

IS LAUGHTER THE BEST MEDICINE FOR STRESS AT WORK?

KATE HULL RODGERS IS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF HUMOURUS AND WORKS WITH CLIENTS SUCH AS LLOYDS TSB, IBM AND GLAXOSMITHKLINE, TO DEMONSTRATE HOW THE STRATEGIC USE OF FUN ENCOURAGES ENJOYMENT IN EMPLOYMENT.



What we do and don't find fun is learned behaviour. There are many influences: age, gender, upbringing, culture and personal taste, to name but a few. It is possible for an individual, a team or an entire organisation to 're-learn' or shape our humour response and develop a GSOH – Good Sense of Humour.

Much of the modern way of working has become politically correct, target driven, and joking aside, FUN is often an extra curricular activity and considered a risk. This thinking needs to be challenged because ILL might stand for I Lack Laughter.

The health benefits of laughter, the physical response to FUN, include:

- lower blood pressure
- strengthened immune system
- a great workout for the cardiovascular system and the lungs (312 muscles are involved in this internal jogging; three minutes of laughing burns as many calories as 10 minutes on a rowing machine)
- release of endorphins - the body feel-good chemical which neutralises the stress related adrenaline, cortisol
- blood is oxygenated, allowing clearer thinking
- muscles relax, decreasing aches and pains.

Laughter is the best medicine. Conditions as diverse as insomnia, asthma, rheumatoid arthritis, allergies and depression have been clinically proven to improve with the increase of laughter.

Most implementations to encourage humour in the workplace require little or no budget. They just need enthusiasm, permission and employee engagement.

Some simple ideas include:

- 'Humourobics' or 'Laughtercise' – recreating laughter as an exercise
- raising money for a charity
- developing a fun end-of-workday ritual
- random acts of kindness
- positive venting – a whinge session led by an experienced facilitator
- lunch hour DVD
- approved joke emails
- acknowledging staff birthdays

For further information:
www.humourus.co.uk

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> The reason many stress policies fail is because the policy has been written in splendid isolation with no consultation with those who will have to implement it. It is then adopted only to find that resources are not available or the procedures are totally impractical. In relation to stress management, the best chance of success occurs when a stress project group is first set up to plan the process. Such a group should comprise HR, H&S, occupational health and staff and line manager representation. This ensures that different perspectives are taken into consideration and a pragmatic workable set of procedures are produced. Roles and responsibilities can also be allocated to ensure work is carried out. It goes without saying that a senior manager should also be genuinely involved as a champion.

As part of the policy, a support mechanism is a must. Staff need to know where they should go to if they have a problem, and they need to feel comfortable to speak up. If individual managers are not supportive then no matter how good the policy is – it will fail. Unfortunately, managers often find it hard to have stress and absence related conversations and, if they lack confidence in their abilities, they will avoid the task. It is imperative for managers to be trained in stress related soft skills. They need to understand about the serious issue of stress, why a programme is needed and they must be able to implement it, if it is to succeed.

For further information:

www.hse.gov.org.uk/stress/stats

RR389 – Attitudes, opinions and experiences of attendees at the ISMAUK stress workshops 2004 (available on the HSE website)

Tackling Work related stress: a managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well being HSE Books (2001)

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