

a lawyer afterward. In the sense of good sportsmanship, the walls of the ego are low if not completely dissolved after a practical joke.

Group Laughter = Laughter Yoga

In 1995, a small group of people gathered together in a park in Mumbai, India, under the direction of a physician named Mandin Kataria. They came to laugh, and then laugh some more. Dr. Kataria named this activity “laughter yoga,” and it spread like wildfire all over the globe, as described in his book *Laugh for No Reason*. What is laughter yoga? The simple explanation is that laughter yoga is prolonged voluntary laughter. In a typical session, people face each other, make eye contact, and engage in childlike behavior, causing smiles followed by laughter, and more laughter. Instructors begin sessions with stretching, clapping, and other body movements so participants will loosen up, and feel less self-conscious. Due to laughter’s infectious nature, people in the group continue laughing for quite some time (as can be seen in the YouTube video “Contagious subway laughter”). In formal laughter yoga sessions, the laughter usually lasts for about 20 minutes. Sessions often end with laughter meditation where participants lie down and contemplate something funny (Briar, 2016).

Humor Therapy as a Coping Technique

In simplest terms, the use of humor is a defense mechanism. Yet, unlike other conscious or unconscious defense strategies to protect the ego, such as rationalization and projection, humor seems to dissolve the walls of the ego rather than intensify them. Humor is the one defense mechanism that can increase pleasure and reduce pain at the same moment; it gives two effects for the price of one. Theorists agree that humor is an adaptive coping mechanism liberating the ego. A 1978 article in *Psychology Today* asserted that the average person laughs about fifteen times per day. Although this study has not been updated, that one might infer, given the state of the world today, that the quota of fifteen laughs per day is not being met. Humor’s greatest asset is to balance the emotional scale between positive and negative perceptions. Although the study of psychology has maintained a particular bent toward the darker side of the human psyche, even this is beginning to change, in both the focus of research and the application of psychotherapy. Many psychologists argue that the expression of laughter and smiling is nothing less than a catharsis of emotions, a physical release tied to

emotional thoughts. Overall, a well-intended catharsis can be quite healthy to the mind and body. But the complexity of humor hints of something more than just catharsis. In any event, mirth serves as a catalyst to unite mind, body, and spirit for total well-being.

It may seem intuitively obvious that humor can be used to diffuse stress, which is proven by the effectiveness of humor therapy. Over the years, a handful of studies have been conducted to measure the effects of humor (laughter) on stress, all with positive results. Miller and Fry (2009) studied the effect of mirthful laughter on the cardiovascular system and found that the release of beta-endorphins has a beneficial effect on the heart and vascular system. Bennett et al. (2003) investigated the effect of mirthful laughter on stress and natural killer cell activity. They concluded that positive emotions derived from laughter likely have a positive effect on the immune system and that laughter is a recommended cognitive-behavioral intervention. In a study to determine the efficacy of clown therapy (humor) on children undergoing surgery, Fernandes and Arriaga (2010) found that this type of humor not only helped the children cope better with anxiety, but also helped the parents.

Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor, noted in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* that humor was a saving grace among fellow prisoners in the shadows of death. Frankl wrote, “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.” Fear of death even has its own brand of mirth: black humor. People often joke about death and dying in an effort to ease their tension and perhaps better understand their own mortal plight. Hollywood often uses comic relief in horror movies (e.g., *28 Days Later* and *Scary Movie*) so that the audience isn’t so emotionally spent that they miss the film’s climactic scene. It is virtually impossible to be both angry and happy at the same time. Thus, if you can separate yourself from your aggression for a moment and see how silly and out of character prolonged anger really is, feelings of hostility dissipate, succumbing to a crescendo of mirth. For this reason, self-parody is thought to be the type of humor best suited to dispel anger.

In the book *The Healing Power of Humor*, Klein states that the use of humor gives a sense of power in the midst of chaos. Being able to make light of a stressful circumstance allows people to feel they have control over a situation. Humor becomes a weapon to disarm the cause of the stress response. Whereas some consider humor as a catalyst to tap the power of intelligence and emotional fortitude, others see it as a diversion tactic. In this case,

humor allows for an intermission in the cognitive war against stressors and a “cease-fire” of the stress response. The use of **humor therapy** in several hospital settings, as noted by Norman Cousins (1989) in his book *Head First*, helps to alleviate the sterile atmosphere these institutions are known for by allowing cancer patients to momentarily forget intravenous tubes, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, and bedpans.

