

Fear of Laughing – Gelotophobia



It is well known that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are more likely to be bullied or ridiculed than neurotypical children. Due to inappropriate or atypical social behaviour, they may be a source of humour to others. Being laughed at is something that few people enjoy, and is associated with emotions such as shame, anger and sadness.

Repeatedly being laughed at and ridiculed may lead to a fear of being laughed at, termed gelotophobia. People with gelotophobia do not see laughing as something positive. They may react negatively toward laughter, are suspicious of others laughing and believe it is directed toward them. A recent study explored whether children with Asperger syndrome (AS) are more likely to develop gelotophobia.

The Study

There were 40 individuals with AS, and a comparison group of 83 neurotypical individuals who were tested. To assess the severity and frequency of past ridicule, both groups completed the Ridicule Experience Questionnaire (REQ). To determine the proportion of both groups with gelotophobia, a newly developed questionnaire called the PhoPhilKat was used. The PhoPhilKat is able to measure three different things; (1) gelotophobia, the fear of being laughed at; (2) gelotophilia, the enjoyment of being laughed at; and, (3) katagelasticism, the enjoyment of laughing at others.

Past Ridicule

Compared to the comparison group, individuals with AS reported having been laughed at more frequently and they perceived these events more negatively. This concurs with previous research that individuals with AS have an increased risk of being victims of bullying.

Gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at)

The AS group scored higher for gelotophobia than the comparison group, meaning that individuals with AS were more likely to fear being laughed at. Six percent of the comparison group exceeded the cut off score for gelotophobia, while 45% of the AS group exceeded the cut off. The AS group were more likely to fear being laughed at even when previous instances of being laughed at had been taken into account.

The authors suggest that the high rate of gelotophobia in AS individuals may be due to the increased chance of being targeted by bullies, which may be a result of social clumsiness. In addition, it may be that due to a lack of social awareness, individuals with AS may find it difficult to distinguish between bullying and good-natured teasing, and mistakenly think that they are being bullied when they are actually not.

Gelotophilia (enjoyment of being laughed at)

The AS group scored lower than the comparison group for gelotophilia, meaning that they were less likely to enjoy being laughed at by others. This is to be expected given that they were more likely to fear being laughed at than the comparison group.



Katagelasticism (enjoyment of laughing at others)

There was no difference between the AS and comparison groups for katagelasticism, suggesting that both groups enjoy laughing at others equally. This may be related to reduced empathy that is often a characteristic of individuals with AS.

Conclusion

Overall, the AS group recalled more and worse instances of being laughed at than the comparison group. They were more likely to fear being laughed at, and less likely to enjoy being laughed at, but are just as able to laugh at others.

Reference

Samson, A. C. & Huber, O. (2011). Teasing, ridiculing and the relation to the fear of being laughed at in individuals with Asperger's syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41 (4), 475-483.

