



Laughter Is Good Medicine

Leader Guide

HE 4-970

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Objectives

1. Gain knowledge about the benefits of humor in life and wellness
2. Learn ways to use humor and laughter to reduce stress
3. Share the enjoyment of laughter and humor

Materials needed

- Lesson guide
- Handouts —member guide
- Collection of stories, cartoons, and humorous clips that you can share
- Humor first-aid kit
- Videotape player
- Videos. Select humorous videos and cue them to specific areas or clips that you want to show to illustrate a point in the lesson.
- A piece of stationery for each member
- Evaluation

Introduction

Laughter and humor are great tools to help people deal with threatening or difficult situations. Looking at life's situations with a sense of humor helps keep things in balance. Humor is a source of power and healing and may be a key to survival. We often forget this when caught up in the troubles of life. However, as Erma Bombeck says, "When humor goes, there goes civilization."

Activities

Preparation:

Write quotes from the lesson on large pieces of paper and place around the room. Refer to them as they appear in the narrative.

Begin lesson by laughing:

Show a clip from a video tape: I Love Lucy, Victor Borga, or your favorite.

Or read a humorous story from Erma Bombeck or other humorous writer.



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Everyone laughs, but some laugh more than others, and children laugh more than adults. Adults laugh approximately 15 times per day, while children laugh about 400 times a day. So, when we grow up, somehow we lose a few hundred laughs a day!

More and more studies are finding that laughter is good medicine. Learning to smile and laugh more easily and often could have a positive effect on our health and well-being.

How and where do we laugh?

Some of us laugh quietly, some laugh in loud bursts, in giggles, in titters, or in chuckles. Some people laugh with their entire bodies while others may just smile and show a twinkle in the eye. Most of us laugh differently depending on the situation we are in and/or the people we are with.

Laughter is also a social phenomenon. People are more likely to respond with laughter when they are with others than when they are alone.

Discuss: When do we laugh? What makes us laugh?

There are several types of humor; some people have categorized them as:

- Parody
- Satire
- Slapstick comedy
- Absurd/nonsense humor
- Black humor
- Irony
- Dry humor and puns
- Sarcasm

We react differently to each kind of humor. Some people enjoy irony, others laugh heartily at slapstick, while others find non-sense humor tickles their “funny bone.”

Laughter can occur in any situation. We laugh when we see something that delights us. A person also might laugh out of anxiety or fear or when facing a life-threatening situation. Laughter also is caused by tickling, surprise, embarrassment, tension, relief after tension, play, or a sudden sense of exhilaration and well-being.

Little is known about the specific brain mechanisms responsible for laughter. But we do know that laughter is social and contagious. We laugh at the sound of laughter itself. That’s why the Tickle Me Elmo doll is such a success.

Discussion. Share examples of things that make us laugh or that we find humorous. Is it jokes, stories, movies, home videos, cartoons, or antics of children. What kind of movie or TV show?

Additional Information.

If you wish, take more time to examine the different types of humor. Give examples of this kind of humor. See the information sheet in the leaders materials on this topic.

Optional activity: Show the “I Love to Laugh” song from the movie *Mary Poppins*. This is a great song that shows how contagious laughter can be.

Most laughter is not so much about humor as it is about relationships between people. It is these curious “ha-ha-ha’s” that bond relationships. Research by Robert Provine at the University of Maryland found that most laughter does not follow jokes. People laughed after a variety of statements that were not jokes. This researcher also concluded that because laughter is closely associated with play, the reason adults laugh less than children is probably because they play less. (So play more!)

“Laughing is the sensation of feeling good all over.”

Josh Billings

What You Get When You Laugh (or, Take Your Medicine!)

The idea that humor and laughter benefit health is not new. The benefits of humor were acknowledged in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, which says “A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22). The earliest reference to humor as medicine is from the 14th century when a French surgeon wrote, “Let the surgeon take care to regulate the whole regimen of the patient’s life for joy and happiness, allowing his relatives and special friends to cheer him and by having someone tell him jokes.” In the 16th century, Martin Luther in his pastoral counseling advised depressed people to surround themselves with friends who could joke and make them laugh. His own letters to other people included playful or humorous remarks. Shakespeare wrote in the *Taming of the Shrew*, “And frame your mind to mirth and merriment, which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.”

Defense against Illness

Humor and a positive outlook may be a strong defense against illness. Researchers are now uncovering evidence that what goes on in your mind can affect your body’s ability to fight disease. In many hospitals, clinics, and seminars around the country, people are learning to relax, think positively, and laugh heartily and frequently.

Preliminary research suggests that the experience of laughter involves biochemical changes in the body. Biochemical changes affect the immune, endocrine, respiratory, cardiovascular, and musculoskeletal systems. Laughter seems to cause the release of natural painkillers that combat arthritis and other inflammatory conditions. Further research is needed to better understand the role of laughter on these major body systems.

When we laugh, we alter our facial expressions and make sounds. Exuberant laughter involves muscles of the arms, legs, and trunk. Laughter also requires a change in our breathing pattern. The laughing reflex contracts muscles in the diaphragm and

Refer to member’s hand-out:

Laughter’s Physical Changes

face and increases blood flow. Once laughter stops, blood pressure briefly drops below normal. Breathing slows. Muscular tension subsides. Most people feel a relaxed afterglow.

