

# Managing Conflict with Humor

## Using Laughter to Strengthen Your Relationships and Resolve Disagreements



We've all heard that laughter is the best medicine, and it's true. Laughter relieves stress, elevates mood, and makes you more resilient. But it's also good for your relationships. Laughter brings people closer together, creates intimacy, and serves as a powerful tool for managing conflict and reducing tension when emotions are running high. Whether with a romantic partner, friends and family, or co-workers, you can learn to use humor to smooth over disagreements, lower everyone's stress level, and communicate in a way that strengthens and deepens your relationships.

### **What is the role of humor and laughter in relationships?**

Humor plays an important role in all kinds of relationships. In new relationships, humor can be an effective tool not just for attracting the other person, but also for overcoming any awkwardness that arises during the process of getting to know one another. In established relationships, humor can keep things exciting, fresh, and vibrant. It can also help you get past conflicts, disagreements, and the tiny aggravations that can build up over time and wreck even the strongest of bonds.

Sharing the pleasure of humor creates a sense of intimacy and connection between two people—qualities that define solid, successful relationships. When you laugh with one another, you create a positive bond between you. This bond acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements, disappointments, and bad patches in a relationship. And laughter really is contagious—just hearing someone laugh primes you to smile and join in the fun.

# The benefits of using humor in your relationships

Humor can help you:

**Form a stronger bond with other people.** Your health and happiness depend, to a large degree, on the quality of your relationships—and laughter binds people together.

**Smooth over differences.** Using gentle humor often helps you address even the most sensitive issues, such as sex or in-laws.

**Diffuse tension.** A well-timed joke can ease a tense situation and help you resolve disagreements.

**Overcome problems and setbacks.** A sense of humor is the key to resilience. It helps you take hardships in stride, weather disappointment, and bounce back from adversity and loss.

**Put things into perspective.** Most situations are not as bleak as they appear when looked at from a playful and humorous point of view. Humor can help you reframe problems that might otherwise seem overwhelming and damage a relationship.

**Be more creative.** Humor and playfulness can loosen you up, energize your thinking, and inspire you

## Using humor to manage and defuse conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of all relationships. It may take the form of major discord between the two of you or simply petty aggravations that have built up over time. Either way, how you manage conflict can often determine the success of your relationship.

When conflict and disagreement throw a wrench in your relationship, humor and playfulness can help lighten the tension and restore a sense of connection. Used respectfully, a little lighthearted humor can quickly turn conflict and tension into an opportunity for shared fun and intimacy. It allows you to get your point across without getting the other person's defenses up or hurting their feelings. For example:

**Alex** is retired, but he still goes up on the roof to clean the gutters. His wife, Angie, has told him numerous times that it scares her when he uses the ladder. Today, instead of her usual complaints, she yells up to him, "You know, it's husbands like you who turn wives into nags." Alex laughs and carefully comes down from the roof.

**Lori's** husband is a smart guy but after a few drinks over dinner, he consistently

miscalculates the amount he should tip for the meal. This embarrasses Lori, makes her husband defensive, and often means a pleasant evening ends with an argument. The next time they're out for dinner and her husband moves to pick up the check, Lori playfully hands him a calculator and says, "There are three kinds of people: those who can count, and those who can't." Her husband laughs and instead of leaving the restaurant arguing, they leave smiling and joking with each other.

Humor isn't a miracle cure for conflicts but it can be an important tool to help you overcome the rough spots that afflict every relationship from time to time. Humor—free of hurtful sarcasm or ridicule—neutralizes conflict by helping you:

**Interrupt the power struggle**, instantly easing tension and allowing you to reconnect and regain perspective.

**Be more spontaneous**. Shared laughter and play helps you break free from rigid ways of thinking and behaving, allowing you to see the problem in a new way and find a creative solution.

**Be less defensive**. In playful settings, we hear things differently and can tolerate learning things about ourselves that we otherwise might find unpleasant or even painful.

