



HUMOR: NOT JUST A LAUGHING MATTER

Class 5: Humor & Aging
©Susan F Goran

CLASS 5 OBJECTIVES



- Discuss the role of 'agism' on the perspective of growing older.
- List two reasons why we may laugh less from the ages of 30 -60.
- Explain why our response to perceived humorous situations may change as we age.
- Discuss 2 strategies to enhance your own humor appreciation as we age.

WHO IS *ELDERLY*?

- "When you are a great deal older than you are now, you will discover that the time a man becomes elderly is exactly like the place where the earth and sky meet." Washington Post editor
- "Researchers tell us that 90 is the new 50. More and more products are created to make older people look and feel like younger people. And so the Elderly Line continues to shift, mirage-like, in the desert sand." Linton Weeks, NPR



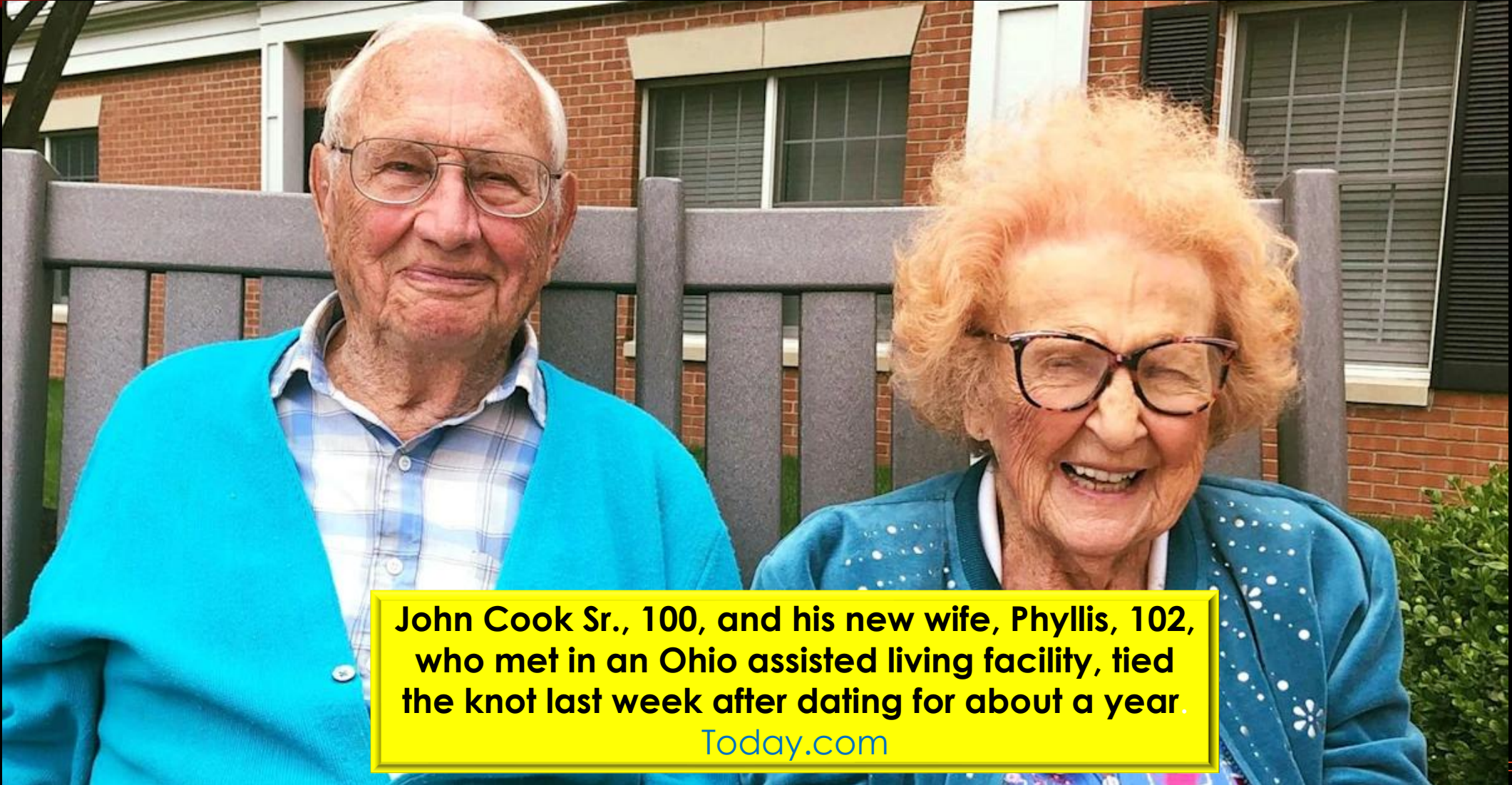
IS DEFINITION IMPORTANT?

