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Laughter paves the way for romance

Studies suggest humour signals big brain and good partner-potential.

[Helen Pearson](#)

If love is blind, then maybe humour is the attention-grabber.

That's the conclusion of two recent studies that confirm a long-standing stereotype of flirting: that women like joky men, while men like women who laugh at their jokes.

The idea that funny people are attractive may seem obvious. But there have been very few scientific studies to examine whether or not this is true.

Eric Bressler of Westfield State College, Massachusetts, and colleague Sigal Balshine of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, did this by asking more than 200 male and female college students to examine photos of members of the opposite sex. Some had funny quotes pinned beneath them, such as: "My high school was so rough we had our own coroner." Others had bland ones: "I'd rather walk to school than take the bus."

Women ranked the humorous men as better potential partners, the researchers found - and as more friendly, fun and popular. Men's view of a woman, on the other hand, appeared to be uninfluenced by her wit¹.

Bressler suspected that men and women do, in fact, both value a sense of humour in a mate, but that they might be looking for slightly different things: women valuing an ability to be funny and men valuing an ability to see the joke.

Make me laugh

In a second study, Bressler and his colleagues asked nearly 130 students to imagine two people of the opposite sex. One fictional character was funny; the other appreciated another person's humour. The team then asked each student which they would choose for a relationship.

Women generally preferred men who were funny, while men favoured a woman who thought he was funny, the team report in a second paper accepted for publication².

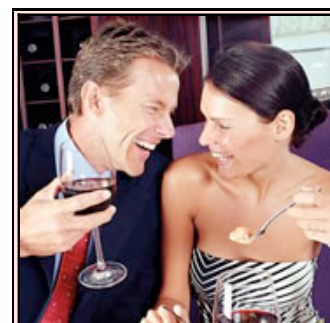
Bressler believes that the findings might hint at why humans have evolved a sense of humour at all.

According to one theory, proposed by psychologist Geoffrey Miller at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, women prefer funny men because their wit reveals an active and healthy brain - and a fine set of underlying genes. "It's a very powerful and reliable way to show creativity and intelligence," Miller says.

Smarty pants

If this theory holds true, a woman choosing a funny man as a partner is more likely to have genetically healthy children who will survive and reproduce themselves. This so-called sexual selection could, in some circumstances, favour women who like humorous men, and men who like women with an appreciation for humour.

The entire idea remains speculative, however. And this particular study only looked at humour in North American college students.



Women like a funny man.
Men like women who laugh
at their jokes.

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But as biologists identify more and more human genes, Miller suggests that they might find ones that contribute in the brain to both a sense of humour and broader mental health.

What does this mean for those seeking love? Bressler, being a scientist rather than a relationship therapist, is reluctant to say. But when pushed, he boils it down to a simple line of advice for the ladies: "If you're not interested in a guy then don't laugh at his jokes."

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References

1. Bressler E. R. & Balshine S. . *Evolution & Human Behavior*, **27**. 29 - 39 (2006).
2. Bressler E. R., *et al.* *Evolution & Human Behavior* article in press (2006).

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