Laughter: A stress buster for busy students

by Kristine Cangelosi, Psy.D. and James R. Oelschleger, Psy.D.

It is your first day of school at Florida Tech and you have been prepared for the past three weeks. You wake up immediately to your alarm, which is playing, “My future’s so bright I gotta wear shades.” It is 6 a.m., three hours before your first class and you find yourself excited and nervous, but ready to put your high school education to the test. You get dressed, put on your brand new Nikes, your neatly pressed slacks and your rock concert T-shirt you got in Orlando with your parents last weekend. You eat a large bowl of cold cereal, including a healthy serving of blueberries to ward off free radicals. You have already stocked your backpack with blue, black and red pens, number two pencils, 3-ring binders and recycled paper, just in case.

You arrive at class one hour early, so you will be prompt and have a great seat up in front. You sit at your desk at full attention, with a cup of coffee, a sheet of paper and a pencil in front of you, ready to begin learning. When the professor finally enters, you don’t hear your name as she reads off the class roster. As you bend over to find your laminated student schedule, you spill your coffee on yourself, the floor and the person next to you, whom you’ve been trying to strike up a conversation with, with no luck. As you are attempting to help your burning classmate, you look up to find a “No food or drinks” sign just above your professor’s head. You then realize you are in the right class, however the wrong building. As you get off your seat and gather your belongings, you feel as though all eyes are on you. “Are they just looking at me?” you ponder. Unfortunately, as you stood up, your backpack unleashed all of your belongings onto the floor, including the 10-pack of condoms you were given during orientation from the Health Center. When you woke up, you chose to laugh at himself would not have changed the situation that had already occurred. Unfortunately, we aren’t always as graceful or smooth as we might like to be, especially when something is very important to us. There are always situations in our life that we cannot control or change. What we can control is how we react to them. We all can learn to take our pain and transform it into a natural tension reducer or energy release. It also provides us with distraction from our tension, worry and even pain. It is impossible to feel miserable and mirth simultaneously. When we are laughing hysterically, we can’t help but feel anything else and we focus only on it. Watching funny movies or cartoons can help distract us from stressors, even if for a short time, and laughter actually increases our pain threshold.

David Abramis, a psychologist at California State University–Long Beach concluded “Those who felt their work was fun performed better and got along better with coworkers than did those who were satisfied in their jobs and did not see them as fun.”

Our culture tells us we can beat our struggles if we learn to get serious, work hard and get tough. Several advertisements also add that we should even learn to play hard or not play at all. However, working hard and remaining serious throughout all of our activities, including our leisure time, may have serious effects on our level of stress. So, laugh a little. Having a sense of humor in the workplace can actually help you to remain creative under pressure. Under stress, we tend to tense up, and may become of humor may not be enough to benefit a healthy person, it could very well be the only exercise option for someone who is hospitalized or bedridden. In addition, other research has found that laughter can increase levels of alertness, improve memory and may have beneficial effects on the immune system.

You can look back on this day with horror and embarrassment. You can also look back on the experience and laugh about it. It is likely great material to write home about. The beauty of situations such as these is that we get to choose our reactions to them, and if we want to look at the brighter side of things, we can.

In a situation like this, one could react in myriad ways, such as with feelings of humiliation, avoidance and/or embarrassment. However, this student reacted with a grin. When he woke up, he chose to laugh at himself. Getting embarrassed or angry with himself would not have changed the situation that had already occurred. Unfortunately, we aren’t always as graceful or smooth as we might like to be, especially when something is very important to us. There are always situations in our life that we cannot control or change. What we can control is how we react to them. We all can learn to take our pain and transform it into a natural tension reducer or energy release. It also provides us with distraction from our tension, worry and even pain. It is impossible to feel miserable and mirth simultaneously. When we are laughing hysterically, we can’t help but feel anything else and we focus only on it. Watching funny movies or cartoons can help distract us from stressors, even if for a short time, and laughter actually increases our pain threshold.

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Center Hours
Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location
CAPS is located at the intersection of Country Club Road and University Blvd., west of Babcock Street.

Is laughter really the best medicine?
You don’t need to be Patch Adams to conclude that humor is beneficial. Just look at someone’s face while they are laughing. Humor contributes to our overall wellness, it makes stress manageable and it sustains hope. When we are hurt emotionally or when we face tragedy, it can help us to distance ourselves or to see another perspective, and when we can laugh at ourselves, it makes our world a little bit easier to deal with. There is more and more evidence accumulating regarding the health benefits of humor. It doesn’t have any side effects, it has no cost, it’s readily available, nonalcoholic and does not require any special equipment. The use of humor in your life does not imply that you become a court jester or stop taking anything seriously. It also does not imply that it should be used at inappropriate times, or used to ridicule or discount others. On the contrary, the effective use of humor primarily involves adopting attitudes that help us cope in times of crisis and change. A healthy sense of humor involves simultaneously taking our problems or our work seriously while being a little bit more lighthearted ourselves.

Administering Humor
- Take the time to read the jokes sent to you on your e-mail, or the comics that come across your desk at school or work.
- If your colleagues or coworkers are laughing in your vicinity, get up and join them. It can create a sense of team spirit and provide you with a needed break.
- Create a humor journal: Keep track of the things that you experience that have made you smile, laugh or feel positive. Keep a notebook handy and revisit these sometime later, on less joyful days.

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Additional articles and student support are available on the CAPS Web site at www.fit.edu/caps/