



Coping with the Daily Stressors of an Academic Career: Try Mirthium®

RONALD A. BERK, PHD

Warning: This article contains humor, which may be unsuitable for some of you. You know who you are. If you have the sense of humor of a grapefruit, that's okay. To accommodate your "serious" perspective, this article is close-captioned for the humor-impaired. After each attempt at jocularity, the humorous words will be explained in parentheses so that you can laugh along with the rest of us.

Ronald A. Berk, PhD, has been a Professor of Biostatistics and Measurement at The Johns Hopkins University for 28 years. He has published two books and several research articles on humor and its application to college teaching. He may be contacted at (410) 955-8212, rberk@son.jhmi.edu, or www.ronberk.com.

How many stressors do you have right now in your life as an academician? Whether you're a newbie or a veteran, there isn't a noticeable difference in teaching load, hours of practice, publication demands, pressure to obtain external funding, meetings, meetings, and—oh, yes—meetings. Do you yearn for the days of yesteryear when teaching and research were so much easier? For example, in the age of Hippocrates, professors had to cover only five organs in the human body: brain, heart, spleen, hernia, and foot. The treatment for most diseases was: "Lop it off." In contrast, now, because of your professorial responsibilities, you're probably eyeballing (a.k.a. "utilizing interocular perusal technique") this issue of *APS* to explore whether the scrubs are greener elsewhere.

How do you deal with an endless barrage of tasks, frantic pace, and a relentless schedule and thrive in a career many of us absolutely love? The simplest solution (Are you ready? Isn't this exciting?) is: Thorazine®. Just kidding. Short of the controlled substances you may prescribe for your patients' therapy, consider: humor and laughter. "Wow, what a letdown. That's not new. Tell me something I don't know." This article concentrates on what you don't do. It's "walking the know" that counts.

Research on Humor and Laughter

The health care literature is larded with articles and books on the benefits of humor and laughter. Recently, a few autopsies were reported on the 50 published studies conducted over the past 35 years,¹⁻⁷ precisely diagnosing what we know and what we don't know (but would like to know).

The psychophysiological research domain is considerably broader than you might imagine. There are two streams of research: the psychological and the physiological. The *psychological effects* relate primarily to humor as a coping mechanism and, to a lesser extent, its enhancement of interpersonal relationships; the *physiological effects* relate to laughter's impact on the body: central nervous, muscular, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, immune, and cardiovascular systems.

The research evidence suggests several strategies to deal with the daily stressors you encounter in your career. The easiest one to apply was described nearly a century ago: The primary psychological function of humor is

[T]o detach us from our world of good and evil, of loss and gain, and enable us to see it in proper perspective. It frees us from vanity on the one hand and from pessimism on the other by keeping us larger than what we do and greater than what can happen to us.⁸

Detachment from Problem Situations

Detachment is one of the most effective techniques for coping with the day-to-day tasks you must tackle. ("Detachment" is derived from two Latin root words: *de*, meaning "remove," and *tachmentus*, meaning "this javelin from my skull.") Using humor to distance yourself from your commitments enables you to disengage mentally and, albeit temporarily, escape from reality. It puts all that you do into a proper perspective.

This function of detachment, which considers humor as an adaptive coping mechanism, is the conceptualization of humor adopted by psychological theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Gordon Allport, Rollo May, and Frasier Crane. Stepping back and seeing humor in a situation liberates you from your own negative emotional responses to that situation. It promotes a sense of objectivity that buffers those responses. Although humor may not always eliminate them, at least it can temporarily suppress them.

Test No. 1. You can test your ability to use humor to detach the next time you attend a meeting. Try having an out-of-meeting experience. Not drifting or sleeping. Imagine yourself levitating above your colleagues, looking down at them, and observing how hilarious they can be as they "seriously" argue, complain, whine, scream, and smack each other over agenda items that are just not that important.

