



Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

Mental Health Quick Notes

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Coping, with a Sense of Humor!

Look around you, and you will find that stress is everywhere. The holidays are history, and winter is upon us. We're working long hours at the office or at school, and we don't anticipate vacations anytime soon. How can we find anything humorous about this picture? And, then, when painful events occur in addition, we are convinced that there are no solutions at all!

It may seem, in the heat of the moment, that the last thing we'd be doing is laughing. Yet, humor has become a readily-accepted remedy that can reduce our stress, thereby, empowering us to seek solutions to life's problems.

Humor as a means of coping with stress has been acknowledged as far back as in Biblical times. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament comments that "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine." In the 13th and 14th centuries, physicians were known to recommend the use of humor in facilitating healing in their patients. Even then, it was apparent that humor and laughter served as a healthy distraction from pain and suffering for patients and families. In the 1930's, hospitals were using clowns to bring humor onto children's wards. In the 1970's, perhaps one of the most significant works that illustrated the value of humor in healing is Norman Cousins's book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, where he shared his personal experience of relying on humor and laughter to cope with his debilitating illness. This work was viewed to be groundbreaking in the development of modern-day humor therapy. Since that time, numerous studies have been conducted which repeatedly show the physiological benefits of using humor to cope with stress.

So, what have these studies found? Laughter reduces our level of serum cortisol, a hormone that is secreted initially by our adrenal gland and converted in our bloodstreams at times when we are under stress. Since stress is known to suppress our immune system, if we laugh more, we ultimately bolster the production of antibodies that fight infection and improving our immunity to illness. Our cardiovascular system is enhanced by laughter. Not only can our heart rate be regulated by a good laugh, but our blood vessels are more relaxed, thereby allowing greater flow of oxygen throughout our bodies and to our brains. Studies have also supported the value of laughter in successful management of physical pain and muscle tension.

Humor can significantly influence how we perceive our problems. When we experience difficulties in our lives, we are often emotionally distraught and paralyzed. If we become consumed with these emotional states, we may easily feel hopeless that anything can change. Such an attitude may lead to further despair and even depression. Through humor, we may find it possible to minimize the seriousness of our problems, thereby releasing emotional energy, creating greater hope for improvement, and enabling us to make decisions regarding our problems.

Humor can enhance our relationships by creating greater opportunity for emotional connections. When we are distressed, we are most inclined to

be sad, withdrawn, and detached from people. When this occurs, we are often depriving ourselves of relationships that could potentially be emotionally soothing to us. This point reminds me of a situation that occurred early in my career, when working on a hospital Oncology unit. A woman was terminally ill, and her entire family came to visit her. They brought photo albums and other sentimental artifacts with them, with intent to spend their time reminiscing about their lives together. Their laughter could be heard throughout the unit. They later explained to me that their laughter allowed them to feel closer to one another during that very difficult time.

When we are upset, it is so much easier to succumb to negative thinking than to attempt more optimistic perspectives. We may have to rely on our creativity and our self-determination to make this transition. This is where humor can be most helpful. Below are some examples of ways we can develop humor as a positive coping skill.

Create a "healthy" script for yourself that provides you with self-care steps that will lead you to feeling more light-hearted. Include activities that allow for humor.

Develop a list of humorous television shows, movies, and reading materials that might lighten your mood.

Explore in your community availability of groups or clubs that promote humor and laughter. Dance groups, laughter clubs, and comedy clubs can be great resources for you as you develop your script.

Seek out friends who embrace optimism. Plan activities that instill a sense of frivolity. Charades and karaoke can generate a lot of laughs!

So, the next time life's difficulties get the best of you, remember that you can choose to rely on humor to deal with your situation. Doing so may lead to easier resolution of problems, greater connection with relationships, better health, and a renewed sense of self-confidence.

Websites for more information:

www.worldlaughtertour.com; www.humormatters.com
www.humortherapy.com; www.joyfulaging.com/HumorTherapy.htm;
and, <http://holistic-online.com>

Submitted by Ann Vergales, MSW, LCSW

Therapy Groups at Riegler, Shienvold and Associates

Monday Evenings: High School Social Skills, 6:00-7:00 pm; Elementary Social Skills, 6:30-7:30pm; Adolescent Group; 6:30-8:00pm

Tuesday Evenings: Middle School Social Skills (Girls) 6:00-7:00pm; High School Social Skills 7:00-8:00pm

Wednesday Evenings: March 19th– April 23rd– Parenting Group

Sibling Rivalry

Question: I have three kids and they are constantly fighting with each other. Sometimes they even get so physical that I fear one will end up needing stitches. I try to treat them fairly but they are in constant competition with each other. I vacillate between trying to help them solve their disagreements and trying to allow them to work it out themselves. What should I do so that they don't hate each other when they get older?

