

# Using Humor to Save Lives

by

William F. Fry, Jr., M.D.

Humor, a common element of everyday life, has certain powerful potentials frequently not recognized. These potentials lie in the applications of humor to mental and physical health issues.

The uses of humor in various forms of psychotherapy has received recent attention. The contemporary view of this subject offers several opinions. (1) Humor is a powerful element of interpersonal relationships. (2) Humor has the capacity for initiating therapeutic insights. (3) Humor can be an experience positively shared between patient and therapist, and thus can contribute to enhancement of the therapeutic partnership. (4) Humor can have negative, destructive effects in therapy and must be used judiciously, with careful attention to counter-transference situations. (5) In any case, humor should not be introduced into therapeutic situations until a warm and positive rapport has begun to develop between patient and therapist.

Physical health issues also have importance in evaluating the significance of humor. This importance can be recognized in considering certain facts about the three major life-threatening disease conditions in the contemporary Western World. These conditions are statistically identified as: heart disease, cancer, and cerebral vascular accidents (strokes).

Acute heart attacks (myocardial infarctions) and related heart pathologies have been, during the recent era, the foremost medical cause of death in our civilization. Seven major factors in the heart disease picture have been identified and well publicized: cigarette smoking, diabetes, lack of exercise, stress, hypertension, and hypercholesteremia. Humor and laughter have specific antagonistic relevance to several of these factors. Mirthful laughter has a scientifically demonstrable exercise impact on several body systems. Muscles are activated; heart rate is increased; respiration is simplified, with increase in oxygen exchange- all similar to the desirable effects of athletic exercise. Stress is antagonized by humor in both its mental or emotional aspect and its physical aspect. Emotional tension, contributing to stress, is lowered through the cathartic effects of humor. Mirthful laughter is followed by a state of compensatory physical relaxation, diminishing physical tension. Cigarette smoking and eating (perhaps contributing to obesity) are not possible while laughing and are thus directly countered by laughter.

Another factor has been identified by medical observation and folk tradition as being associated with the occurrence of potentially fatal heart attacks. This factor is the onset of sudden, intense anger in the heart attack-susceptible person. Humor and rage are antithetical. Mirth defuses rage; it diminishes the impulse of hostility. Anger demands a serious attitude; humor banished the tightness and severity which are necessary for anger. If mirth is experienced, rage is impossible.

Cancer, in its many forms and manifestations, is a second major killer disease. The cancer picture is an extremely complicated one, with only indistinct definition and understanding

by our present science. Humor and mirth have relevance to at least two considerations in the cancer picture.

The presence of cancer in a human being results in pain and other suffering, and produces a depressed and anguished state of mind. Humor, in this regard, is neither preventative nor curative; but it is palliative, resulting in temporary diminution of suffering and mental anguish. Mirth can lift cancer-oppressed spirits. One is taken momentarily from discomfort into a more pleasant state.

Repeated studies, over the years, have suggested an etiologic substrate role played by depression in the onset of cancer. It is suggested that the presence of emotional depression contributes to susceptibility to development of cancer.

Humor and depression are incompatible. With only the exception of the most severe degrees of depression, humor relieves the devitalizing grip of depression. It offsets, opposes, diminishes depression. At times of tragedy, humans turn instinctively to comedy for its depression-lifting effects. We seek to laugh, rather than cry. Perhaps our impulse to enjoy mirth opposes vulnerability to developing cancer.

Regarding the third major fatal disease – strokes – the contribution of humor and laughter is a mixed one. Several strokes – some fatal – have been reported as occurring during mirthful laughter. This occurrence may be associated with temporary increase of blood pressure during laughter. These strokes would be of the type resulting from hemorrhage into the brain through ruptures in the walls of cerebral arteries. Many other strokes result from brain artery blockage, produced by thrombosis or clotting associated with stasis or sluggishness of blood circulation. These strokes are the source of that insidious life-nibbling disease widely known under the diagnosis “little strokes.” Mirthful laughter prevents conditions necessary for circulatory sluggishness. Laughter quickens pulse rate, stimulates circulation of blood, does not lower blood oxygen content.

The values of humor in physical health are illustrated in these three major diseases. When we expand the concept of physical health beyond that of specific disease conditions, humor takes on an enormously greater importance. This importance is derived from the warfare-preventing role humor can play in society.

During the history of humanity, the all time greatest killer- and especially of the young, the strong, the young and the healthy- has been warfare. One of the results of our evolving civilization has been the development of ever more effective methods of destroying the lives of ever larger masses of people. Many learned people have debated the issue of whether this apparently insane tendency to warfare is a genetic characteristic of the human being, inherent in the fact of being human.

Explosions of passionate absurdity are ubiquitous. The impulse to violence is commonplace in both human time and place. Contemporary society manifests this tendency not

only in actual warfare, but also in its tremendous preoccupation with the equipment and strategies of violence. During 1976, across the world, the equivalent of one dollar in every six of national productions, was spent on military purposes. Relationships between nations is defined in terms of power and control factors, rather than in terms of cooperation and mutual efforts.

Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the USA has been involved in some form of significant warfare approximately every 26 years. It would seem that there is a “war generation” which comes into authoritative maturity on this 26 year cycle. This phenomenon can be understood by considering that member of this “war generation” have learned, and have adopted, direct violent action as their ultimate response to frustration and stress. Instead of utilizing complex, intellectual methods of resolving intricate and conflicting human inter-relationships, their preferred primary mode of action is a simplistic giving vent to primitive impulses of reflex violence.

The generational nature of the warfare phenomenon derives from the learning of this characteristic, within families, by younger generations through exposure to the use of violence as the primary coping mechanism of their parents. This learning from parental models of behavior produces a warfare horizon every 26 years – the average interval between generations – during which reflex violence has highest priority among many mechanisms available for coping with challenge.

Humor offers an alternative to violence. For those geared to aggressive behavior, humor may contain intellectual aggression. Wit, satire, caricature and irony are available instead of bloodshed, murder, destructive violence. But humor goes beyond this level of reflex reaction; it is intellectually creative in its very nature. Inherent in humor is the element of discovery. Humor teaches and reveals new understanding. Its creativity opens new realizations and opposes the dead-ending constricting and defeating results of violence and warfare. Mirth opens our minds and raises us above slavery to archaic reflex. Humor precipitates a complex. Thought-provoking experience shared with other humans. Humor gives us a choice.

\*\*Abstracted from an address given at the Annual Convention of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Washington, D.C., April 1979