



## **Laugh Traction--Get A Grip On The Right Kind Of Humor!**

By Steve Wilson

© All Rights Reserved

Did you know that there are three kinds of traction that you can get with laughter and humor? Each one gives you a grip on a particular power of humor and allows you to use that power just as you would use the tread on snow tires or a good pair of running shoes, to get you started and to keep you moving. Two kinds of laugh traction will give you thrust in the right direction but the third type will take you where you may not want to go. The types of humor traction that give you positive forward motion (or emotion) are attraction and distraction. The one that spins you back in reverse or causes you to stall is detraction.

I saw a poster that said "Be sure brain is engaged before putting mouth in gear" It is as important to be aware of what gear your brain is in when you step on the JOYOLOGY accelerator--practice Humor and Happiness Management--to reach your goals, as it is to know what gear your car is in when you are about to drive out into traffic. If you happen to use the wrong kind of humor--the wrong gear--you are likely to collide with the needs and self-esteem of others, causing personal injury, an unwanted "turn-off", or a needless detour. Let's see how the three types of laugh traction work.

(1) **ATTRACTION.** By the time you were 6-months old, you had probably made the common-sense observation that people with humorous, pleasant, joyful personalities are more fun to be with than dull, joyless, humorless folks. You were right! Studies show that, on

the job, for example, most of us would rather work with a pleasant person. In fact, two surveys have reported that eight-four percent of personnel officers felt that a person with a good sense of humor does a better job than one without a sense of humor and, all things being equal, 98% would hire the job applicant with a good sense of humor.

According to Management Professor David Abramis, when supervisors encourage appropriate playfulness at work and show their own sense of humor in a good-natured way, they motivate better productivity, job satisfaction, morale, creativity, and teamwork. Management Consultant Fred Pryor points out that an element of fun at work has several benefits including the fact that "happy employees tend to be healthy employees and, therefore, are on the job instead of at home taking sick leave".

And, according to a report in Men's Health Newsletter, Woody Allen-types actually have a far better chance at attracting the opposite sex than the Rambo-types. More than one survey has shown that the most attractive quality in a spouse or fiancé is "sense of humor". It is consistently rated as more important than all other traits--except, perhaps, honesty--including looks, status, wealth, and power. The bumper sticker that says, "SMILE: IT INCREASES YOUR FACE VALUE", is giving sage and scientifically sound advice.

Putting on a happy face, being able to see the nonserious elements in a situation, learning to feel comfortable laughing out loud, are all ways to get a good grip on better personal attractiveness.

(2) **DISTRACTION.** When researchers want to understand the incredible power of humor, one of the things they ask about is how humor affects the stresses that cause physical and emotional illnesses. One answer that comes up repeatedly is that all of our positive feelings--including humor--help to combat the ill effects stress has on our bodies and our minds.

On the physical side, pleasant emotions like joy, love, will to live, sense of purpose, pleasure, creativity,

compassion, festivity, and humor and laughter, keep our immune'systems active and healthy and promote healing. Staying in a good frame of mind, a good humor, makes you less likely to get sick and more likely to heal faster if you do.

On the psychological side, it has been proven that a great deal of our emotional tension and stress comes from the way we look at things. For example, our mis-perceptions can lead to unnecessary worry, fear, guilt, or embarrassment, which our bodies then convert into ulcers, insomnia and a host of other ailments. When we take things too seriously the molehills of life grow into imaginary mountains of anxiety and we get sick. One way that humor, taking things lightly, helps us get back our perspective is by taking our minds off problems temporarily. The distraction effect of humor allows our spectacular natural healing powers to take effect.

What's more, distraction provides an "incubation period" during or after which the solution to a problem often presents itself. Have you ever tried to think of a word or name that was "on the tip of your tongue" but, no matter how hard you tried the word wouldn't come out; then, when you gave up and forgot about it, the correct word or name came to you? This happened because when you gave up consciously thinking about it, the problem was still incubating; your special computer--your brain--kept working on the problem until you solved it.

