



Humor and Healing

A Reflection By Safe Places for the Advancement of Community and Equity (SPACES)

*“A small child typically laughs more than four hundred times each day, and an adult – seventeen times.” Gretchen Rubin, author of *The Happiness Project**

I. **FOUR THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF HUMOR (excerpted from *Primal Leadership* by Daniel Goleman)**

- 1) **Humor helps.** “Research on humor reveals that a well-timed joke or playful laughter can stimulate creativity, open lines of communication, and enhance a sense of connection and trust. Feeling good lubricates mental efficiency, making people better at understanding information and using decision rules in complex judgments, as well as more flexible in their thinking.”
- 2) **Mood Matters.** “A leader’s emotional state and actions affect how the people they lead will feel and therefore perform. How well leaders manage their moods and affect everyone else’s moods is not just a private matter, but a factor in how well the organization, campaign or project will do.”
- 3) **Laughter and leading.** “People don’t need a comedian’s sense of timing or huge comic repertoire to use humor effectively. What may later seem a rather feeble joke can still be a powerful emotional prod in a tense moment – if it gets a laugh or smile.”
- 4) **Laughter and Linking.** “In a neurological sense, laughing represents the shortest distance between two people because it instantly interlocks limbic systems. This immediate, involuntary reaction, as one researcher puts it, involves the most direct communication possible between people – brain to brain – with our intellect just going along for the ride ...”

“Laughter is a spiritual form of communing; without words we can say to one another, “I’m with you. I get it.” True laughter is not the use of self-deprecation or deflection. Instead, true laughter “embodies the relief and connection we experience when we realize the power of sharing our stories – we’re not laughing at each other but *with* each other.” -- *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Brené Brown

II. THREE WAYS WE CAN USE HUMOR IN OUR HEALING AND SOCIAL CHANGE WORK:

- 1) **Questions** – Pose a question to the group (to answer in pairs or full group) intentionally designed to generate laughter. One can take a direct or indirect approach. For instance, “Tapping memory -- Share a story about a time when you laughed hard or smiled wide?” Or, “Tapping imagination – “If you were an artist or entertainer, what would be your stage name?”
- 2) **Stories** – Share a story about something you saw, heard or experienced that made YOU laugh. For instance, the true story about a young boy on an airplane telling his sister that she was “cool.” Then asking her if she wanted to know what “C.O.O.L” really meant. His answer: “Constipated, Outdated, Over-rated, Loser.”
- 3) **Play** – Icebreaker-like activities that generate laughter. For instance, asking everyone to stand and greet three other people in the room in the most creative way they can imagine. But with a caveat: try to make physical contact with the other person. And NO handshakes, hugs, high-fives, fist-bumps or any other traditional greeting.

III. FOUR RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL READING:

- 1) ***Becoming a Humor Being: The Power to Choose A Better Way*** by Steve Rizzo
- 2) ***Primal Leadership: Learning To Lead With Emotional Intelligence*** by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee
- 3) ***The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*** by Brené Brown
- 4) ***The Happiness Project*** by Gretchen Rubin

To learn more about our work on humor and laughter, please contact Dushaw Hockett at 202-360-7787 or dushaw@thespacesproject.org.