

# Could humor be the key to a healthier society?

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Laughter may very well be the best medicine for a healthy life, according to research released today.

Published online in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, A [systematic review](#) of humor-based strategies for addressing public health priorities, found that humor interventions could be effective to influence people's behavior and intentions around their health.

Uniquely, the research was conducted by Scottish comedian and women's health physiotherapist Elaine Miller, Fellow of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, in collaboration with a team of Monash University researchers led by Monash Warwick Alliance Professor Helen Skouteris.

"I have seen comedy used to address the most taboo subjects on stage," Ms Miller said. "My field is incontinence which is often very embarrassing for people to talk about, but because laughter is universal it has the potential to reach people broadly.

"This robust, systematic review analyzed 13 studies over the past 10 years whereby humor had been used to communicate serious messages covering topics such as [mental health](#), breast and testicular cancer self-examination, safe sex, skin cancer and binge drinking.

"What we found is that humor can act as an effective vehicle for delivering messages people might find fear-inducing or threatening. Humor, if used well, can be an emotional buffer that breaks down some of that fear so the underlying messages reach the intended audience and influence their behaviors and attitudes."

The study highlighted a number of factors that could impact the effectiveness of a humor-based message, including the level and type of fear or perceived threat, the "taboo" nature of the topic and an individual's taste in humor.

"It's definitely not a one-size-fits-all approach. A poorly judged joke can ruin a health campaign's message, a therapeutic relationship, a gig; or all three of those at once. Humor is very complex and further research to examine humor and public health promotion is certainly warranted," Ms Miller said.

"What this study also highlighted is, there's a lot of us who work in health promotion who can learn from commercial advertising and public safety campaigns, such as road and rail safety where humor has been shown to attract attention, promote the memory of and positive attitudes towards an advertisement, brand or message."

Professor Skouteris, Director of the Centre of Research Excellence in Health in Preconception and Pregnancy (CRE HiPP) and Head of Monash University's Health and Social Care Unit within the School of Public Health and Preventative Medicine, said the study was an "encouraging first step" towards implementing humor-based messaging more broadly across public health.

"Humor is enjoyable. People are drawn to it—they want to look at it and be part of it," Professor Skouteris said.

"Importantly, this review highlighted that humor can be utilized as a tool to encourage conversation and sharing. It's not just a way to send a message but actually encourages people to talk about it and be open with others, which we believe can lead to influencing society's perceptions and behaviors around important public health prevention messages."

Professor Skouteris said further research was necessary to examine how humor worked specifically in public health settings.

"Most of the research done to date has focused on humor and health outcomes in [clinical settings](#) so it's important we look more broadly at

how humor may influence behavioral intentions and public [health outcomes](#) out of those acute health settings," she said.

Ms Miller added that she also hoped to take some of this further research on the comedy circuit.

"I'm interested in sub-clinical women, those who have incontinence but who don't seek help. I'm planning to tour my show and survey the audience to establish prevalence of pelvic [health](#) conditions and whether a comedy show can encourage help-seeking," she said.

**More information:** Elaine Miller et al, A systematic review of humour-based strategies for addressing public health priorities, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/1753-6405.13142](#)

Provided by Monash University

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