

Healing with humour: Taking better care of ourselves

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The field of Psychology has for a long time recognized the beneficial influences of humour. Alport (1961), Maslow (1961), and Rogers (1961) acknowledged that a sense of humour is a necessary attribute of self-actualized, fully functioning people.

Humour enhances the creative process (Zelinski, 1990) and is one of the coping devices used to combat stress (Berk, 1989; Dixon, 1980; Pines, Aronson & Kafry, 1981; Sheehy, 1981). Humour can be used successfully in the classroom (Bryant, 1988; Ziegler, 1985; Powell, 1985), in the workplace (Wilson, 1989; Zelinski, 1990), in therapy and counselling (Fenwick, 1995; Leone, 1986; Little, 1977; Pasquali, 1990; Prerost, 1989; Shertzer & Stone, 1980), and in medicine to assist in the healing process (Cousins, 1979; Cousins, 1989; Hunt, 1997; Klein, 1989; Siegel, 1986). Laughter improves self-esteem, enhances social interaction, and generally makes life more enjoyable.

Laughter is more than a visual and vocal behaviour. It is accompanied by a wide range of physiological changes. During vigorous laughter the body brings in extra oxygen, shudders the internal organs, causes muscles to contract, and activates the hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal glands. This results in an increase in the secretion of endorphines (internally produced morphine-like molecules). This internal jogging produces an increase in oxygen absorption, increase in heart rate, relaxation of the muscles, and increases in the number of disease fighting immune cells (Cousins, 1989; Siegel, 1989).

The use of humour as a method of stress reduction and healing became popular in the 1980's following the publication of *Anatomy of an Illness* by Norman Cousins (1979). Cousins, suffering from ankylosing spondylitis, a crippling life-threatening disease, claimed that laughter was a significant feature of his treatment and recovery. Believing that negative emotions had a negative effect on his health, he theorized that the opposite was also true, that positive emotions would have a positive effect. He followed traditional medical treatment, with added vitamin C and plenty of laughter.

Claiming that a hospital was no place for a seriously sick person, Cousins checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel room with a private nurse and lots of comedy videos, tapes, and books. He discovered that 10 minutes of solid belly laughter would give him two hours of pain-free sleep. He believed that under certain conditions our bodies secrete healing chemicals. Those conditions include love, hope, faith, will to live, purpose, determination, and joy; all of which are enhanced by the presence of laughter. Medical practitioners and

researchers have reported research which demonstrates the validity of this theory (Berk, 1989; Cousins, 1989; Glassman, 1983 ; Siegel, 1986).

During his recovery period, Cousins maintained a robust sense of humour. One day when his nurse left a container to collect a urine specimen he filled it with apple juice. When she came to collect the specimen she commented, "This looks a bit cloudy today." To which Cousins responded, "Oh, perhaps I should put it through again," and he drank it!

Illness and disease can result from an inability to cope effectively with daily adversity. (Benson, 1975; Cousins, 1989; Hanson, 1985; Selye, 1974). Daily stressors unchecked over time are the biggest culprits and perpetrators of illness. There may be some truth to the old saying, "It's the little things that get you." If laughter is so powerful it can help to cure life-threatening diseases, just think what it can do to help with everyday annoyances and stressors.

A sense of humour is one of our most powerful stress coping behaviours. Laughter is very freeing. If we can laugh at a thing we can survive it. Laughter helps us to gain power in powerless situations and gives us a sense of control when things around us seem out of control. This humour attitude is physically, psychologically, and spiritually beneficial. A good laugh can help us see life from a different perspective and face our problems with renewed concentration and hope.

You can put more laughter into your life. This may involve some risks, but it sure isn't boring. Look for it, create it, spread it around.

1. Enjoy your work. Create an atmosphere of fun with posters, pictures, cartoons, jokes and friendly banter with co-workers and clients. Look for the funny side of life. For example if you happen to work in an automobile insurance office you may have come across phrases like these written on accident report forms:

- I had been driving for forty years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had the accident.
- The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.
- I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my Mother-in-law, and headed over the embankment.
- The gentleman behind me struck me on the backside. He then went to rest in the bush with just his rear end showing.

2. Your home life can offer an endless supply of humorous material. Our lives are just as funny as the lives of Erma Bombeck, Bill Cosby, and Dave Barry. The only difference is that they have become astute observers of the funny side of life and have learned to write about it.

3. Television, movies, books, and songs provide an abundance of laughable material. What could be funnier than the titles of these books and songs:

- Dates from Hell
- How to be Miserable for the Rest of the Century
- I Got Tears in My Ears from Lyin' on My Back in Bed While I Cry Over You
- My Wife Ran Off With My Best Friend and I Miss Him
- Oral Sadism and the Vegetarian Personality

4. Have a joke party. Invite people you know who like to laugh and have everyone come prepared to share their favourite jokes. I have an A.T. and T. rule for using jokes at all times. They must be Appropriate, Tasteful, and Tactful. Racist and sexist jokes are forbidden. Laughing with people is compassionate; laughing at them is immoral and unethical. Appropriate humour never belittles or criticizes. It is based on caring and empathy, builds confidence, brings people closer together, is mutually supportive, and invites everyone to laugh. Provide paper and pencils at your party so people can record the jokes they would like to add to their own joke files.

5. Create a laughter first-aid kit. This kit should include humorous videos, tapes, books, cartoons, and scrapbooks (a collection of joyous pictures and stories). Items from this kit can be used for gifts or can be loaned to people who need a lift. Use it yourself when you want to feel better. Recently I had my sister visit with me for several days. She had just been diagnosed with a serious form of cancer. We had been crying and laughing together during the day. At bedtime I gave her a scrapbook from my kit and for two hours I heard her chuckling in her room. Remember: Life does not cease to be funny when something bad happens any more than it ceases to be serious when we are laughing. Here is one of my favourite lines, "they say such nice things at people's funerals; it makes me sad to think I'm going to miss mine by just a few days". The more serious the matter, the greater the need for humour.

6. Write a laughter contract with yourself.

I _____ will do one thing each day to (name) get more laughter in my life.

Today I will

(Signature)

(Date)

7. Change your attitude. People generally handle stressors in one of three ways: by hiding under a psychological rock; by blaming everyone around them; or with love, dignity, courage, and humour. We are free to choose how we will respond.

8. Make a good impression. One of the first things people notice in others is facial expression. If you want to "dress for success," wear a smile.

9. Give out "Bad Attitude Awards". The first award goes to Lord Chesterfield, an English statesman in the 18th Century, who said that proper people never laugh out loud.

10. Be a clown. Take a few risks and liberate your funny bone. Childlike (I didn't say childish) playfulness enhances your ability to enjoy life.

11. Reminisce about happy memories and funny stories. Photo albums are great catalysts. I am currently shopping for a camcorder. Home movies provide an excellent avenue for creativity and fun.

12. Look for that humour attitude. Set a goal to laugh at least 100 times a day.

Norman Cousins said laughter saved his life. I think that without laughter we wouldn't have much of a life. Humour is all around us. Become more aware, look for it, embrace it. Use your sense of humour to feel better, and be more creative and productive. Jump for the stars: you may not make it, but the effort will at least get you over the fence. Healing with humour is a better way of taking care of ourselves.

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