

giving out fun awards, such as the ‘Most Likely to Overdose on Caffeine Award’. Employees feel appreciated, and everyone has a good time.

Ruben recalls a fun tradition from his PhD lab at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Each scientist picked an orange test-tube stopper, or septum, and drew a little face on it. Once a week, they’d take a break to place the stoppers on a shaker; whichever stopper stayed on the longest before bouncing off won its scientist US\$1 from each of the other entrants. That two-minute break provided a valuable bonding experience, Ruben says.

And if one wonders what to joke about, “the easiest person to laugh at is yourself”, advises Josh Willis, a climate scientist at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, who has trained with comedy troupes The Groundlings and Second City. He christened one of his missions OMG, an initialism for ‘Oceans Melting Greenland’.

Willis is perfectly willing to engage in a bit of self-deprecating humour, and one of his studies made it easy to do that. In 2006, early in his career, he collected data showing that, despite the effects of global warming, some of the world’s oceans had somehow cooled between 2003 and 2005 (ref. 2). Willis endured a fair bit of ridicule for this ‘discovery’. Even conservative pundits got in on the harassment, using Willis’s paper as evidence that left-leaning scientists are clueless about climate.

Willis, trusting his data, took it all in his stride. Then, in February 2007, he discovered the error he’d made. No, the oceans weren’t getting colder: certain temperature sensors had given bad readings. He published a correction shortly afterwards³.

In response — playing on the talk-show punditry that Willis had endured — his wife gave him a set of business cards imprinted with the title ‘Idiot leftist scientist’. He still carries the cards in his wallet. “That dose of humility and making fun of myself — in the long run, I think it benefited my career,” says Willis.

TREAD WITH CARE

Some joke topics are simply not acceptable in any workplace, notes Nicki Fuchs, a stand-up comic and biochemical engineer at MedImmune in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Gender, politics, race and religion, among other matters, are off the table, she advises.

Those rules still leave her with plenty of room to jest with her labmates. And it’s useful for her to joke about work, says Fuchs, because it helps her, a 30-year-old woman, to connect with the rest of the lab members — all older men. A recurring wisecrack is about whoever most recently left the water

running and flooded the lab — a not-uncommon occurrence, because their work involves filling up large, pressurized bottles.

Jokes may fall flat in some settings. In graduate school, Ruben often ended his lab-meeting presentations with a joke slide. But during one such presentation, his adviser was already unimpressed with his scientific progress, and Ruben suspects that his joke slide — a colleague’s head that was Photoshopped onto a goat’s body — deepened his adviser’s doubts. Since then, he uses jokes only in informal presentations or talks about science careers.

Scientists should also be careful about humour that might not work well with people from other cultures. What’s funny to one ethnic group can be incomprehensible or offensive to another, Mak notes.

Humour is a positive catalyst for thinking creatively. Or, for mathematicians, “Ha + Ha = Aha.”

It’s fairly simple to learn about the sense of humour in a geographical region to which one is travelling or moving, adds Kerr: he just Googles it.

Of course, some topics that scientists study — cancer, for example — aren’t funny at all. Yet jokes can help to ease tension and discomfort around specialities that deal with tragic subjects, says Helena González, who earned a PhD studying the epigenetics of cancer in 2013 and is now a science communicator with the comedy troupe Big Van Science in Barcelona. “That kind of black humour releases your feelings and makes your work much easier,” she says.

Still, she adds, scientists need to be careful about where they make any such jokes. Generally, among a few close colleagues in the lab, it’s fine. When dealing with patients or the public, it’s not.

And although pranks are fun, those that might endanger personnel, equipment or experiments have no place in the lab. Ruben recalls one supervisor he had at a summer job, who dropped a lit match into a recently emptied jug of ethanol. “A column of fire shot up to the ceiling,” Ruben says. “He probably shouldn’t have done that.”

That said, everyone can use a chuckle now and then. If you’re planning a — harmless! — April Fool’s lab jape, be sure to share it with @naturejobs, hashtag #AprilFools. ■

Amber Dance is a freelance writer in Los Angeles, California.

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2. Lyman, J. M. *et al.* *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **33**, L18604 (2006).
3. Willis, J. K. *et al.* *Geophys. Res. Lett.* **34**, L16601 (2007).

MENTAL HEALTH

Degrees and depression

PhD and master’s students worldwide report rates of depression and anxiety that are six times higher than those in the general public (T. M. Evans *et al.* *Nature Biotech.* **36**, 282–284; 2018). The report, based on the responses of 2,279 students in 26 nations, found that more than 40% of respondents had anxiety scores in the moderate to severe range, and that nearly 40% showed signs of moderate to severe depression. The high rates suggested by this study are alarming, says Teresa Evans, a neuroscientist at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio and the study’s lead author. She notes that students suffering from anxiety or depression might have been especially motivated to take the survey, which could have skewed the results. But she believes that the findings underscore the severity of the problem and the need for a response. Evans adds that universities should provide students with training to help them manage their time and cope with stress.

GENDER

Female authors scarce

Female authors are scarce in the pages of high-impact journals, according to an online analysis (Y. A. Shen *et al.* Preprint at bioRxiv <http://dx.doi.org/10.1101/275362>; 2018). Researchers at the University of Washington in Seattle gathered names of first and last authors from papers published between 2005 and 2017 in 15 major science and neuroscience journals, including *Nature*, *Science*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS), *Nature Neuroscience* and *Neuropsychology Review*. Women accounted for roughly 25% of first authors in *Nature* and *Science* and just over 35% of first authors in PNAS. Female first authors outnumbered men — by 53% to 47% — in only one journal, *Neuropsychology Review*. Women represented about 15% of senior or last-author spots in *Nature* and *Science* and just under 40% in *Neuropsychology Review*. The study found an inverse relationship between the prevalence of female authors and the journal’s impact factor: the higher the impact, the lower the proportion of women as first or last authors. Co-author Ione Fine, a neuroscientist, and colleagues suggest that journals could reduce the possibility of bias by adopting mandatory double-blind reviews. Nature Research, which includes all the Nature-branded journals, said that the brand “is committed to gender equality and our journals strive to support women in science”.