

The Power of Humour



**A life-changing
Health and Well Being
resource that is entirely
natural, free, accessible to all,
everyone has it and is
clinically proven.**

Contents

Page 3:
Mental Health and the Modern Era: Toxic, Chaotic and Complex

Page 6:
Humour: already contributing to health and well being for millennia

Page 7
Improving our Health and Well Being: The Benefits of Humour

Page 9
The Power of Humour:
An innate ability to transform perspective, perception and possibility

Page 12
Why should we look to humour?
The benefits of humour for educators and other professional practitioners

Page 14
Using humour to engage - evidence of impact:
Humour is Serious Business

Page 16
Further reading on the benefits of humour

Page 17
References

Mental Health and the Modern Era: Toxic, Chaotic and Complex

Research commissioned by Sky TV in 2023 found that *'42 percent of Brits admitted that they cannot remember the last time they laughed out loud, as well as 32 percent of those surveyed believing they haven't as much as giggled in the last month.'* It was also reported that more than two-thirds (69 percent) felt *'there is a lot less to laugh about these days.'*¹

Why? There is of course no one *all singing all dancing* research available that answers that single question but what is available is an abundance of research that can tell us how our lives have changed over the years. And let's be honest, you don't have to be a genius to hazard a guess why.

If you are a single parent deciding between food or heat, or an elderly person living in a rural area and no-one visits, or a young person on a zero-hours contract, or a middle-aged worker without a third level education that has just been made redundant, your reality will not feel particularly reassuring.

With that comes all that you might expect – stress, isolation, worry and self-doubt among many other emotions. Survival might be your only priority, laughter most probably not. If you are trying to survive, the stressors that come with that will have a major impact upon you.

Historians Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb suggest that *'in the twenty-first century we consider ourselves more emotionally self-aware than the 'stiff upper lip' of generations past. Today talking therapies are an accepted norm, wellness is an industry, and mental health is a social and political buzzword.'*²

Might the suggestion be that we are better able to deal with modern day challenges? In short yes, but life is or should be more than about merely surviving. We may have developed strategies to manage our emotions or reactions to difficult situations or in the face of adversity we have become resourceful, but as Professor Arline T. Geronimus argues *'health is just not a matter of luck, personal choice or responsibility,'* it is very much subject to a process she refers to as *'weathering.'*

It affects the *'oppressed, marginalized, or exploited'* in particular, groups such as *'the poor, working-class, or culturally sidelined'* but is a *'universally human psychological process'* that impacts on all individuals from *'the constant physical toll on their bodies.'*³

If we accept the premise that we are all subject to *'weathering'* but that it differs from individual to individual and is determined by a number of variables including the colour of your skin, personal circumstances, the environment you live in and your level of wealth among many others, then not only addressing these inequalities is a must but working to ensure that everyone is better equipped to respond accordingly is a priority.

Activist and author Nova Reid argues that wellbeing and resilience *'is not just the absence of pain, discomfort or incapacity. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, good health, financial and personal security, rewarding employment and a healthy attractive environment.'*⁴

The modern era feels relentless, a period when we seem to be continuously under pressure, where everything seems so much faster, stress is greater, answers are sought quicker and where we seem

to have not only less time overall, but even less time to stop and reflect, to take stock, to smile even, and to laugh. And yet we are ill-equipped to respond, still burdened with our 'hunter-gatherer' mindset, our actions determined by our fight, flight or freeze responses.

There are many reasons we appear not to laugh as much as we might have in the past. It's not however, because of the lack of stand-up comedians, available sitcoms, theatre productions, funny videos, or social media memes. Rather I'm referring to our capacity for laughter, the ability to make space for humour in our lives, nurturing a humour mindset, or embracing a humourous sense of being.

In this competitive, high-pressure, and tension-laden world I list several modern-day stressors below. It is by no means exhaustive, and the terminology reflects my opinion but equally echoes some of the language used in public discourse regarding influences impacting our mental health and well-being.