- Medical research: chronologically >65
- “Real” age may be altered by the biological events driving the aging process in an individual.
- Potential impact on the interpretation of research-based evidence and pharmacological recommendations
- Age is also a product of the social norms and expectations that apply to each stage of life
- The older adult population can be divided into three life-stage subgroups:
 - Young-old (approximately 65–74)
 - Middle-old (ages 75–84)
 - Old-old (over age 85)

“80 AS THE NEW 60”



CONTRIBUTORS TO LONGER LIFE



John Cook Sr., 100, and his new wife, Phyllis, 102, who met in an Ohio assisted living facility, tied the knot last week after dating for about a year.

[Today.com](https://www.today.com)

AGEISM

Ageism refers to **HOW WE THINK** (STEREOTYPES), **FEEL** (PREJUDICE) and **ACT** (DISCRIMINATION) towards others or ourselves based on age

AGEISM IS EVERYWHERE



1 IN 2 PEOPLE
WORLDWIDE ARE AGEIST
AGAINST OLDER PEOPLE
and, in Europe, there is
more ageism against
younger than older people



Ageism affects us
THROUGHOUT LIFE
and exists in our institutions,
our relationships and ourselves




Ageism
**EXACERBATES OTHER
DISADVANTAGE**

AGEISM IS HARMFUL



PHYSICAL HEALTH **MENTAL HEALTH** **SOCIAL WELL-BEING**

Ageism has far-reaching
**IMPACTS ON ALL ASPECTS
OF PEOPLE'S HEALTH**



Ageism takes a
**HEAVY
ECONOMIC TOLL**
on individuals
and society

AGEISM CAN BE COMBATTED



POLICY AND LAW
can protect human rights and address
age discrimination and inequality



EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES
can transmit knowledge and skills
and enhance empathy



**INTERGENERATIONAL
INTERVENTIONS**
can connect people of different generations

ACCORDING TO MAINE: AARP

- 
- ✓ Most Mainers think older adults become less visible (64%)
 - ✓ Are treated with less respect (54%)
 - ✓ Mainers age 55-plus believe younger people have more advantages in society
 - ✓ 70% note that we live in a youth-oriented society
 - ✓ 69% say employers prefer younger workers over older workers.
 - ✓ 57% agree that older workers are excluded from employment or promotion opportunities.
 - ✓ 66% percent believe age discrimination exists in the workplace

SOCIETAL BENEFITS TO GETTING OLDER



David Steed (from right) and Sheldon Nightingale of Age Friendly Saco help May Mongue set up an Amazon Echo Dot virtual assistant in her Saco apartment on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2023. Age Friendly Saco provides the devices and sets them up at no cost. Credit: Troy R. Bennett / BDN

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS & REESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS

Studies have shown that people who interact with old adults carry favorable viewpoints about ageing.



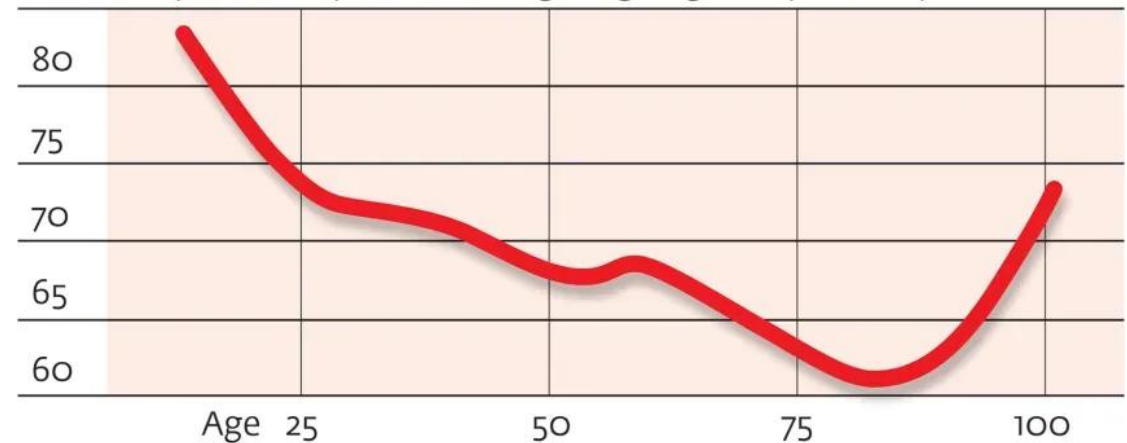
WHAT IS THE HUMOR CLIFF?