Answer: Sibling rivalry can tire the best of parents. Considering that one of the main reasons many parents have second children is to give their first child a companion for life, sibling rivalry comes as an unwanted surprise. Most parents who have siblings remember the cruelty that can occur between them and their brothers and sisters. They also may remember that some of the time they even enjoyed the verbal and physical tussles that drove their parents up the wall. Most would say that it all worked out and siblings grow up and grow out of bickering, sometimes becoming the best of friends. Other siblings continue to carry on the bitterness between them into adulthood where it can affect future generations.

Your question actually addresses two separate parenting dilemmas. First, how do parents handle varying levels of conflict between their children? Secondly, how should the parent handle issues of fairness between their children?

A triage approach is most helpful in dealing with verbal and physical conflict between siblings. If you think about the conflict in terms of levels then...

Level I is verbal sparring. This occurs where the siblings are still under control. They are disagreeing but no one is in a helpless position. The parents response should be to ignore the bickering, think of something pleasurable, avoid eye contact and let them figure it out.

Level II is angry arguing. This can include name calling, put downs, lack of productive talk, but no physical engagement. Parent involvement is needed but is minimized. The parent should 1) acknowledge the anger of both siblings; 2) reflect back each child's point of view; 3) describe the problem while not giving your point of view or your opinion; 4) convey to the siblings your confidence in them solving the problem; and 5) leave the room.

Level III is physical engagement. This occurs when one or both of the siblings is hitting, wrestling or touching the other in a potentially harmful way. Parents should 1) first check to see if the fighting is play or real; 2) double check if each sibling is in agreement that the play is either play or real; 3) if it is agreed that it is play, leave the room; but 4) if it is real, move to Level IV.

Level IV is harmful, non-playful physical engagement. 1) The parent should become involved by describing to both what they see. ("You are hurting each other. We do not hurt each other.")

2) Separate the siblings. ("You each need some time apart. Hurry up to your rooms"); and, 3) If they are unable to solve the problem a family meeting should be called. The agenda should be:

- A. Have each child state the problem from their point of view while the parent writes it down.
 - B. Read the problems out loud.
 - C. Ask the siblings for possible solutions and record them.
 - D. Encourage them to devise a mutually agreed upon solution.
 - E. Plan a follow up meeting to determine if the solution was workable.
- See Faber and Mazlish (1987) for more ideas. Remember, the overall goal is to help the siblings to learn to negotiate with each other, not for the parent to solve the immediate problem or even to make them like each other. Learning to negotiate will assist the siblings in creating a close adult relationship as well as allow the parent to take a neutral stance with each sibling.

Fairness between siblings is a confounding concept for children as well as for parents. Fairness seems to be a right that we should all expect, but in reality we know that fairness can not occur all the time in families, as well as in schools or workplaces. But telling a child "Life is not fair" sounds callous and leaves the child without any hope of getting their needs met. In Loving Each One Best, author Nancy Salamin writes that "Fair is not equal". Giving to each child according to their need is actually more fair to everyone.

Salamin makes the following suggestions when parents are being grilled by their children about their perceived inequality of treatment.

- 1) Respond to the desire not the complaint ("So Johnny you are not happy that I sat with your brother at bedtime. You miss our time together.")
- 2) Give the child permission to disagree ("I understand that the extra time I gave your brother at bedtime may seem unfair to you.")
- 3) Enlist the child to help find out how to make it fair. ("Can you think of a way that I could spend some time with both of you before bedtime until your brother starts to go to bed better on his own?")
- 4) Know that equality is not in everyone's best interest. ("I know that you may not agree but your brother just needs a little more attention at bedtime right now. When I am finished I would be glad to tuck you in.")
- 5) Give up on fairness being a goal. At times, parents feel that they can somehow never disappoint their children. This keeps parents extra sensitive to their children's complaints, doesn't promote creative problem-solving and can actually cause more insecurity in your children.

Resources

Faber A. & Mazlish E. (1987). *Siblings without rivalry*. New York: Avon Books.
Salamin N. & Whitney C. (1996). *Loving each one best*. New York: Bantam Books.

Submitted by Tracy M. Richards, MSW, LCSW, LMFT

If you would like to learn more about sibling rivalry or other parenting issues join us for our six week parenting class starting March 19th. Call 540-1313 for more information.