- **Time Scarcity:** We seem not to have enough time anymore – we always have things to do
- **Information Saturation:** We are saturated everyday with information from every angle – 24-hour television, radio, advertising, newspapers, social media, etc
- **Attention Poverty:** We are not getting enough attention, or we are not being heard
- **Instant Gratification:** We are impatient; we want things, and we want them now
- **Validation Starvation:** Our achievements and accomplishments fail to be recognised – we don't get the validation we feel we are entitled to
- **Resilience Passivism:** Our resilience is tested more regularly, and we often become passive in the face of challenge
- **Self-help Explosion:** Bookshops, social media and television seem to be filled with 'products' to help you help yourself – we are constantly and consistently reminded that we are broken and we need 'fixed' and it is our sole responsibility to make that happen
- **Connection Disconnection:** Advances in technology has enabled us to be more connected than ever before yet we have become more disconnected from those around us
- **Perspective Paralysis:** We seem to have lost our sense of perspective – we often over-estimate, under-estimate and exaggerate; we seem to lose sight of what is reality, our perspective based on what might or should be rather than what is
- **Values Deconstruction:** Many of the values we hold or have held have been deconstructed as society evolves and we try to make sense of the world as we learn how to deal with change
- **Diversity Sensationalism:** Diversity has been sensationalised in the media creating fear and panic about certain groups
- **Mental Congestion:** We have seemingly much more to think about and many more decisions to make thus inhibiting or robbing us of our ability to think clearly, rationally and calmly
- **Situational Escapism:** Such is the pressures of life that we seek to find solace away from everyday pressures; we seek an 'escape' from trying situations choosing not to deal with realities we face
- **Punishment Obsession:** We live in a society that is keen to punish everyone who commits any kind of wrong - legal or otherwise – we don't want to see anyone 'get off' even if it makes the

situation worse; we all have a clear sense of justice, and that justice must be exercised to ‘deter’ others

- **Activism Burnout:** Such are the images and messages that come to us by so many more mediums than before that we have grown ‘tired’ of taking a stand against things we might have rallied against in the past
- **Responsibility Negligence:** We have become very good at asserting our rights but eerily woeful at acknowledging and assuming our responsibilities – it’s much easier to profess our rights than to take stock and reflect on what are our obligations to making life and society better
- **Righteousness Affirmation:** Being wrong or having to say sorry is something that we find more and more difficult; we always aim to be right or look to others to affirm how right we are rather than accept the possibility of our being wrong
- **Humility Depreciation:** We seem to have forgotten about the importance of humility, about treating people with a little more respect, treating them as we would want to be treated
- **Fixation Intervention:** Rather than working on transforming systems and processes we have become fixated with fixing things – we never seem to take the long-term view but rather always looking short-term fixes
- **Happiness Mythology:** We’re always being encouraged to look for happiness thus creating an impression that it is always something that must be sought, accomplished or found whereby merely aiming for contentment in the first instance can provide opportunities to achieve happiness
- **Complexity Overload:** We seem to have developed the knack for complicating matters rather than adopting simple approaches; we always seem to want to come up with new ways of re-inventing things
- **Spotlight Magnification:** When we put the spotlight on a range of issues, concerns, and fears we seem to magnify them beyond what we need to thus create even more stress and worry

The impact of all of this has led to an erosion of people’s mental health across the globe. So, what can be done about it? There is of course no ‘magic bullet’ and it’s simply not something you fix one fine day, but rather improving and achieving positive mental health is a never-ending process.

Just as with any physical illnesses, disease or condition that requires a range of treatments, medicine, or rehabilitation, approaches to improving our mental health is underpinned by among other things well informed and tailored personal approaches, well thought out strategies at macro level, accessible and available resources, joined-up thinking between interested parties and designated year-on-year funding.

But what if there was something that didn’t cost any money, is free, natural, everyone already possesses and has unlimited access to, but above all has no end of positive outcomes not only for mental health but physical health also? There is something – it’s called humour.

Before looking more specifically at the benefits and the evidence to support how humour can better support improved mental health and well-being, let’s take a moment to learn a little more about the history of humour and its somewhat surprising already existing connection with health nurtured over millennia.

*****On a completely separate note if you can only read so long before needing a short break go boil the kettle and watch the following: [Smith and Jones - Grave Sketch \(youtube.com\)](#)*****

Humour: already contributing to health and well being for millennia

Very few appreciate that humour has a long colourful history. This is not out of some form of ignorance but rather because it's not something you spend time thinking about. When you smile or laugh, you don't immediately cast your mind back to ancient Greece and ponder why the *Father of Comedy* Aristophanes, whose (second) play, *The Babylonians* was 'denounced by the politicians.'⁵

In Athenian Democracy, the opinion of voters was influenced by political satire performed by the comic poets at the theatres. They would portray persons or institutions as ridiculous or corrupt. Aristotle defined comedy as '*one of the original four genres of literature*' which also included tragedy, epic poetry, and lyric poetry.

*'In the late 5th-century BC Greece, a secular school known as the Hippocratic writers made a bid to monopolise the profession [medicine], at the expense of rivals who were attached to temples. They had an entirely erroneous theory of how disease works – they thought that health was essentially a balance between four "humours" ... adjust the balance and you alter the patient's state of health.'*⁶

What's notable is not that the Hippocratic writers were mistaken but the weight they attached to the idea of humours as a means of restoring or achieving balance in health. That concept or idea is not too far removed in that humour is indeed good for your health – be that physical, mental, emotional, or otherwise. Reference to humour and its physical benefits can even be found in the bible, *'A cheerful heart does good medicine, but a broken spirit makes you sick.'*⁷

During the Middle Ages, the term "comedy" became synonymous with satire after Aristotle's *Poetics* was translated into Arabic in the medieval Islamic world. Early Native Americans also realised the powerful effects that humour, and laughter had in the process of healing. The third most important person in the tribe was *The Clown* who worked alongside Witch Doctors.

