



Humor and Disability

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Introduction

There is little that is intrinsically humorous about having a disability. Concomitantly, there is little that is inherently morose, sorrowful or tragic about having a disability. Many people in the community at-large perceive disability with sympathetic and lamentable attitudes. Because of that, they resist or oppose attempts to juxtapose humor and disability. Many people with disabilities are resentful or perplexed at such attitudes as they have the potential to perceive the humor that is sometimes related to their disability and life experiences and frequently unrelated to their disability. In the following there will be an attempt to explore issues related to humor and disability and approaches to infusing humor in the lives of people with disabilities, their families and professionals who work in the disability field.

A healthy attribute of any human, disabled or not, is the ability to laugh at themselves and their unique circumstances. Those individuals who have the ability to take a light-hearted approach to life tend to experience less stress, experience a balance of work and fun and are able to cope with reality more effectively than individuals who do not experience such attitudes. It follows that those people with disabilities who can find joy, amusement and fun in their life experiences will have a better chance of enjoying life compared to those who cannot or choose not to view their own circumstances from a positive perspective.

Benefits of Humor

First, we will explore the benefits that can accrue from humor and humorous interactions. One of the primary functions of humor is that it serves as a reliever of stress. The physical acts of smiling and laughing relax muscle groups, allow one's mind to focus on things other than one's troubles, and lead to the production of endorphins, a biochemical substance that gives us a sense of well-being.

Humor can create connections between people. If you observe people who are laughing together, in small or large ways they are creating connections with each other. Another major function of humor is to balance negative experiences of life. Leonard Pitts, Jr., following a personal tragedy stated: In some sense, life leaves us all wounded forever. To be human is to face that and laugh anyway.

Humor can do much to promote more productive work environments. An historic attitude has been that if people are laughing or having fun on the job, they aren't working. First, these two behaviors are not mutually exclusive and, second, many jobs today have so much pressure and inherent stress, that workers need to laugh just to maintain their sanity and carry out their duties. People who work in environments where a lighthearted approach to work is allowed or encouraged will typically put in more than what is expected of them and feel good about it. Conversely, those work settings where people are monitored closely, where "fun" is frowned upon and where the "bottom line" is the overriding value, create employees who do what they have to but won't go beyond the basic expectations of their job.

Humor promotes wellness. An area that has shown significant empirical support is the relation between our feelings and our physical well-being. Norman Cousins, Bernie Siegel and many others have shown that positive thoughts and lots of laughs combined with sound medical treatments can do wonders to aid the healing process. This process can go both ways - which reminds us of the epitaph on the tomb of the life-long hypochondriac - "See, I told you I was sick!"

Humor is one of many things that makes life worth living. Haven't we all met people who acted like they were walking around just to save funeral expenses. People who have a negativistic view of life are making a choice to live and act on their perceptions of life. Unfortunately, some of those people try to get the rest of us to view life in the same way they do. Just as they have the right to act on their choice, we have the right to choose laughter - to see and appreciate the rainbow - whether or not we ever get the pot of gold. We will be better off if we can remember that an optimist and pessimist are right about the same number of times, but the optimist has more fun.

The Need for Appropriate Humor

From an historical perspective, people with disabilities have been a source of amusement to able-bodied people. This has ranged from individuals who were used as court jesters, exhibits of curiosity in carnivals and side-shows, to cartoon characters who have various disabilities, especially speech problems. We have seen a large number of jokes told about the types of people with whom we work: especially those with limited intellectual abilities (moron jokes, ethnic jokes, blonde jokes, etc.).

Most of us have experienced the effects of negative forms of humor where we have been laughed at rather than laughed with. When confronted, people who laugh at or make fun of others typically say they were "just joking." This

statement is a cover for a possible attempt to hurt others' feelings or to put themselves in a superior role. Joel Goodman, director of The Humor Project has outlined several examples of the difference between constructive or positive humor and negative or destructive humor: Constructive humor creates positive environments where people support each other, promote self-esteem and create mutually beneficial connections. Destructive humor does the opposite. According to Goodman, destructive humor goes for the jugular vein while constructive humor goes for "the jocular vein." Therefore, it is important that humor be shared in a nurturing and constructive manner.

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Potential Benefits of Humor for People with Disabilities

Is humor the answer to the challenges that a disability presents? No. But it is one of many "answers" that can help balance those things over which we have little or no control. For instance, a person with cerebral palsy may not have the level of control they might desire over their physical self or events in the environment. However, they can have control over their reactions, interpretations and emotions regarding events that occur within themselves and in their milieu. A quote of Kurt Vonnegut highlights how a humor perspective is a choice: There are two appropriate responses to frustration, you can laugh or you can cry. I prefer laughter, because there's less mopping up to do afterwards! So, an important motto of people who experience a significant amount of frustration in life, might be "Choose Laughter."

Humor may help a parent of a child with a disability perceive the positive aspects of their own and their child's situation and future. It may also help with employment stability for those who work in the disability field. Several occupational positions in special education and rehabilitation are prone to "burnout." Some students and consumers, due to the nature of their developmental disabilities, require considerable attention, intervention, and assistance yet are unable to reciprocate for those who provide them educational, residential, habilitation or other services. Humor in the work environment can do much to create bonds between staff members and students or consumers to create work that has multiple rewards.