In our time, the notion that laughter possesses healing powers was first popularized by former magazine editor Norman Cousins. In his book *Anatomy of an Illness*, he recounted how, armed with humor, he was able to overcome the debilitating symptoms of a crippling spinal disease. Minutes of a good belly laugh, he says, produced several hours of pain-free sleep. Cousins credits his recovery to a solid foundation of medical care, medication, and lots and lots of laughter.

No one, least of all Cousins, is suggesting that laughter alone can cure disease. In his second best-seller, *Head First: The Biology of Hope*, he stresses that it's not just laughter but all the positive attitudes—faith, hope, love, will to live, festivity, purpose, determination—that seem to enhance the outcome of medical therapy.

“He who laughs — lasts!”

*“Joy, temperance and repose,
Slam the door on the doctor’s nose.”*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Ability to Maintain Perspective and Sense of Power

While we work at surviving, laughter can help us maintain our perspective. We have no control over many things in life. As long as we have a sense of humor, however, we can do something—such as minimize the hold that upsetting situations can have over us. When you feel as if you’re losing control, allow a little humor time. If you can find what’s funny in a situation, your distress might not seem as strong.

An Ability to Cope

A lot of the suffering and troubles we experience are not a result of our difficulties but of how we view them. Gail Sheehy notes in her best-seller *Pathfinders* that the ability to see humor in a situation was one of the four coping devices that “pathfinders”—people who overcome crisis—used as a protection against change and uncertainty. Using humor in difficult times can be one of the smartest ways of coping with the problems, easing our worries, and getting on with life.

Joel Goodman, director of The HUMOR Project, Inc., believes that in addition to promoting health, humor is a great way to manage stress, prevent burn-out, and heighten creative problem-solving abilities.

Activity: In groups of two or three, select a difficult or annoying situation, such as being stuck in traffic, waiting in line or come up with your own. Construct a tall tale out of this situation and see if you can make it funny.

(The HUMOR Project, Inc. is an organization that focuses on the positive power of humor. See website: www.humorproject.com/)

A Way to Communicate

Humor and laughter can help facilitate positive social interactions. It is the one form of communication to which everyone can relate. You don't have to speak the same language to laugh together. Laughter also helps break the ice when you're in a group. At its best, laughter can build bridges between people.

“Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.”

Victor Borge

“When people are laughing, they're generally not killing one another.”

Alan Alda

A Tension Reliever

We all know the relief we feel when someone in a group makes a funny comment during a tense situation. Humor can dispel anger and aggression in ourselves and others. A study of humor in the classroom showed lower scores on aggression for students viewing a humorous videotape.

“The whole art of life is knowing how to transform anxiety into laughter.”

Alan Watts

Ways to Include More Laughter in Your Life

Humor is an important, but often overlooked, tool for our everyday life and experiences. The better adjusted you are and the more satisfying your lifestyle, the more readily you will respond to humor in jokes, cartoons, and everyday situations.

You can learn to share your laughter and to help make others laugh. This doesn't mean telling jokes unless that is one of your talents. It means beginning to share your humorous perspective and giving others permission to do the same. A good sense of humor is something everyone can work on. It doesn't just happen. Here are some ideas to help add more laughter to your life.

Develop your comedic vision. Look for the humor in every situation. Learn to laugh at the incongruities of life. We want others to see us as wise, not foolish, so when we goof up, we want to disappear. Instead, look for the funny side.

Celebrate what works. Rather than agonizing over what's broken or not working any more, celebrate what *is* working. If you have a bad day or a family difficulty, try a positive approach. Humor can increase your capacity for solving problems and help you acknowledge your victories in life.

Surround yourself with humor. Clip cartoons, collect funny sayings, collect humorous video and audio tapes. Share these with friends. Display cartoons on the refrigerator or mirror and

Humor First Aid Kit.

Make and share your own humor kit. Stock it with things that always make you laugh—funny cartoons, jokes, greeting cards, comedy tapes. Share how you might use it:—take the kit with you to cheer up ill friends or relatives, take on vacation, keep one in your desk at work....

listen to a humorous tape as you are doing something distasteful—like cleaning the bathroom.

Make humor a daily ritual. Each day, share with family and friends something that made you laugh, or tell a funny story or joke. Keep a notebook of funny things and write in it daily. Make a joy list—whenever you experience something that makes you feel good, jot it down in a notebook. Then when you feel like complaining, read over the list. You’ll feel better.

Take yourself less seriously. Learn to laugh at yourself, not scornfully but with acceptance of self. As you take yourself lightly, take your job and your responsibility to yourself and to others seriously. This will make life a little lighter.

Spend time with a child to rediscover your sense of delight. Don’t be afraid to be silly. Participate in laughter and enjoyment.

Encourage others to laugh. By creating happiness for others, you will experience a special joy of accomplishment that only a lively, generous sense of humor can bring. Tell a funny story and you may get one back.

Realize that a sense of humor is deeper than laughter. A sense of humor sees the fun in everyday experiences. It is more important to have fun than to be funny.

“You can’t help getting older, but you can help getting old. Chronologically, the clock is going to keep on ticking for all of us, but if we take a lick of humor, we can prevent a hardening of the attitudes. If we savor humor, humor can be a lifesaver.”

George Burns

Evaluation

Please take time to fill out the evaluation form. Send to the OSU Extension office in your county when completed.

Activity: give everyone a piece of pretty stationary to start a “Joy List”. List one or two things that made you laugh today.

Optional Activities: Play a game that will get everyone laughing. Incorporate some of these ideas throughout your lesson time. See Leaders Support Materials: “Activities — for a Shot of Good Humor”

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