- A 2013 Gallup survey documenting the frequency of humorous interactions suggests the existence of a "humor cliff" as we age—each year
- 2013 Gallup survey of 1.4 million people in 166 countries, the frequency in which we laugh or smile in a given day begins to plummet
- Humor fades until we're 80, at which point we chuckle a bit more

THE HUMOR CLIFF

Studies show that people laugh freely and openly when young, but less so as they age, starting around 23. The laughter tends to return, however, in the twilight year — perhaps as we work less and spend more time with loved ones.

85% People who reported smiling/laughing a lot yesterday



Gallup data 2013 n = 1.4 million; according to the authors of "Humor, Seriously"

WHY DOES THE LAUGHTER STOP?

Aaker and Bagdonas
Authors and teach
"Humor: Serious
Business", at Stanford's
Graduate School of
Business



The culprit just might be your job.



"We grow up, enter the workforce, become 'serious and important people,' trading laughter for ties and pantsuits," "Before long, we lose levity entirely in a sea of bottom lines, slide decks, and mind-numbing conference calls."



After surveying more than 700 workers across various industries, the authors found that in the pursuit of "professionalism," many people are afraid to show off their sense of humor, as well as more of their true personality, at work each day.



The first, believed by a "large portion" of respondents, is the feeling that humor "simply had no place amid serious work."



"In fact, we find this isn't the case," Bagdonas says. "Humor is a really powerful way to come across as more authentic, more human. It's not in opposition to seriousness. It can reduce stress and foster collaboration."



What's more, a survey of hundreds of executives conducted by Robert Half International and Hodge-Cronin & Associates found that a staggering 98 percent of them preferred employees who had a sense of humor and that 84 percent believed employees with a sense of humor did better work.

WHY DOES THE LAUGHTER STOP?

Second reason: many are afraid to be funny at work is that they have a “deep, paralyzing” fear that their joke will fall flat.

But in one study, researchers found that deploying humor, even if it doesn't draw laughs, will still signal confidence, competence and status — as long as the joke is appropriate.

It's not about being Will Ferrell in the conference room, but “about creating a culture where people's senses of humor are welcome and people are welcome to bring a broader sense of themselves to work,” Aaker says.

Third fear: “there's this misperception that in order to leverage humor you have to be funny,” Aaker says.

One study by a researcher named Wayne Decker discovered that managers who had a sense of humor — never mind if they were funny themselves — were rated by their subordinates as 23 percent more respected, 25 percent more pleasant to work with and 17 percent friendlier.

