In the field of mental health and employee assistance, our focus is placed on helping our clients improve various facets of their lives. It can be tremendously difficult to cope with life’s challenges and it can be helpful to find humor during times of stress and complexity.

Laughter can extinguish conflict and reflect ease and vulnerability. Laughter also mirrors happiness and optimism. If you don’t believe me, try worrying about something while you’re genuinely laughing. The two simply cannot occupy the same place in our minds at the same time. Laughter is a sincere and genuine collaboration between our minds and bodies. Something we can all use more of!

As a parent, one of my cherished memories is remembering the sound of my daughter laughing for the first time. The sound filled the room, and made all of us laugh too! Laughter is contagious. It was a happy moment, one that I’ll never forget.

I have found that my best memories are usually the ones when we laughed together. Whether it’s with our children, coworkers, friends or family, laughter becomes the highlight to our day; our week, even our lives. There is potential in humor and laughter. It lifts us up and connects us in a way that nothing else can do. Laughter is a gift that binds us all together and knows no boundary.

This issue is dedicated to the oftentimes forgotten gems of humor and laughter and how both can help us improve our mindset and overall wellbeing.

Tisa Mitchell, the newest member to Sand Creek Workplace Wellness, will tackle laughter and the impact it has on our brains. While our Director of OAP Services, Carol Nagele-Vitalis, will share her insight into ways that laughter can impact the workplace. We finish this issue with the traditional insight from Dear Sandy.

May your springtime be filled with laughter and joy.

LOL!
There is a lot to smile about when it comes to humor. At the physiological level, humor reduces levels of stress hormones such as cortisol, and is thought to enhance our immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems. Laughter also provides a workout for the muscles of the diaphragm, abdomen, and face. A good laugh can raise our spirits, or ease our tension. If we are able to laugh during a stressful situation, we can put psychological distance between ourselves and the stress.

With so many positives, it is no wonder laughing is one of the first vocalization babies as young as two months learn to do. From there, we learn what to laugh at based on our experiences, attitudes and friendships.

But, did you know finding a comic funny, laughing at a joke, giggling with a coworker/friend/loved one, or anything else humorous in general gives your brain a great workout too? Since our brain has no exact humor center, once your brain encounters humorous material, it begins a delicate dance of actions.

As a joke unfolds, the cerebral cortex, made of several lobes within the brain, jumps into action processing the information and sending messages through its multifaceted network at lighting speed. Researcher are still learning more about the route in which humor travels around our brain, but there is knowledge related to why these lobes are involved.

The first stop on the humor train is the frontal lobe. This lobe serves as the humor gatekeeper. This area of the brain is associated with reasoning, motor skills, higher levels cognition, and expressive language. It determines if we are going to “get” the joke or not. If the funny passes the frontal lobe test, it lets the effects of humor proceed, sending out an electrical wave through the remaining parts of the cerebral cortex.

Moving quickly to the next destination, the occipital lobe, which is associated with interpreting visual stimuli and information is home to the primary visual cortex. This cortex receives and interprets information from the retinas of the eyes. Further confirming what we saw was in fact, funny. The temporal lobe gets into the fun now. This is also the location of the primary auditory cortex, which is important for interpreting sounds and the language we hear confirming what we heard was funny.

The hippocampus is also located in the temporal lobe, which is why this portion of the brain is also heavily associated with the formation of memories. It is these memories that help us relate to what was funny by tapping into our life experiences and understanding of cultural norms.

Last, but not least, the parietal lobe of our brain fires. This lobe is associated with processing tactile sensory information such as pressure, touch, and pain. A portion of the brain known as the somatosensory cortex is located in this lobe and is essential to the
processing of the body’s senses. Damage to the parietal lobe can result in problems with verbal memory, an impaired ability to control eye gaze, and problems with language. As our brain continues to send the funny messages around the rest of our body begins to responds with maybe surprise, or delight and now...laughter. The results can be anything from a mild chuckle to an all-out belly laugh.

Studies on humor and mental health show a correlation between higher sense of humor scores and attributes such as greater self-esteem, better coping skills during stressful times and a better image of self and of our place in the world. People with a more developed sense of humor may be better equipped for dealing with difficult and even life-threatening situations. Having a greater understanding of how humor affects our brains and bodies is something researchers around the world are continuing to study.

