

HumorMatters™



Survival of the *Witty-est*; Creating Resilience Through Humor

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Just as our physical immune system protects us from toxins in our environment, our psychological immune system protects us from the toxins generated from psychological stressors we experience in the world around us. While the physical immune system produces antibodies to help protect us from biochemical toxins, the psychological immune system produces “antibodies” to help protect us from psychological toxins—often referred to as *stressors*.

Humor strengthens both our physical and psychological immune systems. The physical immune system is bolstered through biochemical changes such as an increase in immunoglobulin A during laughter. Humor helps to sustain the psychological immune system by altering how we feel, think, and behave.

Resilience is the ability of the human organism to spring back from stressors in the environment. As human beings we are resilient and, therefore, able to encounter stressors and return to our previous levels of functioning. In order to be resilient it is important that we “maintain” both our physical and emotional immune systems. Maintenance of healthy immune systems comes in many forms. Physical maintenance can be sustained through good nutrition, rest, and exercise. Emotional

maintenance can be supported by sustaining realistic beliefs and attitudes about our world and possessing feelings of self-value and self-worth. By changing one’s biochemistry, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, humor can help build physical and emotional resilience as it stimulates the production of physical and psychological antibodies.

Impact of Stressors

As we experience distress, antibodies (whether physical or emotional) are utilized to help us cope with the stressor. Multiple stressors deplete our immune systems and, without a regeneration of antibodies, our systems become increasingly susceptible to emotional or physical toxins.

After the occurrence of each stressful event in our lives, our immune systems contain fewer antibodies. These antibodies, therefore, need to be regenerated. If a sufficient quantity and/or intensity of stressors persists and there is no opportunity for the immune systems to recharge, a “breakdown” occurs. Breakdowns may be in the form of distressing emotions, rumination, inability to work, physical ailments, etc. When our immune systems are compromised, emotional distress (such as excessive anger, depression, anxiety, guilt or resentment) or physical distress (such as colds, headaches, or stomach aches) often occur.

Creating Psychological Resilience

Humor not only helps relieve distress and fights environmental toxins when they occur, it also regenerates our “antibodies” so that the impact of the toxins is minimal. This regeneration bolsters antibody levels and helps sustain resilience. As we experience humor, we “stock up” on psychological antibodies. When a potentially stressful event occurs, psychological antibodies are then “activated” to address our emotional distress.

As mentioned above, humor changes our biochemistry as well as our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

1. **Biochemically**, humor has been shown to increase immunoglobulin A and decrease stress hormones. It has also been shown to increase our tolerance to pain.

The intensity of stress we experience is directly related to the way in which we perceive the stressor. Shakespeare stated, “Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so.”

2. **Cognitively**, humor helps break rigid thinking resulting in our ability to perceive the world more “realistically” and without distortions. Our emotional state is greatly influenced by our perception of the events around us. A stressor is not inherently stressful. The intensity of stress we experience is directly related to the way in which we perceive the stressor. Shakespeare stated, “Nothing is good or bad. It is thinking that makes it so.” Because one person’s *view* of a particular stressor influences the impact of that stressor, a variety of people experiencing the same stressor may have vastly different reactions—depending on the *meaning* they

place on the stressor. For example, someone who feels excessive anger often believes that the world *must* treat him “fairly,” and when it does not treat him so, he becomes angry. Humor helps adjust this particular belief system by providing a more realistic perspective on an “unfair world.”

Someone who experiences excessive anxiety often believes that she *must* perform well to be accepted or valued. When an environmental stressor challenges her performance, she experiences anxiety.

Humor again can provide a clearer perspective placing her “performance” in a healthier relation to the specific environment so that the individual changes her thinking pattern from “I must perform to be okay” to “I would like to perform well, but I’m okay even when I don’t do as well as I hoped.”

3. **Emotionally**, humor not only relieves distressful feelings, but it helps teach us that we have the ability to “manage” our emotional states. One can’t experience distressing emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, or resentment *and* experience humor at the same time. You may have heard someone who is very angry say, “Don’t make me laugh. I want to be angry.” You cannot maintain a high level of anger and laugh at the same time. When I asked one of my clients (who was very “dedicated” to her depression) what upset her about my “humorous” interventions she replied, “When you make me laugh, I do not feel depressed.” My humor momentarily relieved some of her depression which she seemed committed to maintaining! Humor and “distressful” emotions cannot *occupy* the same emotional/psychological space.

Since the experience of humor affects our emotions, we can learn to *manage* our emotional distress through humor. While humorous interventions may not remove chronic depression they can, for a few moments, relieve emotional upset, teaching us experientially that depression (as is true of other distressing emotions) can be lessened or temporarily relieved when we experience humor.

4. **Behaviorally**, humor can energize and recharge us and increase our desire and ability to choose activity over inactivity. We are more likely to greet and connect with others when we experience humor.

Our Comic Vision

We are more likely to live healthy and happy lives if we maintain our physical and emotional resilience. To do so we can develop our “comic vision”—a way of perceiving the world that allows us to be receptive to the humor around and within us. Heightened receptivity to humor can stimulate our ability to be increasingly interactive with, and even proactive toward, the world around us. In this way we increase our perception of humor—allowing it to help us manage our biochemical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral states.