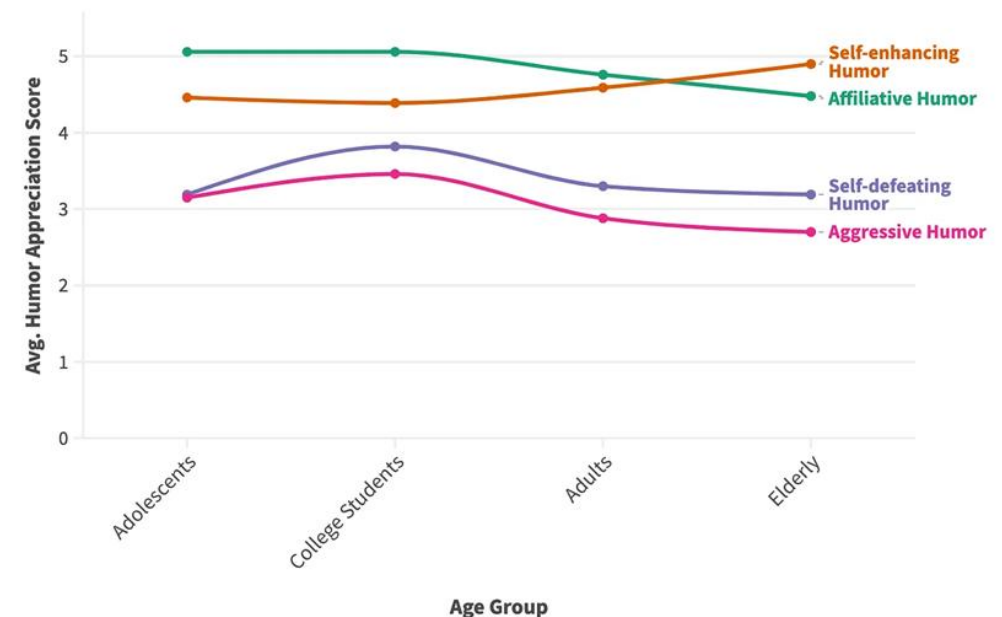
Lastly, you can also shelve the misconception that a sense of humor is either something you're born with or not.

“Each of us has a unique sense of humor, and it's a muscle we can develop,” Bagdonas says.

DOES OUR HUMOR PREFERENCE CHANGE?

- Person's comedic sensibilities are defined by an assortment of preferences that remain fluid throughout our lives.
- Research examines how comedic taste varies with age, exploring our reactions to different humor styles at various life stages.
 - Self-enhancing Humor: finding comedy in everyday situations, often by humorously targeting oneself in a good-natured way.
 - Affiliative Humor: using humor to strengthen social bonds and enhance relationships by sharing jokes and amusing stories that make others laugh while avoiding negativity.
 - Self-defeating Humor: Involves individuals making jokes at their own expense to gain approval or avoid conflict, sometimes undermining their self-esteem.
 - Aggressive Humor: Making jokes or remarks that ridicule, belittle, or demean others, often intended to assert dominance or express hostility.
- *Ultimately, the study found that with age, people appreciate self-enhancing humor more, and they value affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive stylings less.*

Appreciation of Various Humor Stylings by Age Group



Source: Tsai, PH., Chen, HC., Hung, YC. et al. What type of humor style do older adults tend to prefer? A comparative study of humor style tendencies among individuals of different ages and genders. *Curr Psychol* 42, 2186–2197 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02381-4>

STUDIES ON AGE & SOCIAL GAFFES

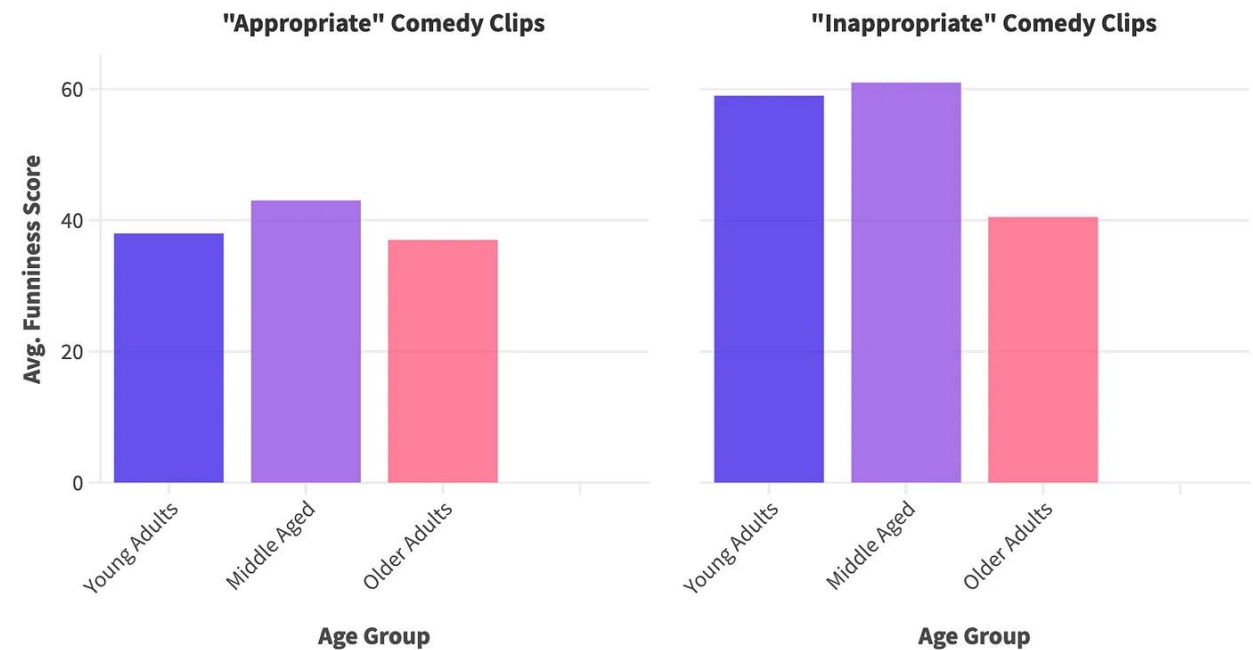
- Social gaffes: older adults less able to discriminate socially appropriate from inappropriate behavior (Halberstadt et al., 2011)
- Age differences in emotion recognition task (accurately identifying facial expressions)
- Age deficits in “mentalizing” tasks where it is necessary to take the perspective of another
- Theory of mind (TOM): requires executive functioning such as updating, shifting, and inhibiting information; reduced in older adults (Aboulafia-Barakha, et al., 2011; Rakoczy, et al., 2012)
- Older adults may have a reduced ability to understand social gaffes
- Age-related declines in cognition contribute to reduced humor comprehension
 - Older adults select fewer correct punch lines (Uekermann, et al, 2006)
- Increasing age associated with lower endorsements of aggressive humor styles; **age differences in social judgments**

