

## Exercising Your Brain: What's Laughter Got to Do with It?

By Kathy Lahnehue, M.A.

In the delightful book *Life in These United States*, which is a compilation of the columns by that name from *Reader's Digest*, is a story about a busy mother who had ruined a couple of pots by leaving them too long on the stove with the burners on. As a reminder when she left the room, she resorted to putting a sign on her kitchen door that said, "STOVE?" When one of her daughters returned from the university on a break, she taped her own sign below her mother's. It read, "No – DOOR. Trust me. I've been to college."

There are two points to this story. The first is that many, perhaps *most*, people who are worried about the state of their brains are living stressful lives. Frazzled by too many demands, they misplace, misinterpret, muddle, break, bump into, burn, and simply forget things – all common side effects of stress.

So the joke's second point is if you want to combat stress, relax and laugh. When you do, you'll have a better chance of learning new things, because relaxed learners learn more. There is a saying, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Laughter increases the chances that you think you can. A tense mind is a closed mind that has barred its doors against the unknown.

One reason speakers and teachers often begin their lectures with a joke is to say to their audience, in essence, "I'm going to provide you with new information, and you are smart enough to handle it." Humor is literally "dis-arming." The joke is the speaker's way of getting the audience to lower their defensive weaponry, unbar the door, and open their minds. Humor arouses curiosity: *I hadn't thought of it that way. This person thinks differently. Maybe I'll listen.*

Even more important, lectures are meant to teach something, and laughter contributes to creative thinking. It draws oxygen to your brain to freshen your mind. People who brainstorm solutions to a problem after they have spent some time laughing and having fun together come up with more ideas than those who start brainstorming without such a warm-up. Here's why: Using your sense of humor means that you are able to find a funny side to an otherwise difficult situation. That requires you to see the challenge from a new angle. If you see a problem as a dark, gloomy cloud hanging over you, coming at it from a new angle is like poking a ray of sunshine through it. Once you have poked one ray of sunshine into the problem, you can often start seeing other potential solutions. And soon that cloud isn't so dark.

As many experts note, there isn't much difference between the pleasure of "ha-ha" and the pleasure of "ah-ha." But the third variation of those syllables is one long, slowly exhaled syllable: "Aaaahhh." That's the pleasure of building rapport with others by having fun together, solving challenges together and ultimately realizing you enjoy *being* together.

One of the most interesting findings in recent brain research was a University of Michigan study that found a 10-minute conversation with someone can improve your memory as much as brain exercises. "In our study, socializing was just as effective as more traditional kinds of mental exercise in boosting memory and intellectual performance," said Oscar Ybarra, a psychologist at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR) and a lead author of the study.

The study was not focused on humor, so the participants may or may not have laughed together in their 10-minute conversation, but I would guess they smiled, at least in greeting and parting, and sincere smiles can be viewed as halfway to laughter; don't you agree?

The bottom line: Laughter is good for body, brain and soul, so get your daily ha-ha's, ah-ha's and aaaahhhh's.

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Resources:

- [http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=laughter-leads-to-insight&WT.mc\\_id=SA\\_CAT\\_MB\\_20110608](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=laughter-leads-to-insight&WT.mc_id=SA_CAT_MB_20110608)
- <http://www.seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Alzheimers/2007/7-10-29-TenMinutes.htm>
- <http://www.bellylaughday.com/bellylaughdayhome/laughandwhathappens.html>