

Humor Reduces Job Stress

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An artist, a psychologist, and a corporate manager are facing a firing squad. They are each allowed one last request. The artist says, "I'd love to have one last look at an impressionist painting." The psychologist asks to give a brief talk about coping with stress. The corporate manager then jumps up and says, "Shoot me first! I can't take another talk on stress management!"

[Adapted from P. McGhee, *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Call 800-228-0810 to order.]

A Corporate Stress Epidemic

I have seen estimates that from 20% to 50% of the average American worker's day is wasted due to stress, boredom or general malaise on the job. The cost to employers in increased health care costs and reduced productivity is enormous—somewhere between \$200-\$300 billion per year at the turn of the century. Making the work environment more enjoyable reduces this waste by improving morale, cutting stress-related health problems, and boosting job performance and quality.

Over the past 25 years, job stress has continued to mount in the U.S. Every major company has learned that it has no choice but to provide some kind of stress management program for its employees. A 1995 report indicated that stress played a major factor in 70% of visits to the family doctor.¹ In the 1980s alone, stress-related claims in California increased 700%. And stress levels have continued to rise throughout the 1990s and into the present decade.

A frequently cited study commissioned by the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company in 1991 found that 34% of employees said they thought that stress on their job would cause them to burnout soon, and the same percentage said they had considered quitting their job in the previous year. Nearly half of those participating in the survey rated their jobs as "highly stressful." A later *Newsweek* poll showed that 40% of employees felt that their employers ask too much of them.²

Stress can have a profound effect upon workers. More and more managers are reporting staff coming in, closing the door and "unburdening." One hospital recently asked me to do a humor program because their nurses were so stressed out that they were developing serious physical symptoms themselves.

"Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me day and night, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do."
(Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil War)

Other common effects of stress are burnout, reduced motivation to do the job, cynicism, negativism, a sense of hurt, frustration, feelings of rejection, failure, loss of self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness, and a generally reduced ability to function. Employees complain that they can't sleep, or don't feel well. They become more isolated, and work less and less as part of the team. There is a sense of having little control over key events in life. Energy level drops, and it's difficult to focus clearly on the task at hand. Not surprisingly, resistance to change often increases in the presence of these feelings. I have heard burned-out employees say they were simply disgusted with their jobs. The disillusionment even spills over into their personal lives, interfering with relationships with their spouse and children.

When we're stressed out, we make more mistakes, and don't see problems or solutions as clearly. We drop and spill things and have trouble with mechanical tasks. We forget names or other information we've just heard, forget where we put our car keys, etc. If we were a car, we'd be operating on just half our cylinders. We'd lurch forward in the right direction, but with only half our usual speed or efficiency. A good laugh in this situation is like an engine tune-up. It gets us moving on all cylinders again. It recharges our batteries and keeps us going . . . and going . . . and going.

An International Problem

The United States is not the only country coping with increased levels of job stress. The Japanese had such high levels of stress in the 1980's and 1990's that they coined a new word, "karoshi," to describe cases of death from overwork. Even Switzerland has in recent years been forced to deal with loss of employment, job insecurity, and increased work load among those who keep their jobs.

In the mid-1990's, a survey conducted by the Manufacturing, Science, and Finance Union of 412 workplaces (employing 140,000 workers) throughout the UK showed that job stress in the UK had reached "epidemic proportions." Seventy one per cent said that stress levels were higher than five years ago. The increased occupational stress was attributed to ". . . growing workloads borne by fewer people, harder sales targets, performance-related pay, spiraling paperwork, fears about unemployment, and increasingly vicious management techniques." Additional stressors were insufficient time to do the job, poor relationships with bosses, little or no involvement in decision making, and lack of control over the job.³ Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

**Half the people you work with are below average.
47.2% of statistics are meaningless.**

The survey showed that 64% of Scottish workers and 60% of English workers were suffering from stress. The organization conducting the survey concluded that this

increased stress is leading to increased absenteeism and poorer job performance. One Manufacturing, Science and Finance officer argued that "Organizations are paying a high price for the stress epidemic in our workplaces. Employers should realize stress is bad for employees and bad for business . . . The focus on stress must be shifted away from the sick individual and onto the sick organization."