**Let go of inhibitions**. Laughter opens us up, freeing us to express what we truly feel and allowing our deep, genuine emotions to rise to the surface.

## Managing conflict with humor tip 1: Make sure you're both in on the joke

Like any tool, humor can be used in negative as well as positive ways. Making snide, hurtful remarks, for example, then criticizing the other person for not being able to take a joke will create even more problems and ultimately damage a relationship.

Humor can only help you overcome conflict when both parties are in on the joke. It's important to be sensitive to the other person. If your partner, co-worker, family member, or friend isn't likely to appreciate the joke, don't say or do it, even if it's "all in good fun." When the joking is one-sided rather than mutual, it undermines trust and goodwill and can damage the relationship.

Consider the following example:

**Michelle's** feet are always cold when she gets into bed, but she has what she thinks is a

playful solution. She heats up her icy feet by placing them on her husband Kevin's warm body. Kevin hates this game, and has repeatedly told Michelle that he doesn't appreciate being used as a foot warmer, but she just laughs at his complaints. Lately, Kevin has taken to sleeping at the far edge of the bed, a solution that distances them as a couple.

Humor should be equally fun and enjoyable for everyone involved. If others don't think your joking or teasing is funny—*stop immediately*. Before you start playing around, take a moment to consider your motives, as well as the other person's state of mind and sense of humor.

### Ask yourself the following questions:

---

1. Do you feel calm, clear-headed, and connected to the other person?
2. Is your true intent to communicate positive feelings—or are you taking a dig, expressing anger, or laughing at the other person's expense?
3. Are you sure that the joke will be understood and appreciated?
4. Are you aware of the emotional tone of the nonverbal messages you are sending? Are you giving off positive, warm signals or a negative or hostile tone?
5. Are you sensitive to the nonverbal signals the other person is sending? Do they seem open and receptive to your humor, or closed-off and offended?
6. Are you willing and able to back off if the other person responds negatively to the joke?
7. If you say or do something that offends, is it easy for you to immediately apologize?

## Tip 2: Don't use humor to cover up other emotions

Humor helps you stay resilient in the face of life's challenges. But there are times when humor is

*not* healthy—and that's when it is used as a cover for avoiding, rather than coping with, painful emotions. Laughter can be a disguise for feelings of hurt, fear, anger, and disappointment that you don't want to feel or don't know how to express.

You can be funny about the truth, but covering up the truth isn't funny. When you use humor and playfulness as a cover for other emotions, you create confusion and mistrust in your relationships. The following are examples of misplaced humor:

**Mike** is a constant jokester. Nothing ever seems to get him down and he never takes anything seriously. No matter what happens to him or to anyone else, he makes a joke out of the situation. In reality, Mike is terrified of intimacy and commitment in his relationships, and uses humor to avoid uncomfortable feelings and to keep others at arm's length.

**Sharon** is often jealous and possessive with her boyfriend John, but she has never learned to openly discuss her insecurities and fears. Instead, she uses what she thinks is humor to express her feelings. Her jokes, however, usually having a biting, almost hostile edge to them, and John doesn't find them funny at all. Instead of laughing, he often responds with a quiet coldness or withdrawal.

For clues as to whether humor is being used to conceal other emotions, ask yourself:

1. Is the joke at another person or group's expense? Does it tear down and divide, rather than build up and unite?
2. Are you truly trying to share a mutual laugh, or do you have another agenda (getting a criticism in, putting the other person in their place, proving that you're in the right, etc.)?
3. Do you often use humor to put yourself down? There's nothing wrong with good-naturedly poking fun at yourself, but frequent self-disparaging jokes may be a defense mechanism for low self-esteem and insecurity.
4. Is humor your default, even in serious situations that call for sensitivity and maturity? Have you been told by more than one person that your jokes are inappropriate or ill-timed?
5. Do other people take you seriously? Or do they see you as a clown, maybe good for a laugh, but not someone to depend on in difficult times?