Most of us have met people who could stand to "lighten up." This includes those with disabilities and those without. Humor may be a catalyst that can have people just enjoy life more. A joke a day at the dinner table (one that everyone can understand) might be a little effort that could lead to positive feelings for the evening for one or more people. Being happy does not have to be a struggle - there are many little and big ways that people can learn to appreciate life and what it can bring.

Humor in Special Education Settings

Can you imagine the child who, for any one of numerous reasons, does not want to go to school?

"Marvin, it's time for school - time to get up."

"Mom, I don't want to go to school."

"Marvin, you've got to get up and get going. You can't just stay home."

"Mom, you don't understand. None of the kids like me at that school."

"Oh, Marvin..."

"Really, and none of the teachers like me either."

"Marvin, don't you think you're exaggerating?"

"No, really, I'm not. I don't think the custodian likes me either."

"Nonsense. Anyway, you've got to get up and get going."

"Mom, give me one reason - just one reason why I should go to that school today."

"Marvin, I can give you two reasons: First, you're forty-two years old.

And second, you're the principal of the school!"

Does humor have a role in the school? Sure, it does! Teachers learn quickly that a key to motivation and interest is through engaging and positive learning experiences. Although these are frequently fun, they are not just for fun. In other words, the purpose of school is not to have children enjoy themselves; but to have them learn those attitudes, skills and understandings that will allow them to become competent, productive, nurturing and fulfilled adults. Effective teachers can do both: they frequently devise instructional games and enjoyable learning activities where children laugh and learn simultaneously. This is especially important if a goal of education is to create adults who willingly and enthusiastically participate in lifelong learning.

Interestingly, most people can recognize the need for motivating and fun learning experiences for young children. However, as these same children move into the higher grades and post-secondary experiences, we no longer feel the need to make learning as enjoyable as we did when they were young. I believe this is a mistake which may, in part, account for some of the high dropout rates - especially in students with learning and behavioral challenges. Think of yourself. Don't you feel you learn more from a lecture or speech which is light-hearted and provides motivating and interesting anecdotes and examples than one which conveys the same content but in a pedantic or boring manner.

Special education settings almost require humor. As I frequent classes and various programs I often encounter both teachers and students who need to learn to "lighten up." A colleague and fellow-humorist Tena Garas suggests that we replace the "IEP" (Individualized Educational Program or Plan) with the "IFP" - the Individualized Fun Plan. Because of the attributes of students, special education settings do present unique challenges. However, these same challenges can be turned into opportunities for growth, development and an

appreciation of life. As a former elementary and junior high school teacher, I can recall great laughs at things the students would say and do as well as some of my own mistakes. This was helpful for both of us. It helped me relax and helped them see that they weren't the only ones who made mistakes and that they could contribute to the enjoyment of others. We also can imagine how humor can get out of hand in some educational settings and the need for clear parameters around the type and amount of humor to minimize the need for behavioral interventions.

Not everyone needs to know that they are generating humor for others- especially if it would reflect negatively on their character or abilities. An example is the teacher who receives an excuse note from a parent indicating that their teenage daughter was absent because "she was in bed with gramps" or the parent who asks that her son's absence be excused due to his "loose vowels." The teacher should laugh quietly (or loudly if they want) at these notes but be careful not to repeat them in the teacher's lounge as such sharing might get back to the parents who wrote them.

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Adding Humor to Living and Working

Following are ideas that may help add some humor to your personal or work life. Try one or two and see what happens. If they work, try one or two more. If they don't work, try one or two more as they might work.

- Make an effort to add humor to daily activities and experiences. Humor need not be reserved for special times and places - it can be infused throughout the day, week, month, year, decade, century, millenium, ...
- Do something different that will surprise (pleasantly) coworkers or family members.
- Focus only on positive forms of humor. Sarcasm, ridicule and negative forms of humor usually only serve to create illfeelings and resentment.
- Appreciate the naturally occurring humor at home and work. People do wacky, weird and funny things - sometimes on purpose; often incidentally or by accident. Try to value those moments.
- Experiment with positive and appropriate jokes. Try them out with the family before telling them in the workplace.
- Smile and laugh more. Practice "humorobics" - a term coined by C. W. Metcalf which refers to practicing the physical act of laughing. Laughter promotes the production of endorphins - a biochemical substance that leads to good feelings and a sense of wellness.

- Be aware of the sensitivities of colleagues family members about what is funny and what isn't. Don't allow something that is funny for you be turned into a bad experience for another person.
- "Lighten up." Try to ignore or not get 'stressed out' by behaviors or events that aren't very important. Try to select the important issues or rules to be firm about and hold a stand.
- Try to separate your work or professional life from your personal life. Plan for fun and enjoyable activities with the family during your non-working hours.
- Recognize that one thing that is a constant in work settings, families (and life) is change. Try to be as flexible as you can so that you can change as the need arises.
- Develop a system for saving humor - make it easy and consistent with your personality so you will do it regularly.
- Examine stressful or negative situations to determine those elements you have control over and those you do not.
- Develop a plan of action to deal with those aspects you can control and get help to deal with those things you can't do on your own.
- Try to not worry about what other people think. Practice being a little wacky, wild and weird - you may learn to like it.

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