

Can laughter make our lives better?

Researchers say yes

12 April 2018, by Amy Schmitz



Credit: University of Arizona

Why do humorous dating profiles get more right swipes? Can being funny help solve problems? Is laughter really the best medicine?

Humor and the "good life" seem to go hand-in-hand. Funny people seem to move effortlessly through the world. Business articles and gurus prescribe [humor](#) as a key to effective workplace performance. The website for the African country of Eritrea even describes humor as "a tremendous resource for surmounting problems, enhancing your relationships, and supporting both physical and emotional health."

"Humor, Comedy and Consumer Behavior," a paper by Caleb Warren, assistant professor of marketing in the UA Eller College of Management; Adam Barsky of the University of Melbourne; and A. Peter McGraw of the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business, looks beyond advertising to highlight how and when humor helps people reach their goals.

The paper, forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, breaks people's goals into three broad categories: hedonic goals (maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain), utilitarian goals (optimizing

long-term well-being) and social goals (getting along with others). The researchers integrate insights from psychology, management, linguistics, anthropology, medicine and neuroscience to propose a framework that summarizes the current scientific knowledge about humor.

The authors argue that humor appreciation (laughter and amusement) helps people feel better by making positive experiences, such as watching a movie or dining at a restaurant, more pleasant—and negative experiences, such as going for dental work or waiting in line, less unpleasant. Sharing a laugh also can help people bond and get along better.

But humor appreciation does not always improve utilitarian outcomes, such as decision-making or health. For example, laughing tends to make people more creative—but also more careless. Similarly, watching a funny movie may help someone recover from emotional ailments, such as depression or an anxiety disorder, but there is little evidence that humor will help with cancer or even a common cold.

Similarly, comedy production (trying to make others laugh) sometimes helps people reach their goals but other times gets in the way. For example, cracking a joke can help people capture attention, but it also can make a message seem less important.

One notable conclusion from the paper is that the effects of comedy production depend on the type of joke people tell, as well as whether the [joke](#) actually makes an audience laugh. Teasing and telling insulting jokes are less likely to help people cope with loss or navigate an awkward social interaction than joking about the weather or creating an amusing pun. But even jokes about the weather and puns won't help if no one laughs.

More information: Caleb Warren et al. Humor,

Comedy, and Consumer Behavior, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2018). DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucy015](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy015)

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