter, like walking, can improve digestion. Dr. Lee Berk, psychoneuroimmunologist at Loma Linda University, said, “If we took what we now know about laughter and bottled it, it would require FDA approval.” Any miracle drug that could do all this would cost a fortune!

No one suggests that you attempt to be a stand-up comic or laugh constantly. It is important, however, to attempt to use humor routinely. Whatever forms of humor you choose, it’s important to practice them on a regular basis. When humor happens by accident, there are positive benefits. There are too many rewards, however, to let humor happen strictly by chance. Don’t let stress come between you and the realization of your goals. Put your stress in check by creating a humor habit—jest for stress!
References


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