

A Prescription to Laugh: Healing Through Humor and Laughter

By Lynn Shaw, MSW

"A cheerful heart is good medicine."

- King Solomon (Proverbs 17:22)

King Solomon gave us one of the earliest recorded accounts regarding the healing power of humor and laughter. In the 1300's, surgeon Henri de Mondeville reportedly told jokes to his patients in the recovery room. In the 1600's, educator Richard Mulcater recommended laughter for those suffering from head colds.

Throughout the centuries court jesters have been hired to relieve the royalty's stress from governmental duties. Perhaps the most insightful recording of the benefits of laughter and humor healing came from Dr. Norman Cousins in his book, Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient.

Laughter And Humor Can And Does Enhance Our Overall Well-Being

In 1964 Dr. Cousins was diagnosed with a crippling and extremely painful inflammation of his body. With his physician's assistance, he checked out of the hospital and into a hotel to utilize as many natural resources as possible to treat his condition. His experience became a controlled study in pain management and overall healing.

Dr. Cousins had a strong will to live and knew if he focused on love and faith, he could generate positive emotions. He decided to experiment with laughter to create a positive factor in altering his body chemistry to be in a healing mode. Dr. Cousins systematically watched Candid Camera classics, Marx Brother films, and read books like E.B. and Katharine White's Subtreasury of American Humor and Max Eastman's The Enjoyment of Laughter. He later wrote, "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep." He recovered from this condition and spent the next 20 years teaching about the merits of laughter and humor in healing.

Experts now agree, Laughter:

- Is good for you
- Boosts your immune system
- Can be shared
- Relieves tension
- Benefits the mind, body and spirit
- Is free!

"Me, Funny?"

Earlier in my career when presenting information on laughter therapy, it was my intention to be known as a laughter specialist, not a comedienne or a humorist. If people said, "you speak about humor." I would defend my position, "No," I would start, "I speak about the benefits of therapeutic laughter." "But, you're funny!" I would hear in return. "You're a humorist!" So purist was I in my thinking, that the idea of people finding my presentations educational AND humorous escaped me.

"Laughter is the shortest distance between two people."

- Victor Borge

What I now appreciate is that often I connect with someone through shared humor, or I connect with someone who simply hears my laugh and readily joins in laughing with me.

What are the Differences Between Laughter and Humor?

Laughter is innate, and you are born with your giggles. You have unique sounds of laughter. Your laughter may sound similar to another's laughter, but your sound is brilliantly yours. Laughter exists on its own merit. You do not have to "get the joke," hear a story, or decipher a code in order to laugh.

People are surprised to learn that I do not tell jokes, yet I laugh every day. Sometimes I get requests to tell jokes, and I offer to just start laughing instead. I enjoy a good joke, but I'm a terrible joke-teller.

Humor is the interpretation of what you perceive as funny. Your sense of humor begins forming during your early life lessons of what is appropriate to laugh about or inappropriate (such as ridicule or teasing). Once the perception is processed in your mind, then your mind informs your body to push the laughter button and let your laughter sounds begin.

For some people who find laughter difficult, humor can be the jumpstart to finding their brilliant sounds of laughter. Paul McGhee, Ph.D., author of Health, Healing, and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training, (Kendall/Hunt, 1999) suggests that some people need to surround themselves with humor through comedy clubs, television shows, or friends who are identified as having "a great sense of humor." By doing so, Dr. McGhee contends that people will connect with humor and then enjoy the laughter that follows.

When I tell stories in my presentations, most audience members will connect with my humor and then laugh. But, occasionally someone comes up to me

saying; "I just wasn't with you today." All that means is that their humor did not connect with mine, which leads me to another subtle difference between laughter and humor.

Humor Cannot Always be Shared

Laughter is energy that can be shared because there is not a stimulus that has to accompany it that is inclusive of others. Humor however, is subjective and not always shared.

Did you laugh at the last joke you heard? Have you been on the receiving end of a practical joke? Did you laugh? Do you enjoy certain television shows that other family members despise? Do you laugh uproariously at a commercial to find your friend looking over at you in dismay?

In summary, laughter is innate and can be shared. Humor is learned and isn't always appreciated by more than the interpreter. There has to be an intellectual connection as well.

How Can You Use Laughter and Humor for Healing?

For the purpose of applying laughter to your daily life and the healing of your mind, body and spirit, think of humor as the brain waves jumpstarting your laughter.

Become aware of what you interpret as funny. For example next time you purchase a card, discover which ones elicited laughter. Read cartoons, bumper stickers, billboard signs to enhance your awareness of what generates laughter. When people tell stories, pay attention to how you felt afterwards. Did you laugh? Reflect on which radio, TV shows or movies make you laugh. Armed with this new awareness, use the tool of humor to induce laughter for your health, healing and general sense of well-being.

Finally, spend time daily practicing laughing out loud. Maybe smiling first, then leaning into a giggle, then outright belly laughs. Now move beyond thinking about laughter and humor. Go ahead . . . it's safe . . . you can do it...ready, get set, laugh!