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Use Humor to Enhance Your Relationships

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“Why did the chicken cross the road?”

You may groan upon hearing this—one of the oldest jokes in the world. *Not another* chicken joke!

But bear with the joke teller, because he is simply trying to connect by getting you to laugh or smile.

Humor is an effective tool to bring people together. When your primary relationships include healthy humor, it shows that you have a healthy relationship. Being able to laugh together instills the sense of “team,” something that you need when times are not so funny.

For better or worse

Yet it’s not as simple as it seems. “Humor can work for better or worse,” says Robert Pierce, PhD, a spokesperson for the American Psychological Association. “It can be a bonding experience, but if used in the wrong context, it can produce feelings of hurt or anger.”

Such humor, in fact, is what can be called “hostile” humor. This type of humor, says Steve Sultanoff, PhD, a spokesperson for the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, is used as a put-down, is often sarcastic and may be delivered in the spirit of “teaching someone a lesson.”

Sultanoff says that use of *empathic* humor is the key to building bridges. “Playful, teasing humor is very much sought by couples,” he says. “In fact, in surveys, a sense of humor is ranked among the top 10 of desired qualities in a mate.”

The why of humor

The reason people want humor in their lives? “It makes us feel good,” says Sultanoff. Laughter—one common response to humor—changes us physically. Humor changes us mentally as well. It promotes a more upbeat outlook, and although studies are few, reports show that humor can help to reduce stress.

Another important aspect of humor is that it serves as “an invitation to change perspective,” says

Pierce. By getting us to view a situation from a different—even funny—angle, it helps us to put life’s problems in balance.

The when of humor

In many relationships, it’s common to share playful banter. If your humor tends to be more on the hostile side, consider this: It likely won’t change unless the underlying, unspoken issues are addressed. Take note of hostile humor and face the situation that’s being avoided.

As a way to offer support to your spouse or partner, know that humor can be useful to someone who is experiencing anxiety or stress. Be sure that you know your partner and the situation well enough, though, to gauge whether she is ready to lighten up.

Learning humor

You may have been the class clown, or the one who laughs at everyone else’s jokes. But if you feel you have no sense of humor at all, it’s not too late. While it may be hard to learn to be a comedian, there’s more to lightening up than telling jokes.

Try these tips to start learning how to see humor in everyday life:

- Sign up for joke lists on the Internet, such as a “joke a day” cartoon.
- Watch a sitcom or funny movie.
- Look to the world around you and see something different.
- Learn one or two good jokes, even one-liners. Even a “chicken crossing the road joke,” which you could learn quickly! Practice it, and keep it in your pocket. Then invite someone to share a laugh with you.

Resource

Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

www.aath.org

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