In an attempt to better understand humor appreciation, *Psychology Today* conducted a survey of its readers in 1978. Thirty jokes were printed along with a questionnaire to gauge readers’ opinions of the jokes’ quality and laughability. More than 14,000 questionnaires were returned, and responses varied as much as the styles of jokes printed. Humor, like beauty, is a relative concept. The study concluded that sexual humor was the most popular topic of jest, with ethnic humor running a close second. Humor scholar Avner Ziv (1984) offers two reasons why sexual humor remains so popular. First, the craving for sexual humor compensates for the continuous desire to physically satisfy this basic human drive. Second, sexual humor may compensate for the disappointment of unmet sexual expectations.

Comic relief is currently used as a mode of therapy in many rehabilitation programs, including the treatment of physical trauma, alcoholism, and drug addiction. Psychologists who recognize the effectiveness of humor and utilize comic relief with their patients identify it as both an assessment tool, to indicate values, inner feelings, and meaning in life, and a therapeutic tool, to encourage a cathartic release of emotions. In psychotherapy, it is the patient’s own use of humor that is nurtured and encouraged; it is not initiated by the therapist. When patients begin to joke about their conditions or predicaments, it is acknowledged as a breakthrough in the emotional self-healing process. Once manifested, the practice of comic relief is encouraged during laughable moments. Humor has been found to be very effective in aiding patients through the transitions of the many stages of recovery.

Just like other coping techniques that can prove ineffective for resolution, the power of humor can be abused. Negative and offensive humor such as racial, ethnic, and sexist humor, as well as sarcasm in both its delivery and reception, do not lend themselves to satisfaction as coping mechanisms. Negative humor may inflate self-esteem, but it is a false inflation with no lasting value. Humor can also be used as a means of seeking approval by controlling other people’s attitudes and making them feel good. Used in this manner, humor takes on an

addictive quality, where each laugh becomes a “fix” leading to the next laugh. Thus, humor employed to win the approval of others takes on the quality of codependent behavior. In a study by Fisher and Fisher (1983) investigating the personalities of comedians, it was observed that many professional comedians and humorists were raised in less-than-enviable environments, including homes with alcoholic parents (Carol Burnett), orphanages (Charlie Chaplin, Art Buchwald), or broken families. In these cases, the use of humor often brought recognition, approval, and a feeling of self-validation. In her book *It’s Always Something*, comedian Gilda Radner described her use of comedy as an occasionally negative behavior: “Comedy is very controlling—you are making people laugh. You feel completely in control when you hear a wave of laughter coming back that you have caused. Probably that’s why people in comedy can be so neurotic and have so many problems. Sometimes we talk about it as a need to be loved, but I think that with me it was also a need to control.”

Comedian Ricky Gervais said it best when he said, “Humor guides you through the uncomfortable places. That is what humor is for—it gets us through the bad stuff.” As a coping technique, humor therapy has the immediate effect of increasing awareness of the cause of stress, which may then lead to the path of resolution. The greater the quantity of laughs and the quality of humor, the greater the sensation of pleasure. The long-term effects of comic relief as a coping mechanism at best remain a mystery, particularly because these have not been investigated to any great degree.

The Physiology of Laughter

Norman Cousins was right: Positive emotions augment the mind-body relationship. Laughter indeed influences the body’s physiology, resulting in restoration and possibly healing. In his own clinical tests, Cousins noted that several hours of laughter produced a small but significant decrease in the sedimentation rate of his blood, a predictor of inflammation or infection. In *Anatomy of an Illness*, Cousins (1976) wrote, “The drop itself (five points) was not substantial, but it was cumulative.” Once thought of

Humor therapy: A coping technique; the use of humor and comic relief as a means to relieve and reduce emotional stress by focusing on the funny, humorous, and positive aspects of life.



FIGURE 14.2 Creativity isn't a gift for a chosen few. It is a birthright for everyone. The renowned Blue Man Group show has been described as a visual and sensory extravaganza, just one example of people who have put their creative talents to use. You can, too, in a way that empowers you.

agree that, given the state of the world today and the direction in which it appears to be headed, the inner resource of creativity and the skills of creative problem solving will be the most important coping strategy in the coming decade.

Creativity can help make order out of chaos. It has the ability to make change palatable, even enjoyable. But to be creative takes the right attitude and a workable strategy. The ability to be creative resides within each and every one of us. Creativity is not a gift—it is a human birthright (**FIG. 14.2**). But like muscles that atrophy with disuse, creativity must be exercised to be effective. For those of you who have let your creative abilities slip into hibernation, here is a refresher course in the basics (**FIG. 14.3**).

