

# Life Tools for Lawyers: The Value of Humor

Cheryl Stephens, Communications Coach

According to the Humor Project—an organization that runs humor seminars and workshops on such topics as *Jest for Success: Making Humor Work at Work* and *Taking Your Job Seriously and Yourself Lightly: The Positive Power of Humor*—it is quite possible to be “a serious professional without being a solemn professional.” Laughter is like internal jogging and, as medical researcher Dr. Norman Cousins said in 1979, “he or she who laughs, lasts.”

## Benefits of Laughter

### Laughter and Health

Laughter helps those coping with major illness and the stress of life’s problems. Now we know laughter does more—it balances the immune system, which helps us fight disease.

Laughter provides a safety valve that shuts off the flow of stress hormones and the fight-or-flight compounds that swing into action in our bodies when we experience stress, anger or hostility. These stress hormones suppress the immune system, increase the number of blood platelets (which can cause obstructions in arteries) and raise blood pressure. When we're laughing, natural killer cells that destroy tumors and viruses increase, as do Gamma-interferon (a disease-fighting protein), T-cells, which are a major part of the immune response, and B-cells, which make disease-destroying antibodies.

Laughter may lead to hiccuping and coughing, which clears the respiratory tract by dislodging mucous plugs. Laughter also increases the concentration of salivary immunoglobulin A, which defends against infectious organisms entering through the respiratory tract.

What may surprise you even more is the fact that researchers estimate that laughing 100 times is equal to 10 minutes on the rowing machine or 15 minutes on an exercise bike. Laughing can be a total body workout! Blood pressure is lowered, and there is an increase in vascular blood flow and in oxygenation of the blood, which further assists healing. Laughter also gives your diaphragm and abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg and back muscles a workout. That's why you often feel exhausted after a long bout of laughter—you've just had an aerobic workout!

### Psychological Benefits

The psychological benefits of humor are amazing: People store negative emotions, such as anger, sadness and fear, rather than expressing them. Laughter provides a way for these emotions to be harmlessly released. Laughter is cathartic. That's why some people who are upset or stressed out go to a funny movie or a comedy club, so they can laugh the negative emotions away (and the biochemical changes that can affect our bodies).

Increasingly, mental health professionals are suggesting "laughter therapy," which teaches people how to laugh—openly—at things that aren't usually funny and to cope

in difficult situations by using humor. Doctors and psychiatrists are becoming more aware of the therapeutic benefits of laughter and humor. There is a growing body of humor and laughter scholarship. In fact, 500 academicians from different disciplines belong to the International Society for Humor Studies.

## **Humor at work and at home**

There is room in the law business for laughter. In a survey of 737 CEOs, over 98% said they would hire somebody with a sense of humor rather than a candidate without one. Ice cream maker Ben and Jerry's has a Joy Committee that provides grants to employees to develop ideas that bring more joy into the workplace.

Author, speaker and business consultant Ken Blanchard says in his book, *Laughing Matters*:

Humor and laughter in organizations can increase the amount of feedback you can get, the honesty, and the capacity for people to tell you good things. All the solutions to problems in organizations are within your own people, but the problem is half of them don't want to say anything because they usually get zapped—you kill the messenger. It's through humor that you can open up the lines to communication.

In a ten-year study of married couples, researchers John Gottman and Sybil Careere of the University of Washington found they are able to predict the success of a marriage with 88% to 94% accuracy based on the presence of romance, humor, and affection in the marital partners' communication style. This may be why "his sense of humor" is so often given by women to explain their attraction to a particular male.

Some 69% of couples have perpetual problems, like different attitudes toward finances, which can kill a marriage unless the communication style that frames the discussion reflects those three factors. While the study identified criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling as destroyers of marriages, an effective funny bone can ameliorate their effect.

In social situations, humor is a powerful tool to help people get to know one another, to bond teams, to overcome cultural differences, and bring newcomers into the fold. In business, humor improves performance, encourages positive thinking, energizes meetings, promotes creativity, and gets more work done. Humor is the bonding agent that creates trust and strengthens relationships.

Humor is a proven antidote to stress, a key to good communications, and it contributes to healthy relationships. Are lawyers better known for their humor skills or for being offended by lawyer jokes? Jokes about lawyers aside, developing your humor skills is sure to make you healthier and happier. And humor is a skill that can be developed.

## **Work on it**

Don't worry if you're not a stand-up comic: the Humor Project has been operating since 1977, and while 80% of its seminar participants think they have good senses of humor, 98% of them say they can't tell a joke to save their life.

Here are some hints for developing your funny bone:

1. Don't even try to be a stand-up comedian if you are shy or you can't remember punch lines. Or give it a try by joining a comedy workshop at a local community college or center.
2. The truth is often funnier than fiction. Tell your own true-life stories. Didn't the "Seinfeld" show us the success of that approach?
3. Freely share your witty or wry observations about daily life. Just remember humor only works when it meets the AT&T Test: Appropriate, Timely & Tasteful.
4. Collect other people's personal stories or anecdotes to share in future. Just don't forget the lawyer's commitment to confidentiality—keep the characters unrecognizable.
5. Watch Comedy Central.
6. Subscribe to an emailed daily joke or purchase a desk calendar with a daily joke.

I'll never forget the effect of pasting on my office door this quip from Henry Kissinger that was taken from my desk calendar:

"There can simply be no crises next week, my schedule is already full."

Everyone who considered bringing a problem to me reconsidered, upon reading then note, whether they truly had a crisis needing my intervention and some decided that bothering me was not really necessary. The power of a joke!

## Safe Harbor: Good Humor Rules

Rule #1: Don't make jokes about sex. It makes people uncomfortable.

Rule #2: Don't make jokes about people's appearance or anything that they cannot change or did not choose. Just don't go there.

Rule #3: Don't make jokes about a whole group of people. Avoid jokes about religion, ethnic background, nationality, sexual orientation and so on.

Rule #4: Don't be gross. Avoid jokes about bodily functions.

## Appropriate and Inappropriate Humor

Appropriate humor is inclusive. It decreases prejudice by focusing on the universal human experience. It encourages a positive atmosphere. It builds rapport and trust. It is based on caring.

The basic rule is that any humor is inappropriate when it is

- exclusive, or separates people,
- puts someone down or ridicules others,
- destroys self-esteem,
- uses stereotypes of groups,
- contributes to a negative atmosphere,
- offends others, or

lacks awareness of others feelings.

## **Put more laughter in your life**

- ◆ Figure out what makes you laugh and do it or read it or watch it more often.
- ◆ Surround yourself with funny people. Be with them whenever you can.
- ◆ Develop your own sense of humor.

---

Cheryl Stephens is the author of Plain Language Legal Writing, and is a leader in the field of plain language communication, providing training and workshops to clients all over North America.