In the 14th Century French surgeon Henri de Mondeville used humour therapy to aid recovery from surgery while accounts from the period 16th-18th century, found humour being used to address depression, release tension, and restore equilibrium, something not too far removed from the notion of the 'four humours', i.e., achieving balance. Accounts of this are attributed to Robert Buton (English Parson), Martin Luther (Pastor), Herbert Spence (Sociologist), Immanuel Kant, (German philosopher) and William Beattie (English physician).

From medieval times until the 17th Century, licensed fools, also known as jesters, were commonly kept at court and were frequently at the disposal of wealthy nobles – their job was to entertain. Both the *Jester* and the *Clown* date from the 15th and 16th centuries right up to 20th century (and in recent times) made better known to us by the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harpo Marx, Marcel Marceau, *The Goon Show* and more recently 'Mr Bean.'

In the 1930's clowns were brought into the U.S. hospitals to cheer up children hospitalised with polio. In 1972, U.S. Doctor Hunter 'Patch' Adams founded The Gesundheit Institute - a home-based free hospital to bring fun, friendship, and the joy of service back into health care.

Before this and perhaps more significantly, Dr Norman Cousins - diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis (Arthritis to you and me) in 1964 - was so depressed by his stay in hospital that he signed himself out, hired a nurse and moved into a hotel. Along with mega doses of vitamin 'C', he watched comedy movies; *'10 minute of genuine belly laughter had an anaesthetic effect and would give me at least 2 hours of pain-free sleep.'* He cured himself of his illness and lived to tell the tale and in 1979 he published a book telling the story, *'Anatomy of an Illness'*

Improving our Health and Well Being: The Benefits of Humour

'Humor is a whole mind-body and social experience; it's a cognitive ability that gets our emotions and our bodies involved in the act, and it also connects us to other people'⁸

Even through the ages, humour was recognised as having many benefits, not least of all for health. Much of the technological, scientific, and medical developments in recent decades has enabled us to know much more what those benefits are.

Laughing has now been established to work out the diaphragm, abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg, and back muscles and is estimated by scientists that laughing 100 times equals the same physical exertion as a 10-minute workout on a rowing machine or 15 minutes on a stationary exercise bike.

William Fry, a pioneer on laughter research, in an article for WebMD was said to indicate that it took ten minutes on a rowing machine for his heart rate to reach the level it would after just one minute of hearty laughter.

Humour is an underlying character trait associated with the positive emotions used in the broaden-and-build theory of cognitive development. Research investigating the psycho-neuroimmunological effects (interaction between the nervous and immune systems) of laughter has found that there is a strong relationship between good health and good humour.

Psychologist Steve Sultanoff, PhD., who is the president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, offers this explanation:

'With deep, heartfelt laughter, it appears that serum cortisol, which is a hormone that is secreted when we're under stress, is decreased. So when you're having a stress reaction, if you laugh, apparently the cortisol that has been released during the stress reaction is reduced.'⁹

Studies at the University of Maryland found that when a group of people were shown a comedy, after the screening their blood vessels performed normally, whereas when they watched a drama, after the screening their blood vessels tended to tense up and restricted the blood flow. Studies also show stress decreases the immune system.

'Some studies have shown that humor may raise infection-fighting antibodies in the body and boost the levels of immune cell. When we laugh, natural killer cells which destroy tumors and viruses increase, along with Gamma-interferon (a disease-fighting protein), T-cells (important for our immune system) and B-cells (which make disease-fighting antibodies). As well as lowering blood pressure, laughter increases oxygen in the blood, which also encourages healing.'¹⁰

Laughter increases oxygen intake and blood circulation thus lowering your blood pressure; it reduces the water vapor and carbon dioxide in the lungs, decreases the risk of pulmonary infection; improves the function of blood vessels and increases blood flow, which can help protect you against a heart attack and other cardiovascular problems;¹¹ it works your stomach muscles, boosts your immune system, releases natural painkillers in the body, reduces stress levels, boosts the body's production of infection-fighting antibodies and helps your body recharge.

Not limited to physical benefits the table below outlines a range of social and mental health benefits as well.

Physical Health Benefits	Mental Health Benefits	Social Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boosts immunity - Lowers stress hormones - Decreases pain - Relaxes your muscles - Prevents heart disease 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adds joy and zest to life - Eases anxiety and fear - Relieves stress - Improves mood - Enhances resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthens relationships - Attracts others to us - Enhances teamwork - Helps defuse conflict - Promotes group bonding

Humour can also help you be more spontaneous, less defensive, release inhibitions and be more honest with your feelings, as well as helping you shift perspective, i.e., see things in a different light. For example, how often have you spoken with someone about a serious issue and ended up making light of it or cracking a few jokes about the situation by the end of the conversation, and then come away from it looking at things in a different way?

