

The Funny Factor

Why smart brains take humor seriously.

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Ron Berk, PhD, a psychologist who taught statistics at Johns Hopkins University, has put such knowledge to work in the classroom, using jokes, funny examples, sight gags and skits. Each semester he'd untuck his shirt, put a cigar in his mouth and a baseball cap on his head, and show up to his statistics class with an impeccably dressed, somewhat formal female colleague. "I'm Oscar and this is Felice, and we're going to talk about relationships," he said, as the theme from *The Odd Couple* played. The students laughed because their professors looked ridiculous. But as they listed the couple's similarities and differences, the humor helped them learn an important statistical concept.

Berk has published a series of studies showing that sharing a laugh helps students learn more. Even funny test directions helped students do significantly better on an otherwise identical exam, according to a study Berk did that will be published later this year. He also detailed his unorthodox teaching methods in a book, *Humor as an Instructional Defibrillator*.