**JOKES. JOKES. JOKES**

So...did you hear about the fight in the candy store?... *Two suckers got licked.*

So...two guys walk into a bar... *The third one ducks.*

So...I just watched a documentary about beavers... *It was the best dam show I’ve ever seen.*

So...If you see a robbery at an Apple store does that make you an iWitness?
Can we laugh, have fun and still be productive? The answer is yes and on some level it makes sense doesn’t it? If we are more relaxed our ability to perform our work tasks and solve problems is easier and therefore more likely. A study done by Kounios and Beeman, shows us that when people are in a better mood they are more likely to exhibit improved problem solving ability. The researchers compared worker performance and found that those watching a funny video clip as opposed to an anxiety inducing video clip, solved more problems with insight. Humor can open us up to possibilities and create a mood where options and solutions can be seen.

The research bears out some common sense wisdom which is that humor, when used skillfully, helps the morale. It reduces hostility, relieves tension and can help communicate difficult messages.

As a word of caution, humor can be tricky especially in a workplace so it bears identifying some safer types of humor for the workplace where boundaries are respected.

One option might include self-deprecating humor. When we are able to make fun of ourselves the risk of offending others is low and it shows we don’t take ourselves so seriously.

Another option would be puns or word play. When cleverly placed these small jokes can often lighten the mood and offer a moment of comic relief.

Finally, finding the irony or humor in the everyday situation (think Seinfeld) is another form of helpful humor. Poking fun at the everyday and mundane things in life like, commuting, paying bills, watering our plants can help to lift the drudgery.

However, one form of humor to avoid in the workplace is sarcasm. The word “sarcasm” derives from ancient Greek for “to tear flesh, gnash teeth, speak bitterly.” Although sarcastic people may intend to be funny, there is often a negative twist which does not improve the mood, but can create a downward spiral of yet more sarcasm and hurt.

In closing, we wouldn’t want to force someone into making humorous quips or require it of a person, but don’t spoil the fun of others and maybe even try it. Giggle along and see what it does to your mood. Laughter is contagious and relieves our stress as we work through the day and that is a good thing!

References:
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DEAR SANDY,

I’ve just started a new job working for a smaller company. Most of my coworkers have all worked together for many years (one of the reasons I took the job!) and seem to have a good time throughout the day joking around and making the day fun even though we’re all quite busy. What are some appropriate ways to consider boundaries with jokes or humor that fit the workplace? I’ve heard a few comments that were meant to be funny, but they seemed like they could have been taken in the wrong way too.

Signed,

Not Really a Spoil Sport

DEAR SPOIL SPORT,

Not all humor is going to be right for every situation. When representing your company or organization the following types of humor are generally considered No-No’s: Locker room and bathroom humor, political, sexist, malicious, religious, homophobic, and xenophobic humor should all be immediately removed from the ‘Ok’ list.

More often, it is self-deprecating, unexpected, word-play and sarcasm (with a caveat) that are more likened to areas of humor that are more accepted and don’t get people in trouble in any work setting.

When we make fun of ourselves (self deprecating) we show vulnerability, and it lightens the mood around the workplace. By admitting that you made a mistake and making fun of yourself it shows that you’re willing to be human, and sometimes that helps in pressure environments.

Unexpected humor can also be a bright spot in someone’s day when you respond to them in an accent, for example.

Sarcasm is also good, but to a point. Too much sarcasm can reflect negativity, so use it sparingly.

Remember, what is funny to one person might not be funny to another. If you overheard a joke that is sexist or is clearly beyond the pale of what’s considered appropriate, then please feel free to contact us at Sand Creek at 888.243.5744 and we can help you navigate any response in a civil and professional manner.

Happy Spring!

Sandy

Send your Dear Sandy Questions to info@sandcreekeap.com
Sand Creek specializes in providing exceptional workplace wellness services to support the human spirit at work. We embrace our core values of service, hope, trust, compassion, and wisdom in each interaction, thereby upholding our mission of providing helpful solutions to improve productivity and shining a light in the darkest of moments.

Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is designed to offer face-to-face counseling and consulting to those that voluntarily reach out to us. We are not simply a phone counseling service or online tool type EAP. Thousands of professional counselors form a worldwide Sand Creek network available to deliver personal care and support to you in your community. Our services are administered nationally, but delivered locally.

Sand Creek supports the relationship between individual health and overall organizational health. Our Organization Assistance Program (OAP) service extends the reach into the organization and provides work teams with a systemic approach to improve the health and well-being of an organization.