

New Research: Good Jokes Can Cure Bad Moods

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After a rough day at the office or a nasty interchange, a great joke can often quickly lift us out of a bad mood. But why? Dutch researchers think they've verified why this is so and how a joke helps us -- most of the time - laugh it off and turn our negative mood positive.

It's not as obvious as you might think, says Madelijn Strick, PhD, a postdoctoral researcher at Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands, and the lead author of the study, published in the journal *Emotion*.

"Indeed, there is ample evidence that positive emotions in general can counteract negative emotions," she says. "However, this explanation does not make humor 'special.' It does not explain why humor would be more effective in this respect than non-humorous positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and love."

So Strick's team set out to figure out exactly how a joke can lift bad moods.

Not to spoil the punch line, but the researchers found a joke works not just because the humor distracts us from negative emotions but because of the cognitive work we need to do to "get" the joke.

Humor and Mood: Study Details

Strick's team had this hypothesis: Humorous stimuli (such as jokes or cartoons) would relieve negative emotions more than equally positive, but not funny, stimuli. So they asked 90 students, average age 21.5, to participate. The "cover story" was that the experiment was about how emotional experiences affect one's perception of color.

The researchers showed the men and women neutral, mildly negative, and strongly negative pictures during the study, followed by either a humorous or a positive, non-humorous stimulus. The negative pictures depicted such scenes as assault, car crashes, and drug addicts, and the positive ones had, for instance, a young father holding his newborn. Neutral pictures showed traffic scenes, neutral faces, or geometric shapes.

After viewing the pictures, the participants were asked to report their feelings. They were asked about how much they liked specific colors, too.

Humor and Mood: Study Results

When the men and women saw mildly and strongly negative pictures, then got the humorous stimuli, they had less negative feelings than when they were exposed to the negative pictures and then the non-funny positive stimuli. The stimuli that posed greater cognitive demands -- that

is, people had to work harder to get the joke -- were more effective at lifting bad moods than those that were less demanding. When they saw neutral pictures, humor had the same mood-lifting effect as non-humor.

Strick says that suggests, "humor may attenuate negative emotions as a result of cognitive distraction." **What sets humor, or at least a joke, apart from other positive emotions, she says, is that it includes an "incongruity" that must be resolved to get the joke. That is, the typical joke "set up" motivates listeners to make a prediction about the outcome, but a good punch line violates the expectations. The listener has to resolve the incongruity to make sense of the punch line.**

The new research verifies what humor experts have known or suspected, says Clifford Kuhn, MD, a professor of psychiatry at the University Of Louisville School Of Medicine in Kentucky who gives presentations on the value of humor. *"They have verified in numbers the fact that a joke is superior to any other forms of distraction it was tested against."* He explains the work of "getting" a joke -- resolving the incongruity -- by telling an old joke:

A frantic father calls the doctor, saying, "Doctor, my child just swallowed a fountain pen." The doctor assures him he is on the way and asks, "What are you doing in the meantime?" The father replies: "Using a pencil."

That punch line, of course, is unexpected. "The cognitive work of finding the new 'congruent' is what we call 'getting the joke,'" he says. Listeners must figure out that the father, frantic, misunderstood the question.

"What they are suggesting is that humor ... is an effective way to redirect anxiety," says Ed Dunkelblau, PhD, a psychologist in Northbrook, Ill., and past president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. Using jokes to boost moods works better if the situation that put you in the bad mood is not extremely personal, Kuhn says. **If someone's loved one was just diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, for instance, making a joke that they should just "forget about it" would not go over well -- the situation is too personal,** he says.

Your mood can't be so bad that the funniest joke in the world couldn't lift your spirits, he says. "You have to be in the mood to play," Kuhn says. "You have to be willing to participate in the joke to get the benefit out of it."