Humour also combats fear, comforts you, helps you to relax, spreads happiness, cultivates optimism, helps communication.¹² Even those who have experienced adversity can find that humour helps acknowledge and dispel negative emotions and strengthen social support among people who have come through trauma and challenges. It can also be a way for people who have survived a difficult experience to mentor and encourage those who are still going through it.¹³

Humour has been proven to not only address physical and mental strength, but also resilience, an essential requirement in the modern era. Much evidence to support this claim is listed below:

- **PHYSICAL:** *‘Laughter’s great for you, and it may even compare to a proper diet and exercise when it comes to keeping you healthy and disease free’* (Dr Lee Berk)
- **MENTAL:** *‘The use of humour by social workers and their colleagues are cited as **one of their most common coping mechanisms’*** (Moran and Hughes, 2006)
- **RESILIENCE:** Several studies found that humour and the sharing of **humour can build resilience** in social work teams’ Siporin, (1984); Witkin (1999); Sullivan (2000); Moran and Hughes (2006) and Gilgun and Sharma (2011)

In her book, *Laugh your way to Happiness* Lesley Lyle makes some important points including that no-one can laugh without smiling - bet you just smiled, now you’re chuckling to yourself. In her book Lesley opens her chapter on smiling with a quote from Phyllis Diller, *‘A smile is a curve that sets everything straight.’* What a wonderful quote!

She highlights differences between fake and genuine smiles, talks about the importance and benefits of half-smiles, the effects on your vocal cords and tone when you smile and even refers to research by the British Dental Association whereby one smile can generate the same brain stimulation as *‘2,000 bars of chocolate and be equal to receiving up to £16,000 in cash!’*

In recent decades, our understanding of neuroscience has increased and with it our understanding of the cognitive role of humour has taken on greater significance. Vrticka and Sambanis, reported that *‘many studies have identified the hippocampal region as taking on a central role during humour experiences.’*¹⁴ Neuroscientist, Sophie Scott describes laughter as an *“ancient evolutionary system that mammals have evolved to make and maintain social bonds and clearly regulate emotions, to make ourselves better.”* Dr Suzanne Phillips reminds us that,

*‘As humans we are one of a few species that laughs and our laughter spans age, gender, language and culture. Laughter is not just a by-product of happiness. Given the body-mind connection, the very act of laughter changes body chemistry to our advantage.... Research finds that laughter can improve diseases like asthma, cancer and heart disease by reducing the physiological stress response that exacerbates these conditions.’*¹⁵

The Power of Humour: An innate ability to transform perspective, perception and possibility

There is no shortage of support for the benefits of humour yet there is still an overriding sense that often pervades public discourse that we should be taking life more seriously. Laughter - needed now more than ever - feels a temporary reprieve, a mere form of escapism in a chaotic world but even if we want to take things more seriously, we can't escape humour as it is in our DNA.

According to a 2005 article *Science*, scientists did indeed locate the 'funny gene' and because *'the gene's protein contains a large number of histidines and alanines, the researchers have settled on calling it HAHA-1.'*¹⁶ No – I just didn't make that up. A 2019 article in the The Genetic Literary Project *'linked smiling and laughing behaviors to the [less funny] 5-HTTLPR gene.'*¹⁷

Leaving the scientific discoveries to one side for a moment, let's consider the thoughts of some that have more expertise on the benefits of humour than the rest of us. Jon Yates talks about three quirks of human nature that allow us to connect with one another. One of these is laughter.

*'Laughing is – at first glance – odd. It appears to be an instinct, much like shivering or flinching. We are cold and we shiver. We feel pain and flinch. We hear something funny and we laugh. But that's not right. Laughter is not just an instinctive, unavoidable reaction to humour. If it were, you would be just as likely to laugh if you heard a joke at home alone as if you were surrounded by others in a theatre. As any stand-up comedian can tell you, this is not the case. You are thirty times more likely to laugh in company than alone. Whether you do so correlates much more with whether you are in company than whether something is funny. Laughter is so social that you could legitimately describe it as contagious; we catch it from each other.'*¹⁸

Peter Berger tells us that humour which is *'the capacity to perceive something as being funny — is universal; there has been no human culture without it. It can be regarded as a necessary constituent of humanity.'*¹⁹

The irony of the age we now live in is that whilst we have had so many advances in science, technology, medicine, and health care we live in age where instances of stress and anxiety alongside more serious issues such as depression and suicide have grown significantly in recent decades. This has been fuelled no less by our obsession for consumption which in turn is fuelled by a desire for status among others. A 2010 report by the New Economics Foundation reminds us,

*'..over the last half-century, we have grown used to the idea that we live to work, work to earn, and earn to consume. We consume not just to survive and flourish and enjoy our lives, but to signal who we are and where we stand in the world, especially in relation to others. What we feel we need and what satisfies our needs are inflated well beyond what is actually required to live a good and satisfying life. We buy much more than enough stuff. Directly or indirectly, the stuff we buy consumes finite natural resources on which our lives ultimately depend.'*²⁰

The modern era has come complete with such an array of ailments not merely restricted to the physical, psychological or the physiological but ways of thinking that seem to impact upon our lives more so than even before, where even the smallest stress has us seeking doctors, counsellors, therapists, coaches, and mentors.

