



**“Stop,
you’re
making
me
laugh!”**

**“Why,
worried
you will
pull a
muscle?!”**

**A JOKE CAN HURT SOMEONE’S FEELINGS
OR BRIGHTEN A PERSON’S DAY, SO HOW DO
WE STAY ON THE NICE SIDE OF HUMOUR?**

WORDS REBECCA DOUGLAS

Laughter is said to be the best medicine, but many may cringe remembering the times when, in an attempt to be humorous, the line has been overstepped and someone’s feelings have been hurt.

Sometimes, this is done on purpose. Many personal jabs and cruel comments are disguised in joke form so the

perpetrator can claim they “didn’t really mean it” if they are called out.

On the other hand, this power can be wielded for good. A funny remark can be used to relieve tension in the room, avoid undesirable conversations or cheer up a person who’s feeling sad, angry or excluded.

Healthy humour

Research has shown laughter has several health benefits, including alleviating stress and anxiety. It releases nitric oxide, which relaxes blood vessels and lowers blood pressure, and reduces the risk of clotting and cardiovascular illness.

A Norwegian study reported a good sense of humour is linked to a longer life, both in overall health and resistance to fatal infections. Interestingly, the effect appears to be stronger in women than men.

Social scientist Associate Professor Lauren Rosewarne says there are also benefits in helping us to fit in with society and with groups of people generally. "We like to amuse other people and make others laugh — it enhances our self-esteem and makes us feel like we've been well-received," Assoc Prof Rosewarne says.

"Humour is a way to appear likable and also a means to diffuse tension."

But when seeking to lighten awkward or sombre occasions, such as a funeral or when someone is in hospital, it is important to be mindful of whose discomfort you are seeking to soothe, clinical psychologist Dr Lillian Nejad says.

"Humour can be helpful to relieve distress and lighten the mood in more serious situations, especially when you have a personal relationship with someone," Dr Nejad says. "If you are tempted to use humour only to diffuse tension for yourself, think twice. Choose instead to be respectful and considerate of others' feelings."

Lighten the punchline

One of the classic rules of comedy is to "punch up", meaning people who are wealthy, famous and powerful are considered fair game for ridicule, whereas it's best not to joke about those who are struggling. Not only would it be unkind to do so, your jokes will not generally be found funny.

"It has a down-to-earth quality, and it's a great way to express that you don't take yourself too seriously. This type of humour can often make others feel more comfortable around you, but it can be problematic when self-deprecation is used to minimise your accomplishments and achievements, and diminish yourself in order to fit in."

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"We should never 'punch down'," Assoc Prof Rosewarne says. "We shouldn't be seeking to make jokes about someone less powerful. We should also avoid making light of things that people are often insecure about such as appearance, or centring our humour around sensitive topics such as religion, sexuality or race, unless we know our audience very well and know how our material will be received."

It is OK to use self-deprecating humour as an easy way to avoid offending others, but beware of putting yourself down too much, even in jest.

"Self-deprecating humour is practically in the DNA of all Australians," Dr Nejad says.

Dr Nejad recommends consciously examining how you can bring more humour into your life.

She suggests exploring how you can consume comedy across various formats such as live shows, podcasts, songs, books, comics — even YouTube animal videos. You can also set aside dedicated time in your diary for laughter to improve your overall health and happiness.

"Studies have shown that scheduling laughter in your life, including laughter therapy or laughter yoga, can help to boost mood, reduce stress, and strengthen your immune system," she says. 