


‘Help, I’m a Fun



In a relationship, at the office, on Twitter — a sense of humour is our greatest asset. But what happens when you don't have a funny bone? Writer Antonia Hoyle (left), 35, reveals what life's like with NSOH

PHOTOS: DAVID YEO

nderachiever!'

'AS THE CHAMPAGNE FLOWED, my stomach churned. I knew it was only a matter of time before the convivial atmosphere would come to an abrupt halt and it would be my fault. Sure enough, it happened when someone compared an ex-boyfriend to Fred Flintstone. The wisecrack made my fellow party guests fall about laughing until, finally, they looked at me, wondering why I hadn't so much as raised a smile. "I'm sorry," I said, blushing. "I just don't get it." Once again I'd killed a conversation by not finding it funny.

'Why? Because I don't have a sense of humour. I don't understand jokes; I can't join in with witty banter and the things that everyone else finds hilarious leave me

confused. It might sound amusing, but it's no laughing matter. My sense of humour failure affects everything from my career to friendships and even my marriage.

A shared appreciation for funny stuff is, after all, the social glue that binds our relationships. It endears us to strangers, puts our employers at ease and entertains friends and family.

'For women, it's now as sought after a commodity as beauty and brains. A recent survey of men ranked a GSOH as the most important attribute a woman can have, while another showed 79 per cent of bosses believe humour to be important in the workplace. Stars from Kristen Wiig to Tina Fey have busted the myth that women don't "do" ▶

humour. Writer Caitlin Moran cracks one-liners with seemingly less effort than it takes me to clear my throat. Sitcoms like *Girls* portray humour as a passport to a better existence. Throw in Twitter and Facebook and the rest of us have no excuse not to be at our funniest 24/7. At work we're supposed to sparkle. Friends – real and cyber – expect witticisms. Hardly surprising that so many of us are buckling under the weight of expectation. As Harley Street psychotherapist Susan Hepburn explains, "Social media and celebrity influences mean women feel under more pressure than ever to be funny. Not being able to laugh can lead to low self-esteem and a sense of isolation."

'I first realised I had NSOH aged 11, when I watched *Bill And Ted's Excellent Adventure* at a sleepover. While friends guffawed I felt bewildered.

'At university, I grinned self-consciously at Ali G, hoping nobody would notice that I wasn't in on the joke. At a stand-up comedy show I was dragged to I was

singled out for my sullen face. I insisted I was happy; the comedian made fun of my supposedly posh accent, reducing the audience to hysterics. I tried to smile but felt full of self-loathing. At its most savage, humour can induce a cruel mob mentality. If you get it, your identity is bolstered. If you don't, you're treated with suspicion.

'In social situations, I use alcohol as a crutch, finding it easier to fake jollity when tipsy. But I often make a fool of myself. People are laughing at me, not my jokes. It's not that I'm stupid. I have a first-class degree and think I write with wit. Nor am I miserable. I love my work, my husband Chris, 35, an analyst, my two children (Rosie, three, and Felix, one) and my friends. I just seem to be missing the funny gene. I find slapstick puerile. Sarcasm sails over my head because I expect people to say what they mean. When it comes to small talk I freeze, lacking the confidence to make quips without offending.

'Perhaps this sounds like mild autism (many of us are somewhere on the spectrum, after all), but I don't think it is. Maybe it runs in the family, although apparently humour has little to do with

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almost as difficult to get jokes as I do. Ironically, I laugh more in his company than anyone else's – mainly about how misunderstood we are.

'But it's not just jokes that I find difficult; I also struggle with banter, which is more important – especially at work. Bosses like staff to flatter their ego by finding them funny. One job didn't work out after I failed to get my manager's humour – I simply wasn't able to laugh myself into her confidence. Having NSOH can make office conversation mortifying. Whether it's sniggering over the cocky work experience boy or the dodgy canteen food, I've often felt too awkward to join in until I'm excluded altogether.

'Social media is the biggest minefield of all. Every other tweet in my timeline is a joke, but none of them make me ROFL, LMAO or even LOL. It's a game of one-upmanship with everyone on a mission to get as many retweets, favourites and likes as they can. I don't even make it out of the starting blocks.

'Ironically, I met my husband when he was at his funniest – giving a speech as best man. Needless to say, I didn't get it, falling

genes. Still, while I do remember my parents laughing at the telly, my brother finds it

for his kindness and loyalty rather than his wit. Luckily, he is the patient type. Over the six years we've been together, he's tried to explain all the jokes in *Seinfeld* and *Scrubs* before giving in and letting me watch *The West Wing* instead. He even forgave me when I interrupted his speech at our own wedding to ask for clarification on his joke about my dancing. He wishes I was more open-minded to humour but thinks I'm funny in my own way. He – like my closest friends – says the very fact that I don't have a sense of humour is funny in itself. Others who don't know me? Perhaps they'd describe me as dull or awkward.

'It's not that I haven't tried to hone my sense of humour. I've read self-help guides. I've tried to giggle in the hope it will turn into genuine guffaws. If I could only learn to laugh more convincingly I might get away with it. But I'm not a good enough actress to fake it, and I'd rather be labelled humourless than a hypocrite. Besides, I think lots of people don't really get the joke – they're joining in to feel accepted. So yes, while I'd love to understand a whole episode of *Fresh Meat* or hold my own in a bar with some sharp repartee, I've accepted that it's never going to happen. And I've made my peace with that. I might not be funny, but at least I'm being myself.' ■

Do you feel like you've had a humour bypass? Let us know at feedback@graziainmagazine.co.uk



Antonia's friends (with her below) find her lack of a sense of humour funny in itself