Lesley Lyle underscores this somewhat when she says,

*'It has become a rarity today to see someone smile and laugh with gay abandon. It seems as if people have forgotten how to laugh. In this competitive high-pressure and high-tension world, laughter is fast disappearing and people are succumbing to daily stressors that relentlessly rob them of the ability to laugh'*²¹

In her book she highlights that most adults are *'estimated to laugh an average of 15 times a day, unlike children who laugh and giggle between 300-500 times each day'* (no wonder kids never get around to cleaning their room) which is a staggering statistic, but will no doubt resonate with any adult who believe kids don't take anything seriously.

She goes on to make the point that *'humans learn to laugh long before they walk or talk.'* We may not laugh 300 times a day ever again but laughing aside, the point is that we lose something as we make the transition from childhood into adulthood. I don't think any of us could disagree with that.

In Maurice Charney's *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, Wake Forest philosopher Adrian Bardon writes,

*"Humor is explained by human beings' special conceptual abilities. The pursuit of humor represents a kind of play that contributes to conceptual flexibility. The feeling associated with this kind of play is amusement ... (Humor) actually helps sharpen our ability to respond to cognitively challenging situations. This would also explain why adults tend to demand more clever and subtle humor than children do: One needs humor of increasing subtlety and complexity in order to challenge one's cognitive flexibility, and humor can only be funny when it does this."*²²

Salvatore Attardo describes humour competence as *'The capacity of a speaker to process semantically a given text and to locate a set of relationships among its components'*²³ whilst Rod Martin writes that *'Humour provides a way for individuals to shift perspective.'*²⁴

Nagler and Ridd describe humour as being *a time-honored strategy in the repertoire of nonviolence...[and] when used in the right spirit, does always work: it always puts quarrels into a larger context, and it humanizes the grimmest of situations.*²⁵

Aju Basil James characterises humour as encouraging *'doubt, chaos and relativism about the discourse it targets... [and] throws away the allegation that it is often incapable of constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.'*²⁶

Mora, Weaver, and Lindo describe humour as *'an important tool for conveying multiple forms of messages, ranging from simple casual observations about daily life to more serious social denunciations of political and social inequality'*²⁷ whilst Mordechai Gordon argues that in education teachers having *'a sense of humor can help them not only cope with the multiple challenges they face but also mitigate the tendency of some educators to lose hope and become burned out... in embracing a humorous stance, we have a greater chance of helping our students become more open to constructive criticism and to thinking in new and creative ways.'*²⁸

On his website *Deep Fun*, Bernard De Koven quotes from PBS series *This Emotional Life*,

*'... to find things funny we need to be able to shift perspective, perceive incongruities and paradoxes, and be surprised and delighted by the unexpected —the punch line. This causes us to switch into a playful, rather than a serious, frame of mind. When we are amused, we are in a state of observation, which gives us a bit of psychological space or distance from our circumstances.'*²⁹

There is however still a fear or a perception, or even a belief that using humour to address more serious issues or to confront our everyday realities is inappropriate. Rick Rubin questions this,

*'Seriousness saddles the work with a burden. It misses the playful side of being human. The chaotic exuberance of being present in the world. The lightness of pure enjoyment for enjoyment's sake. In play, there are no stakes. No boundaries. No right or wrong. No quotas for productivity. It's an uninhibited state where your spirit can run free. The best ideas arise most often and easily through this relaxed state. Putting importance on the work too soon stirs up instincts of caution. Instead, we want to break free of the shackles of reality and avoid all forms of creative restraint.'*³⁰

Humour as an inappropriate way to learn also permeates learning environments – most notably in the classroom. Rob Gee, who leads improvisation and sketch workshops with primary school children counters this,

*'Some teachers run scared of allowing comedians to teach their kids, but they shouldn't be so sceptical. Why not? Think of what a huge problem it is getting boys to read and write. When I teach kids about sketch comedy, they love to write down their sketch ideas. It's one of the few times you can see them enjoying writing. So learning how to do sketches helps improve their literacy, their confidence, their self-esteem....It's the antithesis of the traditionalist view of what should be happening in schools, but given that most of the jobs that our kids will be doing in the next 50 years haven't been invented yet, it seems important to train kids to be flexible, have self-esteem, be literate, rather than follow a traditional curriculum – comedy can help with those things.'*³¹