Coping with Interpersonal Conflict

The emotional response to an uncomfortable or threatening situation with a colleague or patient is typically negative, such

as feelings of anxiety, tension, stress, embarrassment, anger, frustration, hostility, grief, and incontinence. Those reactions can submerge you so deeply in a problem that you can't see the problem. They can cripple your ability to function (a.k.a. "do your job") in the ED,^{9, 10} ICU,¹¹ ENT, MRI, or NFL. Psychiatrists like Dr. Niles Crane report that people with severe mental disorders, such as Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, Norman Bates, and guests on *The Jerry Springer Show*, lack a sense of humor. They can't detach from their issues.

Humor can jolt you out of your habitual frame of mind. Being "out of your mind" promotes a sense of control, self-protection, empowerment, and superiority over the problem. In other words, *you* rule. You're Rambo or Ramboette in a white coat and scrubs.

Preventing Burnout

Using humor in your career can help prevent burnout, caused by a sense of powerlessness, as when your teenage daughter goes on vacation with *her* friends and *your* credit cards. That is the time for the detachment mechanism to kick in so you're able to gain control over the situation. This ability to detach can increase your resilience to the dangerously high levels of stress that lead to burnout.¹² *Remember:* Although you may not be able to control what's thrown on your academic or clinical plate, you don't have to swallow everything. You can control how you respond to every entrée. If not, those institutions that devour their young will gobble you up, then spit you out.

Test No. 2. Consider the classic character of Hawkeye Pierce on *M*A*S*H*. Imagine playing his role in your university department or hospital. See, now you're



"Stepping back and seeing humor in a situation liberates you from your own negative emotional responses to that situation."

smiling. Some of you may have already assumed that role. Hawkeye's constant joking with his colleagues and patients, even the banter in the OR, permitted him to distance himself from his primary stressor, the Korean War, and all the other daily stressors. (*Note:* "banter" is derived from the French word, *kibbitz*, meaning literally, "to torment Frank Burns.") You can derive that coping benefit from bantering with your faculty, administrators, students, patients, and others to deal with situations that drive you nuts. Although your banter may be annoying to a few of the bantees, especially those who are humor-impaired, its therapeutic value to you may be worth that cost.

Other Benefits of Humor and Laughter

For other benefits, see the Top-10 List in the description of Mirthium® in the box accompanying this article. There is also a Top-10

List of warnings, which addresses the enthusiastic but as yet unproven claims by members of the medical community.^{13, 14} ♦

References

1. Lefcourt HM. The humor solution. In Snyder CR (ed.), *Coping and Copers: Adaptive Processes and People*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 68–92.
2. Martin RA. Humor, laughter, and physical health: Methodological issues and research findings. *Psychol Bull* 2001;127: 504–519.
3. Martin RA. Sense of humor. In Lopez SJ, Snyder CR (eds.), *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003, pp. 313–326.
4. McGhee PP. *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1999.
5. Provine RR. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000.
6. Bennett HJ. Humor in medicine. *Southern Medical Journal* 2003;96:1257–1261.
7. Berk RA. *Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator: Evidence-based Techniques in Teaching and Assessment*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002, Chapter 2.
8. Kline LW. The psychology of humor. *Am J Psychol* 1907;18:421–441.
9. Keller KL, Koenig WJ. Management of stress and prevention of burnout in emergency physicians. *Ann Emerg Med* 1989;18:42–47.
10. Rosenberg L. A qualitative investigation of the use of humor by emergency personnel as a strategy for coping with stress. *J Emerg Nursing* 1991;17:197–203.
11. Eisendrath SJ, Link N, Mattay M. Intensive care unit: How stressful for physicians? *Crit Care Med* 1986;14: 95–98.
12. Talbot LA, Lumden DB. On the association between humor and burnout. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* 2000;13:419–428.
13. Zand J, Spreen AN, LaValle JB. *Smart Medicine for Healthier Living*. Garden City Park, NY: Avery Publishing, 1999.
14. Ziegler J. Immune system may benefit from the ability to laugh. *J Natl Cancer Inst* 1995; 98: 342–343.