Stanley JT, Lohani M, Isaacowitz DM. Age-related differences in judgments of inappropriate behavior are related to humor style preferences. Psychol Aging. 2014 Sep;29(3):528-41. doi: 10.1037/a0036666. PMID: 25244473; PMCID: PMC4176891

AGE RESPONSE TO COMEDY TYPES

- Social norms also play a role in our ever-changing relationship with humor, as generational gaps in what is deemed "appropriate" heavily inform our interpretations of comedy.
- To better understand the interaction of cultural mores and humor processing, researchers from Akron and Northeastern University asked participants to watch a series of comedic film and television clips and score scenes based on their appropriateness and humor. All age groups found the so-called "appropriate" clips equally funny, while older adults were less amused by clips deemed "inappropriate."

Perceived Comedy Funniness by Respondent Age and Joke "Appropriateness"
Response to "appropriate" and "inappropriate" comedy clips by age group: young adults (18–30 yrs.), middle aged (31–59 yrs.), and older adults (60+ yrs.)



Source: Stanley JT, Lohani M, Isaacowitz DM. Age-related differences in judgments of inappropriate behavior are related to humor style preferences. *Psychol Aging*. 2014 Sep;29(3):528-41. doi: 10.1037/a0036666. PMID: 25244473; PMCID: PMC4176891.