Even in peacebuilding where the need to be sensitive is at its most acute, Craig Zelizer asserts,

*'Humour can be used to help groups deal with tensions, release frustrations, and also heal mental and emotional wounds. The use of humour for releasing emotions that have built up as a result of conflicts can be particularly important to help groups cope and maintain their sanity.'*³²

James O'Dea puts it another way,

*'The effervescence of laughing and coming together and then surrendering from there to a deeper joy of collaboration gives us the taste of the huge richness of this subject for peace-building. When we are plugged into the primal and unifying field of connection, for which laughter is an obvious but not exclusive door, our body and mind reward us with a cascading flow of inner delight that spreads to other.'*³³

Ian Leslie, further reinforces the points that both Zelizer and O'Dea make,

*'Groups and couples need ways of defusing the stress of vigorous disagreements – of bringing conflict back towards the tolerance threshold. One of the most effective techniques for doing that is humour. In particular, the playful, interpersonal humour we call teasing.'*³⁴

*****If you need some more respite from reading and fancy lightening the load a little check out this skit. I trust it will lighten your day: [The Sketch Show UK - Phobias Workshop \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)*****

Why should we look to humour?

The benefits of humour for educators and other professional practitioners

Bearing in mind what I have written above, it almost seems somewhat redundant to pose the question, but it is legitimate one. Once again, let's remind ourselves - humour permeates every facet of life, it's free, it surrounds us, it's with us every day, and everyone has it or can access it, even in the darkest moments, in the challenges that life throws at us there are moments of humour.

It's on a par with many other art forms (as we see by the many thousands of people who throng to see comedians in 'concert' on a regular basis), it has been immortalised in graffiti throughout the ages, it's a dominant feature in social media, television, radio, and film.

It has reached cult status, and it is a means by which many, e.g., comedians, political commentators, teachers, etc engage a variety of audiences. As Robinson, Smith and Segal state,

*'Laughter is your birthright, a natural part of life that is innate and inborn. Infants begin smiling during the first weeks of life and laugh out loud within months of being born. Even if you did not grow up in a household where laughter was a common sound, you can learn to laugh at any stage of life.'*³⁵

We are surrounded by humour and if we look hard enough training programmes, conferences and seminars on comedy, happiness or humour are not so difficult to find. There are various institutions located in different places across the planet set up for that very purpose, one example being the Centre for Comedy Studies Research at Brunel University in London; and with the advent of social media, we are bombarded of course with humorous images, messages, and videos every day with Facebook, YouTube, and Tik Tok among the many well recognised mechanisms at our disposal.

Humour and more pointedly laughter is of course a spontaneous reaction to or natural consequence in a particular moment, but we also know it's a powerful tool that if used properly and accordingly can accomplish a lot, be it a shifting or transforming thinking, releasing tension, or nurturing connection between strangers.

Kevin Daum in his article, *'8 Ways Using Humor Will Make You a Better Leader'* lends weight to this notion. I have paraphrased him when he states that *'humour energises people, it creates lasting memories, breaks the tension, puts things in perspective, livens things up, disarms an uncomfortable situation, builds a bonded community and makes people feel great.'*³⁶

And if anyone thought that Humour cannot be a force for change, they need look no further than Iceland, 2009, when comedian Jon Gnarr helped to form the 'Best Party' and won 34.7% of the vote at the 2010 municipal elections.

He became Mayor and helped to turn around the fortunes of Iceland from near bankruptcy to a once again thriving economy. Yip, politicians, and bankers screwed up the economy and a comedian fixed it. Isn't that ironic?

More recently we have seen Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian, having to exhibit leadership during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At one point he might have only imagined portraying in a sit-com as opposed to real life. There's a lot to be said for those with a sense of humour being able to exhibit effective leadership when called upon.

Being able to use humour to engage meaningfully requires effort. For many it comes more naturally than others, but it still requires effort, but the benefits are numerous, not only to you but to those whom you might engage with. The table below³⁷ offers an indication of outcomes that can be achieved when humour is pro-actively used. (I have added the headings Sense of Being, Opening it creates and The Outcomes to demonstrate how it might be used in my own profession, Youth Work when engaging young people).

