

# CPD Director Teaches USU Employees To Laugh Off Stress | CPD Blog

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Stress is what happens to your body when you feel threatened. It's a very useful set of chemical and physical changes if you need to run from predators.

"Unfortunately most of us don't run or fight," said CPD Executive Director Matthew Wappett during a presentation to Utah State University employees this morning. "We just kinda sit there.... in the long run that's not very healthy."

Dr. Wappett's presentation, *Why Stress Makes You a Terrible Person, and Why You Should Laugh About It*, was peppered with humor and hard science.

In today's stressed-out society, people can experience the effects of stress over the long term: a higher pulse, higher blood pressure, fast, shallow breathing; even stickier blood that's more likely to clot.

All those symptoms can cause health problems or make them worse: hypertension, cardiac arrhythmia, hardening of the arteries, chronic pain, attention deficit disorder, insomnia, anxiety, hostility/conduct disorder, depression, truncal obesity (that's fat around your middle), eating disorders, premenstrual syndrome, infertility, autoimmune disorders, insulin resistant diabetes, dementia, high cholesterol.

Professionals have recognized the stress connection. While walking clients through weight loss or infertility treatments, they often ask about stress and how well it's being managed.

In addition to the toll stress takes on the body, it also invokes chemical changes in the brain; ones that focus more on individual survival, less on paying attention, remembering things or feeling empathy for other people. There are chemical reasons why, after a hard day, people go home and treat their loved ones badly.

Fortunately, Wappett said, while stress triggers certain responses in the body and brain, people can also trigger a relaxation response. They can prompt in themselves that wonderful sense of safety and well-being that—for some people—comes with a runner's high, crocheting, or practicing yoga.

Research by Dr. Herbert Benson began studying relaxation response in the 1960s and 70s. It is triggered by two steps: repeating a word, sound, action or phrase, and passively returning to that repetition when thoughts intrude.

Wappett worked with a classroom of students with behavior disorders and taught them—against some resistance—to knit. Eventually, "the kids discovered they liked it." They even used it to manage their emotions.

Laughter also triggers feelings of safety, Wappett said. Humans are not the only social animals that laugh. Herd animals do it, too, "chuffing" to let the herd know that a predator has left, for example. With the laughter, the body releases hormones associated with trust and bonding. "People who have genuinely laughed with you share a chemical bond," he said.

So if laughter and yoga are both good for relieving stress, what about combining the two? Wappett led an auditorium-full of people through some exercises that combined simple actions with *ho*, *ha* and *hee* sounds. They soon turned into genuine laughter in a scene that is hard to describe without squashing the magic. But if you were there, it was hilarious.

If you want to know what laughter yoga looks like, do a YouTube search for "laughter yoga."