

Let Humor Lead Your Nursing Practice

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People will forget what you said.

People will forget what you did.

But people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

Most people tend to take themselves too seriously. They get so caught up in the rapidity of the moment or with the power struggle of us versus them that they forget one of the most important aspects of life and living. You are hereby given permission to have fun at work! In taking a lighter approach by adding an appreciation of humor, an effective leadership tool is born and a constructive therapeutic intervention in both the classroom and clinical setting evolves. Humor and laughter can result in more dedicated nurses and improved work ethics. Because human spirituality is based upon relationships, humor creates that connective bond between people who laugh together. A leader must connect with emotion—the spirit, the soul. What better way to touch a heart than to use humor? Humor shows a warmth and approachability that enables the leadership role to abound.¹

PHYSIOLOGY OF HUMOR

You just had a good laugh—how do you feel? Do you know that physiologically you just jogged half a mile; and it was a lot more fun!^{2,3} The endorphins just released into your body by mere laughter can be more powerful than a combination of the South Beach diet® and 24-hour Fitness®, with no calories and zero grams of fat!^{4,5} Based upon 45 years of research on the physiology and psychology of laughter done by William Fry, Jr., MD, a psychiatrist at Stanford Medical Center, Goodman (HA! “good” “man”) states, “laughter enhances respiration and circulation, oxygenates the blood,

suppresses the stress-related hormones in the brain, and activates the immune system. Indeed, laughter is jest medicine.”⁶ There have been endless published reports of the healing powers of humor.^{2-5,7-12} Because humor has a tendency to bring people together, yet also reduce tension, humor has even been referred to as a *social lubricant*.^{4,13}

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The psychology of humor allows one to relate theory to hypothesis. Why does a hardy giggle or a good belly laugh make us feel better? Freud’s relief theory tells us that laughter

allows for the release of accumulated psychic energy.^{14–21} Plato's superiority theory says we laugh at others so that we feel better about ourselves.^{15–17} Schachter's cognitive response theory, also known as the cognitive theory of emotion, can best predict how humor will increase the persuasiveness of a leader's message as it distracts from the mundane argument.²² Humor touches the heart through stimulation of the mind.²²

Humor is derived from the Latin word *umor*, meaning to be fluid and flexible, like water.^{9,20,23,24} Donna Strickland, a nurse and healthcare leadership consultant, avows "all of this 'yummy stuff'—laughter, love, spontaneity usually happens if you are paying attention to the fluidity of the moment—helps keep your spirit fluid and flexible so that you do not get brittle and broken in times of chaos, change, and crisis."^{25(p.1)}

One of the earliest definitions of humor is presented by the German psychologist Jean Paul (1826) as "das Umgekehrt Erhabene" (cited in Gurtler¹⁵), which means the stimulation of a higher level of self-reflective imagination whereby life's problems can be viewed in a state of relative calmness without being overwhelming.¹⁵ Self-reflection allows one to laugh at themselves, at the world, and together with others.¹⁵

UNIVERSALITY OF HUMOR

In a world of cultural diversity, humor can be the universal language to evoke a positive experience.^{18,26} No culture has ever been found that is devoid of a sense of humor as humor is "a learned component of human life."^{3(p.111)} Therefore, humor can be identified as the social construct of a universal language that evokes a positive experience, embodies group participation, and leads to autonomous self-confidence in an effort to cope with and laugh at life's situations within a cultural diverse world.^{15,26–28} Humor lends itself to laughing, smiling, and is synonymous with joy as humor just makes you feel better as it leads to a sense of well-being.²⁹ Even from the Bible, Psalms 2:4 quotes, "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall have them in derision." Proverbs 17:22 says, "A merry heart doeth good like medicine; But a broken spirit drieth the bones." A simple smile, the shortest distance between two people, is a universal expression of positive feelings.^{4,30}

FUNDAMENTALS OF LEADERSHIP

John C. Maxwell introduces us to his *#10 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: The Law of Connection*.¹ He states, "effective leaders know that you first have to touch people's hearts before you ask them for a hand."^{1(p.101)} As laughter enhances the senses, the impact of the spoken word connects the audience to the leader. Connectedness leads to credibility and a genuine desire to be a part of what is happening. "The vision of the leader becomes the aspiration of the people."^{1(p.107)} Culbertson, an expert in stress management for healthcare leaders through the use of humor, enlightens flexible leaders to maintain control and understanding, yet survive, by taking a lighter approach to work.³¹

A leadership role of mentoring and modeling not only provides structure but enables others to strive for greater outcomes. A leader must have vision—a clear sight of where you want to go and how you want to get there. This is what

we know as self-awareness, which is but a self-depreciating sense of humor.³² As you lead, provide a motivational environment. An effective leader harnesses the human spirit and shares insights and skills learned from personal experience and a positive attitude.

QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

We all recognize that there are two major differences in people. No one likes to be around the first group because they see gloom in everything and try to drag others around them down as well. The other group is uplifting, delightful—life is good. You choose. As a leader you teach the first group how to become the second by showing them the value of humor in life. This is not a leadership challenge in nursing to be taken lightly. Breathe. Smile. Goffee and Jones have studied the four qualities of leadership; leaders: show their own weaknesses, use intuition, are empathetic, and reveal their differences.³³ This fourth quality is the one that gives a unique vision and inspirational synergy to leadership. This difference, as humor, can be very effective as it enables the nurse leader to visualize a new perspective. Humor is an art form—useful to problem solve, resolve conflict, and facilitate team work. By using humor in an authentic, timely manner, a leader's charisma transcends and captures an audience.

Humor, because it strengthens relationships and rapport, is seen as a positive trait in an effective leader.³⁴ Humor can be that powerful tool that leads you, the professional nurse, to success in leadership.²⁷

SHALLOW THOUGHTS

Oswald B. Shallow, was, in fact, not too shallow. He sums it up best:

- Fun creates enjoyment.
- Enjoyment invites participation.
- Participation focuses attention.
- Attention expands awareness.
- Awareness promotes insight.
- Insight generates knowledge.
- Knowledge facilitates action.
- Action yields results.^{12(p.31)}

As much fun as you may have, humor is not the panacea. Ethnic, gender, and racial humor should be avoided. There is no room for bias or prejudice or hate. Humor is, after all, a perceptual phenomenon. Humor and leadership are both relational. In our present world of chaos, uncertainty, and often fear, humor facilitates flexibility and resilience, qualities need for successful leadership. Laughter and common sense may be what leads one to salvation. Goodman offers a poignant quote by Tom Peters: "If it's not fun, you're wasting your life."⁶ Humor is infectious. Humor is free. Humor will lead us to more effective leadership.

Now, may you please just have a good laugh! **NL**

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