Sense of Being Opening it creates The Outcome

1	2	3
Be silly together	Daydream with them	Notice them
Laugh at their jokes	Hang out together	Include them in conversation
Giggle together	Make time	Be sincere
Smile a lot	Unwind together	Talk directly together
Be relaxed	Be yourself	Tell them you like being with them
Enjoy your time together	Accept them	Look in their eyes when talking
Do what they like to do	Trust them	Create a safe, open environment
Be spontaneous	Play with them	Talk openly with them
Have fun together	Let them act their age	Help them learn something new
Be happy	Surprise them	Inspire their creativity

Edward De Bono (who is viewed by many as the ‘God’ of creativity) asserts that, *‘Humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the brain... The neglect of humour by traditional philosophers, psychologists, information scientists, and mathematicians clearly show that they were only concerned with passive, externally organised information systems.’*³⁸

By promoting humour as a deliberate methodology to engage meaningfully with people we can enhance their creativity, their innovation, and their imagination. Enhancing knowledge and providing training in the use and practice of humour could be a major asset to engage people more effectively and more meaningfully.

****Like the video links so far? If you fancy boiling the kettle again and having a giggle, then check out this one: [Sketch Banknote unter Auto - Dave Allen 1976 - YouTube](#)****

Using humour to engage - evidence of impact: *Humour is Serious Business*

Some years ago, along with a few colleagues of mine that shared an interest in humour and its capacity to engage people beyond making someone laugh or smile, we worked together on designing, developing, and delivering a training programme called, *Humour is Serious Business*. During this time, the programme has been delivered to no less than 100 young leaders, youth workers and non-formal educators from a wide variety of backgrounds and countries.

The programme promotes a 'humour mindset' – a way of life - which is a way of thinking that encourages individuals to see humour in everything by developing their 'humour lens.' That does not mean neglecting obligations and responsibilities to others nor making light of important, serious, sensitive, or controversial matters but rather it encourages individuals to change perspective on how they view things. This can be everything from enjoying a moment when a young child does something innocent to raise a smile while you are having a coffee or using irony to highlight contradiction or satire to speak truth to power.

The success of *Humour is Serious Business* has provided a basis from which to make the case for a more strategic approach to promoting humour – primarily in non-formal education – but more broadly as a pro-active methodology to engage people more meaningfully and more effectively, across any profession where people interact with one another.

Humour - a natural state which everyone has unbridled access too - is as previously mentioned free and can be used in multiple ways. It is a resource available to practitioners and can be embedded in everyday practice and can sit comfortably alongside other areas such as music, dance, sport, etc. By tapping into such a natural state, it makes it easy to support any practitioner learning process and help equip them to become much more effective in the work they do.

The ability to do so already exists and it's the humour mindset, something that we all have. From the moment we were born, from the first few weeks and months of our lives, before we learned language, to co-ordinate, to possess the ability to stand and walk, to sing, we were already smiling and laughing, and in turn making those around us smile and laugh also.

We return to that. As Lesley Lyle wrote in her book, adults on average laugh 15 times per day – quite a contrast to the 'between 300 and 500 times per day' that children laugh on average. Somewhere on the journey of life we lose our humour mindset. Our training supports practitioners to embrace our underlying principle that they can use in their work - play.

Participants move from a perspective of viewing humour as merely a reaction to something they find funny, and from where it's more than just tools and techniques they can use, to a state of mind they can apply in their everyday setting and that it can be shared with those around them.

Our training is not about trying to 'make' people funnier, or better able to tell jokes, or about to embark on a life of 'stand-up' but is about transforming their perception and in turn their approach through the development of their 'humour lens.' We do this by focusing on developing many of the natural abilities that practitioners already possess, e.g., imagination, creativity, and resourcefulness but shifts the focus from one of being reliant on tools, models, methodologies, props, and resources to one whereby the practitioner becomes 'thee resource' and in turn 'the conduit' for facilitating an individual's learning.

They do this by not only increasing their knowledge and understanding of the power of humour as the most effective means of engaging people, but also increasing their skills base in how to use

humour in everyday settings. They also undergo attitudinal change allowing them to become more approachable and more humble and alter their behaviour so as to be more responsive, more sensitive and more empathetic thus enabling them to become more effective in their relationships.

They learn how humour can be an asset, a 'tool,' a resource, and more, and in doing so discover how it can be the most effective mechanism for building rapport, enhancing relationships, addressing, and resolving issues, managing conflict, problem-solve challenges, create alternate approaches, and present and reflect upon learning. Participants emerge with a better understanding of humour, the power and potential for transformation that it possesses, and they become more competent in its use and thus can more successfully negotiate relationships using their 'updated' or newly acquired skills.

In an age when 'front-line services' are under greater than ever pressure from cutbacks, shrinking resources and competition from other agents and providers to ensure essential services, and in an environment when divisive dichotomies and polarisation has become the norm, the onus on practitioners to become much more creative, imaginative, innovative, and resourceful to respond to societal challenges or emerging trends has never been greater.

Humour is the one medium that can transition between all these tensions and succeed in transforming and transcending the chaotic discourse that defines modern discussion and debate. Humour is one of the few if indeed arguably the only medium that can address any, and all issues. From the most polarising to the most sensitive, it has the power to take on any issue and create space and time to explore it, learn from it and identify ways of moving forward.

