



## **"Try It, You'll Like It: The Courage To Risk Using Humor"**

By Steve Wilson

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According to well-established personality theory, confidence comes from competence. Competence comes from practice. It makes sense to me.

The sequence goes like this: Engage in a behavior or activity repeatedly, combined with good coaching or feedback, and you will experience success, which is reinforcing, and likely to encourage further repetitions, which leads you closer to perfecting the skills involved, which gives you increased self-confidence, which for many people is personally transforming. Make the activity one involving humor, and you will transform yourself and your work and your relationships in marvelous ways.

"Practice" means doing something over and over...not necessarily doing it "right" every time. For many people, doing something that they might not do "right" or do "well" feels risky. After all, many of us were raised with fear of rejection ("What will people think?") and, fear of failure ("Thou must be absolutely perfect!"). Combine the Fear of Rejection (F.O.R.) with the Fear of Failure (F.O.F.) and you end up with one great big Fear of Trying (F.O.T.). In short, the formula is: F.O.R + F.O.F. = F.O.T.

### **Three Humor Powered First-Person Accounts**

1. One Monday morning I received a phone call from a Registered Nurse in Baltimore, Maryland. She was excited. A week earlier she had been in the audience at a Humor Seminar program I presented in conjunction with a weekend self-esteem workshop. As a result of looking at her life that weekend, she experienced an emotionally charged personal confrontation with her own harsh, deprived, and abusive childhood. She realized how much she had missed by never having been given toys to play with. At one point during the workshop, she announced quietly through her tears, "It was as if a bucket and scrub brush were my only playthings".

But, on the telephone that morning, she sounded triumphant. "Thanks to you, I have learned to be more playful, and I want to tell you about a powerful experience I had with humor on my job. Joan was night-supervisor in the adolescent psychiatric unit of a general hospital. This is the story she related to me,

A sixteen-year-old girl had been admitted to the hospital as suicidal, and was placed on Joan's unit. The teenager was sullen and depressed, refusing to look up, make eye-contact, or speak. As Joan put it, "I was stumped as to how to get through to her. Then I remembered the seminar, the advice about humor power, and my personal decision to take more risks with humor, and I had an idea that this was the time to try.

"I took the girl into my office. She never looked up. I remembered that in my desk drawer was the red clown nose, which I got at the seminar. I took it out and put it on. The teenager never noticed. I made a noisy fuss about shuffling some papers on my desk and told her I had to go over the rules of the Psych. Unit with her. She glanced up, spied the clown nose out of the corner of her eye, did a double-take and burst out laughing. Apparently the humor had worked. What the girl saw was not just another authoritarian person, but someone with warmth and understanding.

"For the next hour-and-a-half she laughed and cried and laughed and cried and told me her story, not holding back any feelings. This catharsis reduced the lethality level of her suicidal thoughts so it was no longer a problem. She slept well that night and joined in the therapeutic routines the following day. I couldn't wait to tell you about my wonderful experience with the power of humor. I am so happy that I took the risk. I am completely convinced, it works!"

2. Tom was a 41-year-old executive for a giant research corporation. He had suffered two mild heart attacks and needed to undergo a follow-tip angioplasty. This a procedure is which a tubes is inserted into a large artery in the groin, then guided tip to a blood vessel at the heart where a small balloon is inflated to open the vessel, clearing the way for an unrestricted blood flow which allows the patient to remain fully functioning in his life. Tom was scared.

We talked about it and he decided to use his generally positive outlook and sense of humor to cope with his anxiety. He would show the operating room team that he was on their side, and that he was determined to do his part to make the, procedure successful.

His secret weapon was a pair of "Groucho glasses" which he hid until the last moment before being wheeled into the operating room. Then he put them on and acted "normal". The doctor and the nurses had a good laugh. His display of good humor was his way of showing that he had faith in the medical team. Everyone was bolstered.

One of the assisting nurses played it "dead-pan". She removed the toy eyeglasses from his face and handled them as if they were real. Placing them tinder his pillow for safekeeping, she said, "You won't need these, during the procedure but they'll be right here for you when its over". The procedure was a complete success. Later, Tom told me, how the humor had worked so well to get him through that frightening experience.

3. Billy was a ten-year-old boy referred to me by his school principal. He was in trouble for inattention in class, a defiant attitude, fighting with the other kids, and inappropriate touching of some of the girls in his class. It was a Tuesday afternoon when his mother brought him (kicking and screaming, no doubt) to my office for his first appointment.

When I met them in the waiting room, it was obvious that Billy did not want to see yet another psychologist and he had no intention of talking to me or even making eye-contact. I decided to take a risk by appealing to his sense of fun as a way of "breaking the ice" with him. I asked him a question that he never imagined would come from a gray-haired, 50-year-old "shrink", "Do you know how to work a yo-yo?" He was disarmed but skeptical as he answered, "I had one once, but I ain't no good at it".

I asked if he would like to see some neat yo-yo tricks right there in the waiting room before coming back to my office- He couldn't resist. I went back and got my yo-yo and after a few basic tricks, dazzled him with some advanced maneuvers, and offered to give him lessons. He willingly accompanied me to my office where our therapy relationship was begun...with yo-yo lessons.

In subsequent weeks, his trust in me increased, and he opened up his aching heart to reveal the pain of a learning disability, multiple step-fathers, and an emotionally abusive home life. After several months of treatment, his self-esteem was considerably improved, he had been placed in the proper classrooms, and he was no longer a problem to the teachers or other children. Yo-yo in hand, Billy was well on his way to a happier life.

**Go Ahead. Try it!**

Taking a chance and using humor occasionally in a situation where you previously had been holding back or hadn't even thought of it, will pay off more often than not. You will get positive feedback for helping relieve tension or showing the group another way of looking at something. People will thank you for giving them the chance to laugh. You will feel rewarded and be encouraged to try using humor again and again.

You will quickly be able to tell when to use humor and when to leave it out. You will develop a "gut feeling" for humor. You will be more competent with humor and more self-confident in general. Taking chances with humor you are overcoming F.O.F., F.O.R., and F.O.T. You are becoming a Humor Powered person.

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