“Oscar makes me take Mirthium® every day before I go to work.”
—Felix Unger (*The Odd Couple*)

MIRTHIUM®

(Generic: laughtilyouplotz)

If you have been diagnosed with chronic humor impairment, jocularitis, jesticulosis, or just plain “seriousness,” talk to your humor professional about Mirthium®.

BENEFITS

Reported benefits are based on randomized, quadruple-blind (even the researcher doesn’t have a clue what’s happening), placebo, controlled clinical trials worldwide on 7 semi-human HMO CEOs, conducted by several disreputable university researchers. Those results were replicated in studies with 3 blind mice, 5 Chinese hamsters, and a partridge in a pear tree, plus a convenience sample of sheep from New Zealand.

The major benefits of Mirthium® according to the latest research relate to both humor and laughter:

Humor

1. Reduces negative emotional consequences of stress, anxiety, and tension
2. Decreases depression, loneliness, and anger
3. Improves mood
4. Increases self-esteem
5. Promotes a sense of empowerment

Laughter

6. Increases pain tolerance and threshold
7. Improves respiration and breathing
8. Improves mental functioning (alertness, creativity, and memory)
9. Exercises facial, abdominal, and thoracic muscles
10. Relaxes muscles/decreases muscle tension

WARNINGS

There are certain claims or common beliefs about the effects of Mirthium® that are false. Seriously, there is **NO** conclusive research evidence yet to support the following:

Humor

1. Decreases symptoms of illness and medical problems
2. Enhances interpersonal relationships, intimacy, and marriage satisfaction
3. Increases longevity

Laughter

4. Stimulates the production of endorphins which decrease pain
5. Prevents or alleviates pain

6. Lowers heart rate
7. Lowers blood pressure
8. Decreases heart disease
9. Decreases stress hormones (serum cortisol, dopac, and epinephrine)
10. Boosts immune system functions to fight viral and bacterial infections and disease
 - ❖ increases immunoglobulin A(IgA), M(IgM), and G(IgG)
 - ❖ increases natural killer cell activity (NKA)
 - ❖ increases number of activated T-lymphocytes (T4 and CD4 cells)
 - ❖ increases T-cell helper/suppressor ratio
 - ❖ increases levels of Complement 3
 - ❖ increases number of B-cells
 - ❖ increases gamma-interferon levels

DOSAGE

Only 1 delayed-release red transdermal patch placed on the tip of your nose with one tablespoon of apple-sauce every 24 hours. You'll be able to laugh until you're punchy all day and all night.

- ❖ Recommended by the International Association of Polymorphous Prescriptions
- ❖ #1 choice of professors, physicians, administrators, accountants, scientists, engineers, IT specialists, lawyers, IRS auditors, FBI agents, and airport security officers
- ❖ Immediate results: Start laughing within 3 hours after first dose as the patch dissolves in your nose

CONTRAINDICATIONS

Mirthium® is contraindicated in humans and assorted livestock who have a known hypersensitivity to anything or with nail fungus, hemorrhoids, humongous prostate, cataracts, or irritable howl syndrome. Tell your humor professional about any over-, under-, or around-the-counter medications. Mirthium® interacts with every medication.

SIDE EFFECTS

No severe allergic reactions other than convulsive hysteria and shrieking like a banshee. If laughter continues for more than 48 hours, you should be so lucky. Side effects include: trichinosis, halitosis, gingivitis, hallucinations, drooling, hair loss, athlete's foot, snoring, urge to smoke, malaise (compulsion to eat corn), cavities, gangrene, and necrophilia.

QUESTIONS

Ask your humor professional about Mirthium® today. Call 1-555-YO-FUNNY for your free information guide on Mirthium® or visit www.mirthium.com.

BERK PHARMACEUTICALS
(A name you used to be able to trust!)

Copyright © 2004 Ronald A. Berk, Ph.D.
(410-955-8212; rberk@son.jhmi.edu)