



PAM DIBBS

The Serious Business of Humor

Scientific Summary

By Pam Dibbs

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“Every chuckle or guffaw brings
with it a host of business benefits.

Laughter relieves stress and boredom, boosts engagement
and well-being, and spurs not only creativity and
collaboration but also analytic precision and productivity.”¹

Writing a science summary as a comedian might seem as out of place as a crumpet in a curry, since analysis often dampens humor. However, I’m motivated to do this for two reasons.

First, in my coaching work with organizations, I’ve seen that when humor and laughter are integral to the culture, both the organizations and employees reap substantial benefits. Studies show that laughter boosts happiness, creativity, productivity, and connection. Leveraging humor can be transformative—if we want employees to look forward to Mondays and bring their best, most creative selves to work, it’s time we take humor seriously.

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Secondly, after extensive studies on fear and other negative emotions, it’s refreshing to see laughter and humor recognized as valuable scientific topics.

Although the research is still in its early stages, there’s a growing body of evidence supporting what we intuitively know. Cognitive neuroscientist Scott Weems aptly states, “Nearly every aspect of our lives is improved by focusing

¹ Beard A, Leading with Humor (Harvard Business Review, May 2014)

on humor.” Or, as we Brits might say, it’s as obvious as putting the kettle on.

Behavioral scientist Peter McGraw categorizes laughter’s positive effects into three areas: coping, cooperation, and creativity. Ready for some science?

COPE

Laughter is a physiological response to humor and a social emotion, profoundly impacting our brains and bodies. It influences how we think, feel, and behave. The same chemicals activated by drugs and chocolate also give us pleasure during laughter. It’s like having a cheeky bit of chocolate without the calories.

Laughter releases endorphins, our natural painkillers. It lowers stress hormone levels, reduces blood pressure, relieves muscle tension, and can even boost immunity by stimulating white blood cell activity. “Laughter leads to pleasurable feelings and significantly increases the release of endorphins and other opioid peptides in the brain areas controlling arousal and emotions.”

Research shows that laughter significantly increases pain thresholds. Watching about 15 minutes of comedy in a group can increase pain tolerance by 10%. Laughter therapy is increasingly being used for its health benefits. It’s cheaper than a spa day and just as effective.

COOPERATE

As Victor Borge said, “The shortest distance between two people is a good laugh.” Teams that laugh together find collaboration, problem-solving, and conflict resolution easier. Laughter, a social behavior, is crucial for forming social bonds, improving trust, and enhancing team cohesion. We are 30 times more likely to laugh in a social setting than when alone.

Psychology professor Robert Levenson at the University of California found that couples who used humor while discussing irritations not only

felt better but had higher relationship satisfaction and stayed together longer. Talk about keeping the peace without a stiff upper lip.

Cultural anthropologist Mahadev Apte noted, “Laughter occurs when people are comfortable with one another, when they feel open and free. The more laughter there is, the more bonding occurs within the group.”

Cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Sophie Scott adds, “We’ve known for some time that when we talk to someone, we often mirror their behavior. Now we’ve shown that the same applies to laughter, too—at least at the level of the brain.” In other words, laughter is contagious, like a really good episode of “Fawlty Towers.”

CREATE

Humor fuels problem-solving and innovation, enhancing an organization’s creative process and broadening perspectives. A Wharton study showed that individuals primed to laugh before a complex task exhibited more flexible, creative decision-making and greater analytical precision. In another study, subjects who watched an amusing video clip were significantly more likely to solve a creative problem involving a box of tacks, a set of matches, and a candle.

In a brainstorming study, a group of improvisational comedians generated 20% more ideas than professional product designers, and their ideas were rated 25% more creative. “It seems counterintuitive, but laughter is productivity’s greatest ally.” It relieves boredom, clears the mind, reduces tension, and facilitates social connection.

Incorporating humor into the workplace isn’t just a nice-to-have—it’s a must-have for creating a vibrant, productive, and innovative culture. After all, if we can laugh together, we can achieve anything together. Cheers to a happier, more connected, and creative workplace!