Harold Bloomfield, M.D., author of "Inner Joy", says that constant worry even about real problems is not "emotionally economical". And who would argue that worrying about imaginary problems is anything other than a total waste of time and energy? When you are troubled or trying to solve a problem, it is a good idea to think hard about it and then take some time off, get away from the problem as completely as possible. Maybe you could take a humor break. For example, you might eat an ice cream cone, spend some time joking in the company of good friends, let yourself get "lost" in a funny movie, or look at cloud shapes. Your subconscious mind will continue to work on the problem while your conscious mind is distracted. During that time, natural healing processes take place, preventing you from getting

worn down and reducing the risk of adding physical illness to mental worry. You return to the problem a little more refreshed and, perhaps, with the answer in hand.

Humor distraction from problems actually helps you get a grip on solutions.

(3) **DETRACTION.** This is the reverse gear that will propel you backwards away from your goals and away from good relationships. It has to do with laughing at people rather than laughing with them; those times when humor hurts rather than helps. You probably have heard the saying, "Children's humor can be cruel". Well, humor used as a weapon is cruel regardless of the age of the person using it. Perhaps you have had the experience of being made fun of, being the butt of the joke, or being part of a group that was the target of detracting humor. Sometimes jokes are made about a person for being fat or skinny or wearing glasses or being clumsy or being from a foreign country or having a certain religious belief or skin color. If it has happened to you, then you already know what detraction humor feels like. It doesn't feel good.

Sometimes people are not aware that their jokes or comments are hurtful; we say they are insensitive. Some people intentionally use humor to "put down" others; this is mean and cruel. It is important to know what can happen if humor is used the wrong way and to be able to tell the difference between positive humor and negative humor.

In 1973 I had the pleasure of getting to know a very wise man who taught me the two words which, when put into operation, cure almost all mental health problems. Norman Guitry was truly a gentleman in every way, distinguished by the citizens of Columbus and recognized throughout Ohio as the elder statesman of mental health advocacy. For several years running I had the good fortune that he accepted my invitation to address incoming classes of Mental Health Technicians at Columbus Technical Institute. His lectures were always warm and witty and wise. One particularly powerful idea he shared with every class was, "All you need to know about mental health can be summed up in two words, and those words are: Don't belittle. Make it a practice," he urged us, "to lift people up instead of putting them down and you 90% of the world's mental health problems will be solved." It was a privilege to have heard those

words of wisdom "from the horse's mouth". Norm's ideas are even more valuable to me now that I have learned to appreciate the power of humor.

Humor used to detract from or belittle another person's appearance, race, gender, age, mistakes, or beliefs can be devastating to their self-esteem. Humiliating humor can cause emotional scars that last a lifetime, perpetuating prejudices and stereotypes instead of valuing cultural diversity. Many people who are hurt by humor withdraw their friendship and cooperation, thus damaging teamwork, productivity, and relationships. Some who are harmed by humor retaliate with direct, open aggression, sabotage, or other negative responses; attack always produces counterattack.

Gene Shalit said, "Good-hearted ethnic humor has mostly been lost in America. Too bad for America." In theory, I suppose there could be such a thing as "good-hearted" ethnic humor but, I ask you reader, do you really think it could exist in today's society? In any case, here are some guidelines I recommend to help you decide which humor to use in a given situation: Don't poke fun at anything a person couldn't change in the next five minutes. Develop your sensitivity to different tastes in humor. When in doubt, leave it out; never use humor that is intentionally offensive. Remember that "timing is everything"; humor and laughter are not always appropriate or welcome (immediately following surgery, for example, the patient may already be in enough stitches and will appreciate you saving your joking for later). Issue laughter invitations not commands; never force your humor on anyone. Be extra careful with sarcasm; it almost always stings and it is the most easily misunderstood of all humor. Abide by this African proverb: "The axe forgets but the tree remembers", and you won't go wrong.

When you use **detraction** humor you are moving backward, getting gripes rather than getting a grip. When you make positive humor--**attraction** and **distraction**--a driving force in your life you will build forward momentum toward your goals, happier relationships, and a more harmonious world.

---

---

Steve Wilson is a psychologist, author, speaker, workshop leader and consultant who helps people and organizations get the absolute most out of themselves while they love every minute of it. He is the Cheerman of The Bored of World Laughter Tour, Inc. and USA Laughter Clubs. For more information visit his website [www.stevewilson.com](http://www.stevewilson.com), or [www.worldlaughtertour.com](http://www.worldlaughtertour.com), or phone 1-800-669-5233.