

Laughter – fundamental to good health

Laughter has captured the attention of philosophers, psychologists, medical practitioners, sociologists, educators and theologians for centuries. More recently management, leadership and behaviour theorists have joined the throng looking for the magic laughter elixir.

What is it about laughing that evokes such interest? Human laughter is both primitive and sophisticated. The patterns of sounds we first utter as expressions of delight when we are three or four months old are possibly the same sounds our ancestors uttered when they were infants tens of thousands of years ago. And yet the complexities of some humorous stimuli that make us laugh; the incongruities of a joke for example, delve into the highest reaches of our brain's functioning.

As children we tend to laugh often and laugh heartily. But the transformation into adulthood brings with it accumulated losses, stresses, fears and unresolved anger that may diminish our ability to laugh. When we do seek and find humour, the one aspect of the resultant laughter that we all seem to agree upon is that 'it makes us feel good'.

That 'feel-good' rush we get from a good belly laugh moves us into a state of joy and we can notice that our cognitive functioning returns to its optimum. Irrational behaviour thrives in a Petri dish of sadness, fear and anger. Laughter can bring us back to the desirable human states of joy, happiness and rationality.

So why then do we ignore the power and value of laughter? And what stops people from accessing this innate human attribute?

Laughter – fundamental to good health is an overview of major research into this subject so far and a glimpse into emerging theories.

The presenter, Daryl Peebles, has led a 'double life' with a professional career in the corporate world and an active semi-professional interest in theatre and the entertainment industry.

His presentation is a refreshing mix of serious research presented in a humorous way, using his skills as a stand-up comedian. At times Daryl may emphasise his message using song, magic or ventriloquism.

This is not done to turn conferences into circuses or theory into theatre! It is done to demonstrate benefits of laughter by putting theory into action.

People often leave Daryl's presentation having had a good laugh, feeling better for it, and importantly, are a little more enlightened about the value of humour and laughter to us all as well-functioning, healthy human beings.

Daryl Peebles

Working as a Human Resource Manager in a stressful work environment in the late 1980s, Daryl recognised the futility of the economic rationalists' view that Australian organisations could do 'more with less'. He saw too many examples of the downside of trying to sustain this myth: stress, substance abuse, 'survivor guilt', relationship break-downs, ill-health and worse.

The expectation of his role was to significantly 'downsize' his organisation and to do so with minimum disruption to the organisation's service delivery. But regardless of the euphemistic title it was given, his job entailed sacking people. Good, hard-working people with responsibilities. People who had done nothing to deserve such treatment were being shown the door.

About the same time, Daryl learned a few valuable lessons having the opportunity to observe joyous workers in successful, productive organisations. The contrast was profound.

His own work circumstances were distressing and adversely affected his personal life and he found himself in turmoil in the early 90s. He considered his options and fortunately chose a positive path.

With an active interest in theatre and entertaining, Daryl was able to observe people after enjoying a good belly laugh in the theatre, pub or club in which he was working. Audience feedback such as, “I really needed a good laugh like that!” or “I haven’t felt this good in ages!” were common responses to his plays and comedy routines.

Daryl read all he could on the benefits of humour and laughter to our wellbeing as fully functional human beings. He has sought audience with experts including Dr ‘Patch’ Adams and Emeritus Professor Christie Davis, attended conferences, and recorded and collated his own experiences.

Now, as a PhD student at the University of Tasmania and an active member of the Australasian Humour Studies Network, Daryl is formalising his 20-year passion for this fascinating topic through a research project exploring the value of humour in the workplace and its potential link to Psychological Capital.