

# Laugh, nurse, laugh!

By Kara Theal, MA, BSN, RN-BC

Use fun and humor to reduce stress and build community.

**VICTOR BORGE**, the famous Danish comedian, pianist, and conductor once said, “Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.” Infusing laughter and humor into your work life is a powerful tool that can improve communication, reduce stress, foster cohesiveness, and boost overall performance and staff engagement. (See *It starts with a smile.*)

When was the last time you heard someone say that he or she didn't feel good when laughing? Probably never, right? The physical and psychological benefits of laughter are well documented in the literature. A hearty laugh shuts down the release of the stress hormone cortisol and triggers the release of endorphins, reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and pain and improves the immune system and cardiovascular function. When it's shared, laughter binds people together, increasing happiness and intimacy. And humor can help shift perspective, allowing everyone to view situations in a more realistic, less threatening light that enhances teamwork and diffuses conflict.

## Is it okay to find humor in nursing?

Wanting to bring laughter and humor into the serious nature of what we do every day may seem inappropriate, but situationally appropriate.

## It starts with a smile

A genuine or authentic smile (also called a Duchenne smile, named after neurologist Guillaume Duchenne, who studied emotional expression in the 19th century) involves the contraction of two muscles: the zygomatic major (raising the corners of the mouth) and the orbicularis oculi (raising the cheeks, which produces crow's feet around the eyes). When a smile flashes across your face, the brain releases the neurotransmitters dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin to produce feelings of happiness.



And your smile is contagious. Research shows that each time you smile at others, their brain coaxes them to re-



ate humor and playful communication triggers positive feelings and fosters emotional connections. These connections create bonds that buffer stress, disagreement, and disappointment and heal resentment and hurt.

Healthcare providers have higher stress levels and complaints than

turn the favor, creating a symbiotic relationship. They view you as attractive, reliable, relaxed, sincere, and approachable, making interactions easier and more enjoyable.

Combat the negative forces you face by walking into work with a genuine smile, even when you feel like frowning. Let that smile show you're grateful to be integral to healing, illness prevention, and the alleviation of human suffering.

Know that smiling benefits you even when you don't feel like doing it. It turns out that faking or forcing a smile reduces stress.

## Invite humor into your workflow

Not sure how to get the laugh track started? Here are a few ideas that might tickle the funny bone.

- At your daily brief, ask staff members to share a funny story from the previous day.
- Email a joke of the day to your team.
- Designate a humor board for posting cartoons, jokes, pictures, and anything that invokes laughter.
- After meal breaks, hold a humor huddle and ask everyone to share one thing that led to laughter since the daily brief.
- Hold a picture caption contest. Each Monday, circulate a picture via email and ask everyone to submit a funny caption. On Friday, after a winner is chosen by the staff, hold an awards ceremony and post the winning caption on the humor board.



Start by not taking yourself too seriously. While ambitions are noble, being overly serious will weigh you down and reduce your chances of achievement. Levity fosters positivity, optimism, engagement, and successful navigation through the ups and downs of life. When you're able to laugh at yourself and share your embarrassing moments, you communicate your openness, humbleness, and sense of humor with your team.

### Have fun at work

Listen for laughter during your workday and move towards it. More often than not, your coworkers will be happy to share something funny because it gives them an opportunity to laugh again.

You might even want to recruit some new employees. The positions that need to be filled include Chief Executive Humor Officer, Vice President of Laughter Services, Director of FunRaising, Secretary of Humor, and Laughter Ambassador. And don't forget to onboard a Levity Leader, whose job it will be to remind others that they're taking themselves too seriously. (See *Invite humor into your workflow.*)

employees of any other field. Nurses are continually challenged by the physical nature of the profession, which requires the ability to work with multiple complex patients and meet the emotional demands of those patients and their families, while working long hours with increasing workloads. Daily pressures can lead to decreased morale and low-performing teams, but incorporating laughter and humor into everyday practice can ease distress.

### Humor—the good, the bad, the ugly

Humor should be amusing and laughter-provoking for everyone, and when used appropriately it doesn't require understanding social cues. Humor should lift the spirit and make everyone feel more comfortable. In other words, we should laugh with, rather than laugh at, our coworkers. Avoid sarcasm because it can be misunderstood and often targets others in a negative way. Racist, sexist, ageist, and other forms of discriminating jokes are bad humor and should never be part of workplace interaction. Gags and practical jokes should be used only when your judgment tells you those on the receiving end will find them funny. And always remember to be cognizant of the suitability of the time and place where humor and laughter will occur.

### Why so serious?

Laughter is a natural part of life. Infants begin smiling during the first weeks of life and laugh out loud within months of being born. The average preschool child laughs or smiles 400 times a day, and the average 6-year-old laughs or smiles 300 times a day. The sad news, though, is that the average 40-year-old laughs or smiles only four times a day. As adults, we need to raise our laughter quota.

### Go team

Seeing the humor in all the situations life has to offer is important. Sharing your funny stories with others and having them laugh with you will incorporate humor and laughter into the fabric of your work life, finding it naturally in everything you do. A sense of community and cohesive culture are born when a team laughs out loud and has fun together. ★

**Kara Theal is the director of clinical information systems at Northwell Health in Lake Success, New York.**

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