Photo by Maud Beauregard on Unsplash

HUMOR & AGING

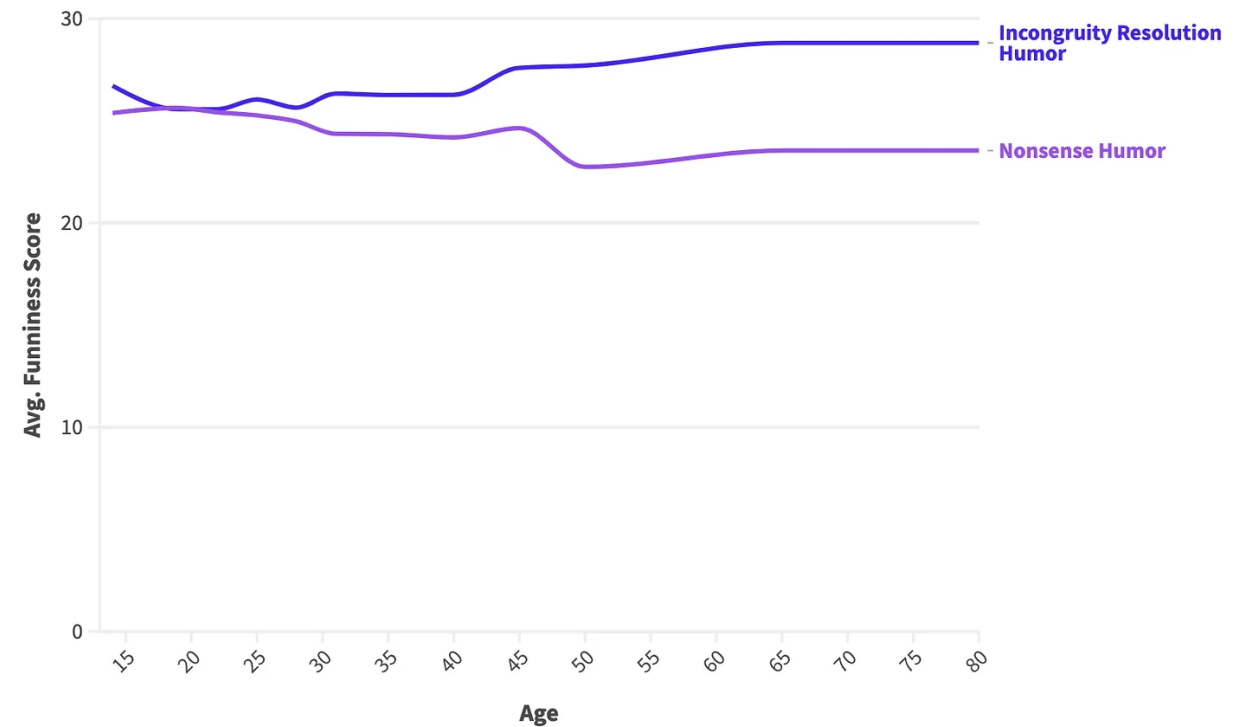
- Research suggests that elderly people enjoy humor more than younger people, but they have increasing difficulties in understanding jokes.
- Several cognitive mechanisms that may help explain this trend are discussed.
- Amount of laughter exhibited by the elderly is smaller compared to young adults.
- Elderly are especially sensitive to jokes referring to old age.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23689078/>

WHEN DO WE LAUGH?

- A similar study of 4,200 German participants found that we increasingly prefer incongruity resolution as we age, an approach marked by unexpected or contradictory elements that lead to a comedic surprise. In joke format, this genre includes a setup pointing toward one outcome, with a punchline that delivers a surprising twist, such as "I just flew in today, and boy, are my arms tired!"
- This research indicates that as individuals age, their increasing appreciation for incongruity resolution is coupled with a diminished enjoyment of nonsensical humor.

Perceived Funniness of Different Joke Types Over Time



Source: Ruch, Willibald & McGhee, Paul & Hehl, Franz-Josef. (1990). Age Differences in the Enjoyment of Incongruity-Resolution and Nonsense Humor During Adulthood. *Psychology and aging*. 5. 348-55. 10.1037/0882-7974.5.3.348.

ALTERED SENSE OF HUMOR IN DEMENTIA

- Clinical experience suggests abnormalities of humor may be prominent in neurodegenerative diseases
- The syndromes of behavioral variant frontotemporal dementia (bvFTD) and semantic dementia (SD) are associated with impaired understanding of cartoons and sarcasm
 - Humor behaviors in these patients become 'mirthless'
 - Frankly inappropriate humor responses such as laughter over others' misadventure
- Differences in expressions of humor and appreciation of humor depended upon the type of dementia
- Emerging evidence suggests that humor might be affected alongside other aspects of social cognition in Alzheimer's disease

HUMOR IN DEMENTIA

- The onset of dementia may change a person's sense of humor.
 - As the disease progresses, jokes with setup and punchlines can become more difficult or impossible for the person to follow.
 - An individual living with dementia may find amusement in things that most would not find funny, like a caregiver cutting her finger, and sometimes will laugh for no reason that they or anyone else can identify.
- Study results revealed that humor therapy is as effective as widely used antipsychotic drugs in helping people with dementia—and it avoids serious drug-related side effects.



WHAT WORKS FOR PATIENTS WITH DEMENTIA?