At the end of the 1990s, a small number of companies in European countries were just beginning to explore the usefulness of humor and fun on the job as a means of bolstering employee morale and productivity. I presented a keynote address at a conference in Basel Switzerland in 1998 entitled "The New Leadership Paradigm: Successful Corporations are Putting Humor to Work." The interest among the media was very strong, since the idea of making work fun had never occurred to them. Corporate managers, however, were doubtful that this approach could work in Germany and Switzerland, since humor and fun are viewed as something you do after you finish your work, not during your work. Once I assured them that a lighter approach led employees to be more productive—not less—they became more receptive to finding ways to build this idea into their own corporate cultures. I've been invited back to Basel in October or 1999 to speak to the Swiss about how cultivating your sense of humor can help cope with job stress, and continue to perform at peak levels and provide quality service on the tough days.

Causes of Job Stress

Each job, of course, has its own unique stressors. But many are common to all jobs. These include (threat of) being transferred to another state, moving to a new department, adapting to new procedures, losing an office window, dealing with different managers' ways of communicating/managing, paperwork, etc. The following, however are consistent sources of stress in all companies.

1) Keeping up with change

Many employees have come to hate change, because it never ends. As soon as you learn the latest technology or new procedures, a new version comes along, and you have to start all over again. It is the increasing pace of change that exacerbates this source of stress.

2) Doing more with less

As downsizing has led companies to get leaner in recent years, two things have happened. First, those who remain are anxious that they will be the next to go. A 1997 survey by the International Survey Research Corp. found that 46% of workers say they are "frequently concerned" about losing their jobs. The same figure was 31% in 1992. There is every reason to believe that the figure is higher today. Second, the reduced staff size means an increased work load for those who remain. In the midst of their job insecurity, they are asked to learn new skills and take on new responsibilities at the same time.

The light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off due to budget cuts.

Downsizing is designed to boost profits. Companies also realize that they must be lean in order to react quickly to the changing demands of the marketplace. Company executives have been put in the difficult position of having to find ways to increase productivity and quality while raising the bar higher and higher for both management and non-management employees. From the employee's perspective, raising the bar higher under these conditions means only one thing—more stress!

A business writer for *Time* magazine noted in 1993 (at the peak of corporate downsizing) that the average manufacturing workweek at that point was 41.5 hours, the highest in 27 years. "The resulting increase in stress leads to discontent, lowers creativity and undermines corporate loyalty."⁴

Sometimes downsizing can have unexpectedly damaging effects on the downsizing company. Nynex, for example, let go thousands of workers in the first half of the 1990s. "Union rules protect senior workers, 'but our younger employees were the ones who had taken more time to educate themselves,' says a remaining technician. 'We have actually gotten rid of our best people.' This practice—of getting rid of the brightest workers—happens so often that it has its own term: brightsizing." (It has also been called dumbsizing.)⁵

After one of my programs at a major chemical company, an employee told me that the downsizing they went through created a lot of pressure to be perfect on the job. He said, "My feeling is that if I'm not perfect, I'll be the next to go, because part of the company's reputation is that we don't make mistakes."

A corporate consultant was speaking to a group of managers, and asked, "Is there anyone here who's a perfect manager? I've always wanted to meet a perfect manager."

No one raised their hand at first, but then he noticed a man in the back of the room waving his hand. "Ah," said the speaker. I've finally found a perfect manager. Tell me sir, is it true that you're perfect?"

"No, no," said the man, "I'm raising my hand for my wife's first husband!"

3) Demand to do things faster

Customers in every domain of business now expect products and services faster than ever before. If your company can't provide something fast enough, they'll go to someone who can. This results in impossible deadlines that make employees feel that their back is against the wall every single day. As soon as one project is completed, there is another waiting in the wings that also has to be done immediately.

Employees know that they have to work quickly and efficiently, but their working conditions are making it more and more difficult to do so. Anyone working under this kind of time pressure is desperate for anything that can give them a break from the

constant tension. Laughter is one of the quickest and most effective ways you'll find to relieve such tension and get refocused on the task at hand.