### Tip 3: Develop a smarter sense of humor

Some find it easier than others to use humor, especially in tense situations. If your efforts aren't going over well, the following tips may help.

**Monitor nonverbal cues.** If someone isn't enjoying your attempts at humor, you'll be able to tell from their body language. Does their smile seem fake or forced? Are they leaning away from you or leaning towards you, encouraging you to continue?

**Avoid mean-spirited humor.** It may work for some comedians on stage, but used one-on-one, it will not only fall flat but may also damage your relationship. Saying something hurtful or insulting, even when framed as a joke, may alienate the other person and weaken the bond between you.

**Create inside jokes.** An inside joke is something that only the two of you understand. It can often be reduced to a word or short phrase that reminds you both of a funny incident or amusing story, and is usually guaranteed to generate a smile or laugh from the other person. When two people are the only ones "in" on the joke, it can create intimacy and draw you together.

### **It's safe to start with self-deprecating humor**

If you're uncomfortable with making lighthearted banter or cracking jokes, or you struggle to know what's appropriate in any given situation, start by using self-deprecating humor. We all love people who don't take themselves too seriously and are able to gently poke fun at their own failings. After all, we're all flawed and we all make mistakes. So if you're having a bad hair day or you've just spilled coffee over yourself, make a joke about it. Even if the joke falls flat or comes out wrong, the only person you risk offending is yourself.

Once you're comfortable making jokes about yourself, you can broaden your range to include other types of humor.

### **Tip 4: Tap into your playful side**

Do you find it hard to joke around or loosen up? Maybe you don't think you're funny. Or maybe [you're self-conscious](#) and concerned about how you'll look and sound to others.

Fearing rejection or ridicule when attempting humor is an understandable fear, but it's important to point out that you don't need to be a comedian in order to use humor to manage conflict. The point isn't to impress or entertain the other person, but simply to lighten the mood and defuse tension. So don't be afraid to simply goof around and act silly like a kid. It can lower the other person's defenses, putting you both in a more positive state of mind that's conducive to smoothing over differences.

### **Reclaiming your inborn playfulness**

---

It's never too late to develop and embrace your playful, lighthearted side. If you're uncomfortable letting go, just remember that as a baby, you were naturally playful. You didn't worry about the reactions of other people. You can relearn this quality.

Start by identifying the things you enjoy that border on fun or playful. For example, you may like to:

- Tell or listen to jokes
- Watch funny movies or TV shows
- Dance around to cheesy music when you're alone
- Sing playfully in the shower
- Daydream
- Read the funny pages/comic strips

After you recognize playful things you already enjoy, you can try to incorporate them into

# HelpGuide

your relationships. The important thing is to find enjoyable activities that loosen you up and help you [embrace your playful nature](#) with other people. The more you joke, play, and laugh—the easier it becomes.

## Practice with the “experts”

---

**Play with animals.** Puppies, kittens, and other animals—both young and old—are eager playmates and always ready to frolic. Volunteer to care for pets at a shelter or rescue group, stop to play with a friendly animal in your neighborhood, or consider getting [a pet of your own](#).

**Play with babies and young children.** The real authorities in human play are children, especially young children. Playing with children who know and trust you is a wonderful way to get back in touch with your playful side.

**Interact playfully with customer service people.** Most people in the service industry are social and you’ll find that many will welcome playful banter. Try your wit out on a friendly cashier, receptionist, waiter, hostess, or salesperson.

As humor and play become an integrated part of your life, you’ll begin to find daily opportunities for using your newfound skills to help maintain your relationships and manage conflict.

## Recommended reading

[The Benefits of Laughter](#) - And the important role it plays in relationships. (Psychology Today)

[The Role of Play and Humor in Creative Conflict Management](#) - How playfulness and humor are key components of conflict management. (Marianella Sclavi)

Authors: Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., Melinda Smith, M.A. Last updated: October 2018.