©Kleine Zeitung/Kanizaj

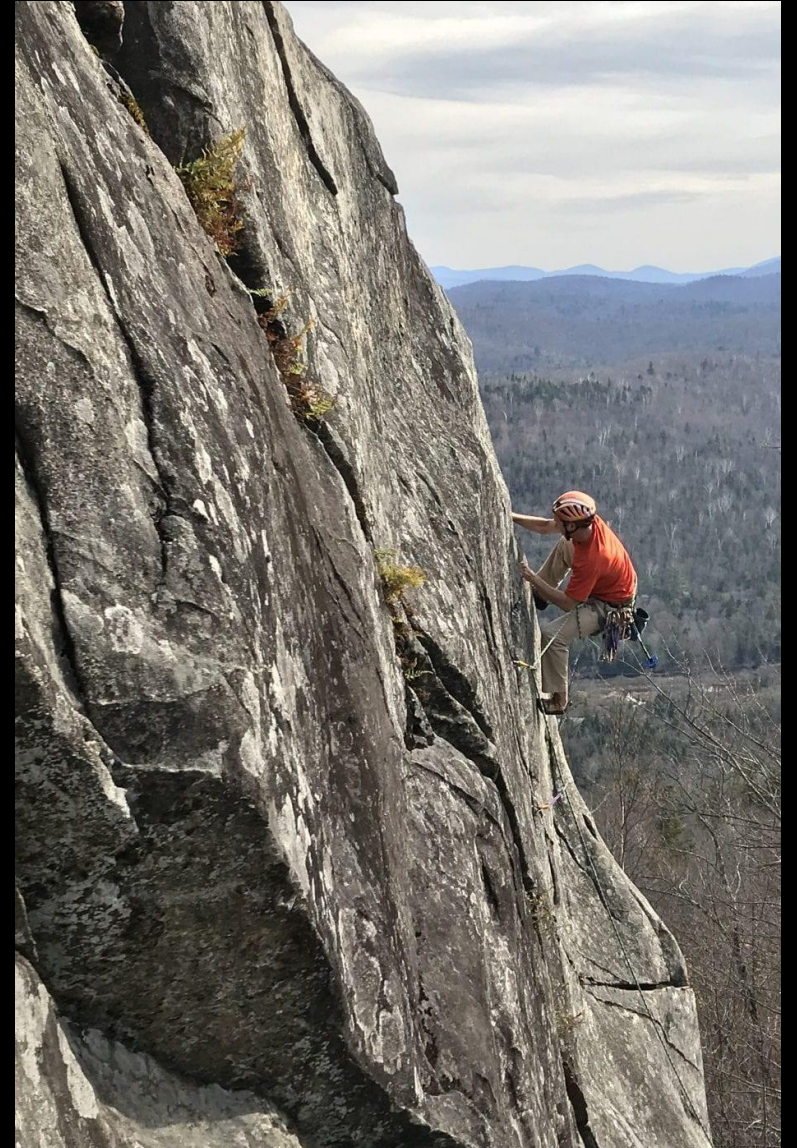
<https://www.rednoses.org/our-work/our-programmes/older-citizens/>

- Improvisation, humor and empathy, as well as expressive tools, to engage nursing home residents
 - Song and music, such as singing with residents their favorite songs accompanied by a ukulele. Creating improvised songs or witty, playful scenarios. For example, residents teasing the elder-clowns by playfully pretending to kick them as they bend over. The elder-clowns respond with exaggerated pratfalls, sound explosions and facial animations.
- Elder-clowning is a reliance upon biographical details to tailor interactions to the uniqueness of each individual resident.
- What did you like to do as a child?

<https://bethesdahealth.org/blog/the-benefits-of-humor-for-people-living-with-dementia/>

CLIMBING THE CLIFF AGAIN

- ‘Falling off the cliff’: research shows that changes as we become elderly and start laughing more frequently.
- One reason could be that we’re no longer working. Surveys show that people laugh more on weekends than workdays to begin with, and in retirement, every day is a weekend. Another possibility is that humor in old age “is a way of building bonds and making memories,” Aaker says.
- “My mom worked at a hospice,” Aaker says. “What people were often saying on the last days of their life was, I wish I didn’t take myself so seriously.”



BENEFITS OF BEING 60 (OR OLDER)

- No one expects you to run—anywhere.
- Your eyes won't get too much worse.
- Things that you buy now won't wear out.
- You and your teeth don't sleep together.
- You are no longer viewed as a hypochondriac.
- People call you at 8 p.m. and ask, "Did I wake you?"



