

Is Laughter the Best Medicine?

By Bridgit Dengel Gaspard, LCSW

“Laughter is the best medicine” is such an utter cliché, it must be true! Personal therapeutic breakthroughs broaden your perspective. Ideally this triggers the ability to smile and even chuckle at situations that once were overwhelming and perhaps even paralyzing. Before I was a therapist, I was a stand-up comic. Hmmm, is that better as a setup for a joke or the punch line? I’m not sure. Either way it’s true. Woody Allen said the things I talk about may be funny to the audience, but are painful when they happen. Comedy can be a healthy way to deal with difficult experiences.

Humor is complicated. What may fly in Mongolia may flop in Peoria. Different things are funny depending on a number of factors like age, gender, culture, current mood and frame of mind. Whether the stimuli is a sight gag, finding something funny, or being tickled, the physiology of laughter is the same, and quite healthy.

“It is unclear as to how many muscles it takes to laugh, but the harder you laugh, the more muscles are used. These are facial muscles, muscles in your arms, neck, trunk and legs. Some of these are muscles that are only used when you laugh, therefore it is essential that you learn to laugh in order to be healthy,” explains <http://www.3fatchicks.com/how-laughter-therapy-can-relax-muscles-and-relieve-stress>. This is a site with what I consider an insulting*, unfunny** name.

Laughter improves cardiovascular health, breathing, mood, strengthens the immune system and reduces stress and pain. For a serious accounting on the physiology of laughter, peruse <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laughter>.

Rodney Dangerfield may not have gotten any respect, but humor has been studied for a long time. In Latin, humor means "body fluid." Ancient Greeks practiced humoral medicine, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body was vital for physical and mental health. An aside: this type of comedy reigns at the box office so I am adding a gratuitous sample:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yDnOF8uSCQ>.

Sigmund Freud wrote a book on jokes and the unconscious in 1905. In 1980 Norman Cousins published “*Human Options: An Autobiographical Notebook*” highlighting his program of generating a positive attitude assisted by inducing laughter through Marx Brothers films. (A classic that includes Lucy – who we all

love... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApYVbEAPSTo&feature=related>.) Mr. Cousins maintained that not only did this add joy, but reduced his pain and allowed him to sleep (all of which help heal.) Feeling scholarly? Follow your intellectual curiosity and learn more from the International Society for Humor: <http://www.hnu.edu/ishs/>

As a therapist who prescribes militant self-care, I often recommend a client partake of something that makes him laugh. This is part of Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) skill called "improve the moment" when overwhelmed with distress. I try to practice what I preach and have had a subscription for over a decade to Funny Times which compiles cartoons and essays from all over into a monthly paper (<http://www.funnytimes.com/>).

Personally I love the juxtaposition of opposites and absurdism. When I was doing stand-up, one of my routines explored the big question, "if you know you're shallow does that make you deep?" It revolved around my being the black sheep of the family because "I don't get naked and I don't get high. I'm very shallow. My parents were hippies. They're very deep. I was not allowed to wear mascara, because that was 'fashion slavery.' But when my brother wore mascara, it was art, personal expression, BRAVERY!"

Towards turning things upside down, enjoy a Reno 911 out take:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWL5_oeCEd0&feature=relmfu

Steven Wright:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akhxTqAMiiA>

Gender stereotype send-up:

http://www.funnytimes.com/videos.php?video_id=2012011801

Sometimes, ours is not to wonder why (something is funny.) Just laugh. I want to end with what my comedy colleague, Vivian Paxton, used to have everyone do together. For one minute demonstrate your best fake laugh! Chortle, giggle, smirk, grimace, chuckle, roar, scream. Don't stop. Guffaw, shriek, howl, snicker, cackle, snort and laugh! Why is that hilarious? I don't know. But afterwards you will be spent and feel sooo much better...

Need help starting?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOY7L88RV70&feature=related>

*Insult jokes can be a form of negative bonding and is beyond the scope of this post. However if you like this kind of humor, check out:

http://www.thejokeyard.com/funny_insults/insult_jokes.html. Other serious aspects of humor include its dynamic related to social status like nervous laughter (to hide embarrassment) or courtesy laughter (because it's your boss!)

**While researching for this post, an admittedly fun assignment, I was surprised at how quickly it lost its jocular appeal. There is an overload of mean, nasty mockery of human suffering (illness, deformity, low intelligence, etc.)

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