Medical Xpress

Laughter isn't always the best medicine for work stress

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Credit: Richard Foster - Flickr

Humor helps us deal with the stress of juggling work and family commitments, but only when we seek it out, according to a new study led by The Australian National University (ANU).

It turns out colleagues sending us cat videos to make us laugh before an important meeting might actually be making our blood pressure rise,

lead author Dr. David Cheng and his team found.

"If you seek out humor—if you're the one cracking the joke or pressing play on the video, it very clearly helps reduce stress," Dr. Cheng said.

"Basically, it's all about whether you are in control of the situation and can seek out a distraction when you need it.

"I suspect it also has to do with whether you feel supported by your colleagues. For example, if they say: "I'll handle the meeting, you go and pick up your kids," and then crack a joke, it might help. But if they're not picking up the slack, you're less likely to appreciate the humor."

Dr. Cheng says thinking about humor and how it can affect stress in the workplace is especially important as we return to the office following COVID-19 lockdowns.

"A lot of people have been able to 'switch off' from their colleagues while working from home over the past 12 months," Dr. Cheng said.

"You can finish the Zoom meeting and then have some time to yourself. And while working from home very much presented its own set of challenges, for much of 2020 we weren't juggling a long commute or drop-offs and pickups.

"As we come out of lockdown and head back into the office, we may have to re-adjust and think about how we deal with work-life conflict."

The research is published in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*.

It follows a 2018 study, which showed humor can help us deal with aggressive behavior in the workplace.

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More information: David Cheng et al. Finding humor in work–life conflict: Distinguishing the effects of individual and co-worker humor, *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (2021). DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103538

Provided by Australian National University

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