FOR YOUR HEALTH...



Train yourself to
appreciate
(cognitive), feel
(mirth), and
physically
experience (laugh).



WHY NOW?

LOOK WITH NEW EYES



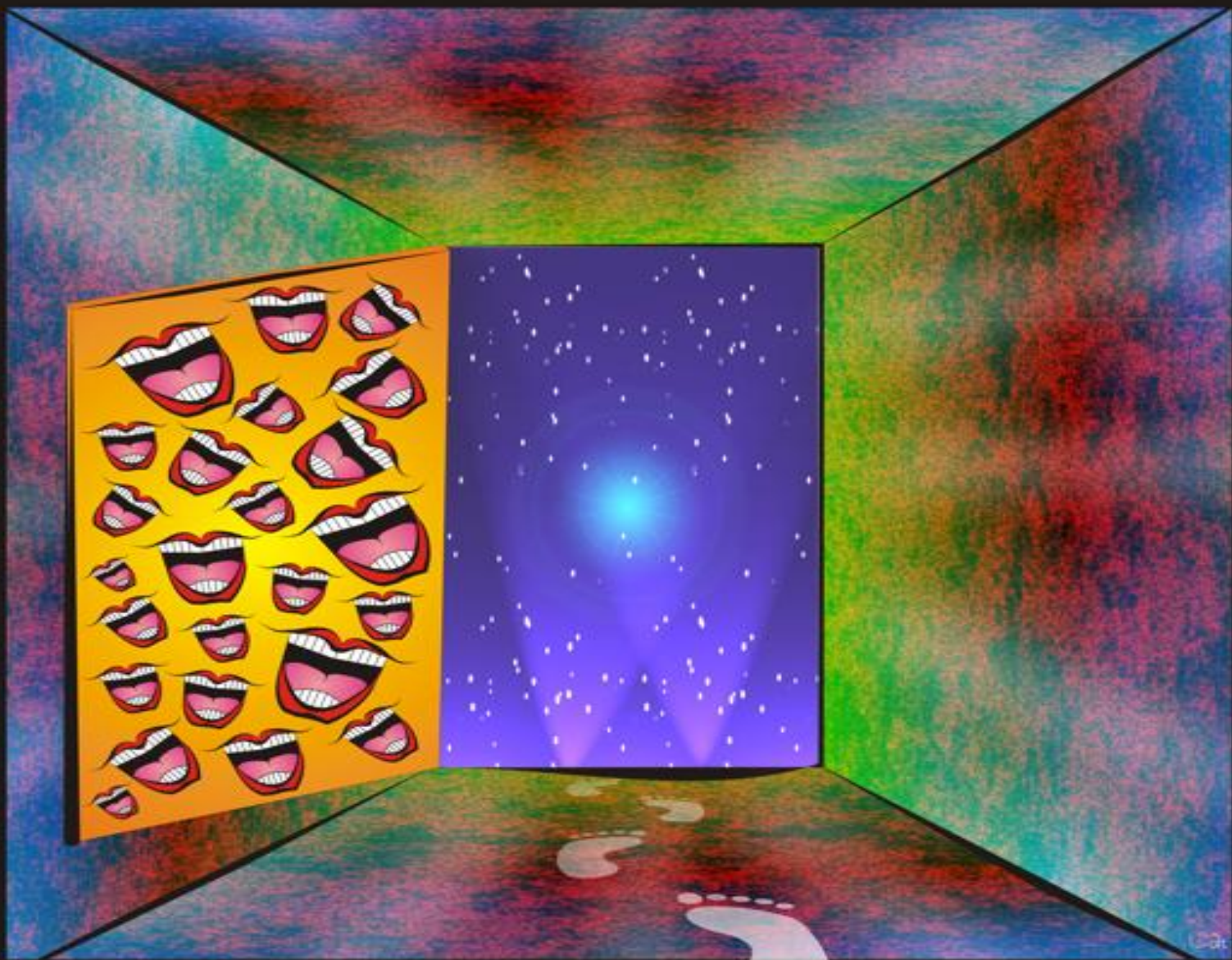


SURROUND
YOURSELF
WITH PEOPLE
WHO MAKE
YOU LAUGH!!



BE SILLY....PLAY





"Laughter is the doorway to the soul"