4) Information overload

Once American businesses got on the information superhighway, there was an explosion of new information to be assimilated. Most employees now feel pushed to the limit to keep up with the latest information. And then there's e-mail and the Internet, which make us regret ever taking a day off—because of the mountain of messages we have to deal with when we return.

Humor Boosts Job Performance

The experience of a rapidly growing number of companies (as well as empirical research) has shown that humor and fun on the job support peak levels of job performance. This finding is supported by decades of research in psychology showing that while a moderate amount of tension, anxiety, or stress can boost performance, it progressively interferes with performance as tension gets higher than this moderate level. For many employees, a good part of every work day is now spent at tension levels that are worsening job performance and the quality of service provided. But we now know that there is no more effective tool than humor to quickly reduce tension, and re-energize efforts to complete the task.

Signs on Employee Doors/Desks

Incontinence Hot line . . . Can you hold please?

What happens if you get scared half to death twice?

All those who believe in psychokinesis, please raise my hand.

Oh Lord, give me the patience . . . and give it to me NOW!

You may know where you're going. God may know where you're going. Does your secretary know where you're going?

There is now a great deal of research documenting humor's power as a stress management tool. This research is discussed elsewhere at this website, along with the ways in which humor helps you cope with job stress or any other form of life stress. For one example of this kind of research, a study of 36 female executives showed that women who scored higher on a sense of humor test had higher self-esteem and suffered less burnout on the job than their low humor peers. Also, frequent daily hassles contributed more to burnout and low self-esteem among low sense of humor executives than highs. So these women's sense of humor helped protect them from both burnout and a loss of self-esteem.⁶

One overworked engineering group tried to lighten up the atmosphere by placing a note on the bulletin board announcing that John Roe and his wife had had a baby boy, and needed suggestions on what to call him. A playful "Name the Baby Contest" poster was put up to encourage fun names, and employees added suggestions for the next few days. The suggestions included names like Skid Roe, Tomor Roe, Golfp Roe, Zor Roe, Fidel Cast Roe and He Roe. Not surprisingly, the group noticed a sharp drop in stress as this was going on.⁷

The Popularity of Dilbert Cartoons

When I have a chance to walk the hallways of companies a bit, I'm almost always struck by the number of Dilbert cartoons on doors, bulletin boards, etc. I've heard it over and over again: "That's exactly the way it is around here!" Scott Adams uses exaggeration and distortion to draw attention to the things that drive employees nuts. The comic relief provided by the cartoons eases some of the stress caused by the issues represented in the cartoons.

"Knock knock. Who's there? Not you anymore." (From a Dilbert cartoon)

In 1996 (August 12 issue), Newsweek published an article about the rising popularity of Dilbert among corporate employees. They provided the following test, called "Is it real . . . or is it 'Dilbert'?"

"A) A software engineer, recently denied a promotion, is receiving his performance review. He asks his boss why he got passed over. 'You're not a team player,' says the boss. 'What do you mean, I'm not a team player?' asks the stunned employee. The answer: 'You didn't smile in the company photo.'

B) A boss and a subordinate are traveling together on a business trip. At an airport layover, the subordinate goes to a pay phone to check the office for messages. The boss appears fascinated. 'You mean,' he says, 'you can check voice mail while you're on the road?'"

Amazingly enough, both happened in real life. Employees love Dilbert because the comic strip expresses their own frustrations and annoyances about the absurd things that happen on their job. According to Guy Kawasaki, a management expert with Apple Computer, "There are only two kinds of companies. Those that recognize that they're just like 'Dilbert,' and those that don't know it yet."⁸

Some of the common themes dealt with in Dilbert cartoons are downsizing, cost containment, heavy work loads, working in humiliating (and shrinking) cubicles, bosses tormenting their underlings, changes in technology, the latest management fads, and corporate double talk. Regardless of the theme, most people feel that the cartoon helps them deal with some of the tough parts of their job by helping them laugh at the absurdity of the things that happen.

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