One reason that makes this possible is that practitioners can assume roles within a particular scenario but remain 'unconnected' or 'disconnected' and thus not be held responsible for views or opinions expressed, due to their merely fulfilling a role. This of course is a supervised process, but it allows individuals to be fully immersed in the process but equally detached because of their 'role.'

In our training we provide opportunities for participants to stretch themselves and to step out of their comfort zone by 'forcing' them take to take on new roles, create scenarios alongside others, imagine or re-imagine responses to new or perceived realities, work on developing their improv skills, explore a wide range of subject matter much of which can be uncomfortable, confront their own prejudice and bias, increase their knowledge of the subject matter being addressed and in doing so become more understanding and ultimately, increase their ability to address and participate in difficult conversations.

This in turn means they can become more sensitive, more patient, more kind, compassionate and caring, and more willing to engage with a view (at odds with their own) to learn from it rather than merely looking to express their own ideas and opinion. They move from a position of listening to reply to one of listening to understand.

As already pointed out, this is made all the easier as humour is of course free, it is natural, everyone has it, it uses minimal resources if indeed any at all, and it has many benefits – not least of all health - and with the imagination and creativity of individuals, there is not one single issue it cannot address and with careful management maintain a safe space to do so.

Testimonials of its impact can be found [here](#). For more information on *Humour is Serious Business* click [here](#). To see a short video on the programme please click [here](#). A second video is available [here](#).

*****You have done well – you have reached the end of the paper. You deserve another chuckle. Enjoy this as [Grandma reads the story of the wonky donkey \(youtube.com\)](#) But if you want to be convinced even more that humour is something that can be learned then watch this: [The Skill of Humor | Andrew Tarvin | TEDxTAMU \(youtube.com\)](#)*****

Further reading on the benefits of humour

- Leadership: <https://www.inc.com/kevin-daum/8-ways-using-humor-will-make-you-a-better-leader.html>
- Relationships: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/articles/200304/the-benefits-laughter>
- Social Interaction: <https://www.laughteronlineuniversity.com/social-benefits-laughter/>
- Critical Thinking, Creativity and Communication: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/how-humour-stimulates-critical-thinking-creativity-and-communication-skills>
- Conflict Resolution: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/humor-but-not-humiliation-finding-sweet-spot-in-nonviolent-/>
- Social awareness and critical consciousness: https://www.academia.edu/17547217/Editorial_for_special_issue_on_education_and_humour_Education_and_humour_as_tools_for_social_awareness_and_critical_consciousness_in_contemporary_classrooms
- Health: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-health/laughter-is-the-best-medicine.htm>
- Laughter: <https://cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0803-humour.html>
- Workplace: <https://www.humorthatworks.com/benefits/30-benefits-of-humor-at-work/>
- Teaching: https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we06/engdid/A_ressourcen/pdfs/hausarbeiten/Humour-in-EFL-Classrooms--Rebekka-Krause-.pdf

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 - ⁵ Selfie, How the West became Self-obsessed, Will Storr, Picador, 2018;
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 - ⁷ Book of Proverbs (17.22).
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 - ⁹ <https://psychology.fandom.com/wiki/Gelotology>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/give-your-body-boost-with-laughter>
 - ¹¹ http://www.helpguide.org/life/humor_laughter_health.htm
 - ¹² 9 Ways Humour Heals, Borchard J Teresa. (20+) Facebook
 - ¹³ <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/humor/humor-and-resilience>
 - ¹⁴ https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we06/engdid/A_ressourcen/pdfs/hausarbeiten/Humour-in-EFL-Classrooms--Rebeka-Krause-.pdf
 - ¹⁵ <https://thisemotionallife.org/blogs/pursuit-happiness-your-inalienable-right/>
<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/blogs/pursuit-happiness-your-inalienable-right>
 - ¹⁶ <https://www.science.org/content/article/researchers-locate-funny-gene>
 - ¹⁷ <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2019/03/01/what-makes-something-funny-genetics-almost-certainly-plays-a-role/>
 - ¹⁸ Fractured, Why our societies are coming apart and how we put them back together again, Jon Yates, Harper North, 2021
 - ¹⁹ Redeeming laughter: the comic dimension of human experience, Peter Berger, De Gruyter, 2014
 - ²⁰ https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/f49406d81b9ed9c977_p1m6ibgie.pdf
 - ²¹ Laugh your way to Happiness, Lesley Lyle L., 2014
 - ²² https://www.academia.edu/9819670/The_Philosophy_of_Humor
 - ²³ https://www.academia.edu/2716155/Humor_and_irony_in_interaction_From_mode_adoption_to_failure_detection
 - ²⁴ https://archive.org/stream/psychologyofhumo00martrich/psychologyofhumo00martrich_djvu.txt
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