Think Like da Vinci!

When lists are compiled of the world's most brilliant, creative minds, Leonardo da Vinci is found at the top of many lists. A painter, inventor, scientist, and philosopher, and a man many consider ahead of his time, da Vinci is revered as a genius by everyone, including Michael Gelb. So impressed was Gelb with da Vinci's creative genius that he pooled da Vinci's talents into a book, *How to Think Like da Vinci*, so that the rest of the world could rise a few steps in creative consciousness by emulating the Italian. Among the many tips in Gelb's book are the following:

1. Be curious about how things work; don't take everything for granted; ask questions.

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FIGURE 14.3 If you think you're not creative, you'll prove yourself right. You may not be a Steve Jobs, but everyone has the makings of a creative person, including you!

2. Make a habit of using all five of your senses to explore the world.
3. Be willing to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty.
4. Be willing to make mistakes and learn from them.

The Creative Process

The creative process is not complex, but it is wonderfully profound because there are so many possible ways to get from point A to point B. During the 1980s, intense interest in the human creative process developed. And like the goose that was cut open to find out how she laid the golden egg, the creative process has since been examined from every side, angle, and perspective and has been dissected and inspected. Unlike the goose, though, the process wasn't killed; instead, it has become well understood so that the creative muscle could flex with strength, power, and agility for the whim and benefit of those anxious to use it.

The creative process has two parts, which by no coincidence match the functions of the right and left hemispheres of the human brain. Torrance described the creative process as a combination of both divergent (expansive possibilities, right-brain) and convergent (collective synthesis, left-brain) thinking processes.

as only a coping technique, humor therapy now qualifies as a relaxation technique as well because of its physiological effects. Since this discovery, scientists have investigated the mysteries of the immune system and its relationship to the experience and expression of various emotions.

Dr. William Fry has devoted his life to the investigation of this mind-body relationship, and his work has yielded some fascinating results. Laughter appears to have both short-term and long-term effects on the body's major physiological systems. In the short term, a bout of laughter appears to initiate the stress response, with a slight increase in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and ventilations. But this is quickly followed by a rebound effect, where these parameters decrease to below previous resting levels. The overall effect is a profound level of homeostasis, much like that seen when progressive muscular relaxation is practiced. In the short term, laughter is credited with stabilizing blood pressure, "massaging" vital organs, stimulating circulation, facilitating digestion, and increasing oxygenated blood throughout the body. As Fry (1986) stated, "Laughter is clearly related to the reduction of stress and the physical symptoms related to stress."

Fry also conducted a series of studies on the composition of tears, those shed from pain and laughter as well as those artificially induced (e.g., from cutting onions). His research revealed that the constituents of emotional tearsdrops include a greater percentage of proteins and toxins than those produced artificially. Fry concluded that tears resulting from emotional responses serve to rid the body of stress-related toxins. Once again, this suggests that physical expressions—both laughter and crying—are natural and healthy to the well-being of the individual. As author Kurt Vonnegut once quipped (Klein, 1989), "Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward."

Perhaps more impressive than the short-term effects of laughter are its long-term effects. Through the new multidiscipline of PNI, researchers are now finding that the immune system plays an ever-increasing role in the mind-body relationship. In the words of Bernie Siegel (1986), "Thoughts are chemicals; they can either kill or cure." It appears that thoughts and perceptions are quickly transformed in the brain into chemical reactions that have impact throughout the body. Negative thoughts actually trigger the neural release of the stress hormones and suppress the immune system. Positive thoughts strengthen the integrity of the immune system

by inducing the release of special neuropeptides from the pituitary gland and other tissues located throughout the body. Neuropeptides—endorphins, interleukins, and interferons, to name a few—act as messenger molecules to various organs throughout the body.

Recent research has revealed that neuropeptides are also manufactured and released by the lymph nodes and other components of the immune system. Although several hundred neuropeptides have been discovered to date, scientists believe there may be many more acting in the interest of the body's immune system. In effect, laughter causes the body to produce its own painkillers. A study by David McClelland (McClelland and Kirshnit, 1989) measured changes in secretory immunoglobulin A (S-IgA), a salivary immune-defense agent, as a result of three emotional responses (humor, cynicism, and trust) elicited by three types of movies. Films of W. C. Fields and Mother Teresa produced a significant rise in S-IgA, while a Nazi propaganda film corresponded with a decrease. The long-term effects of humor and the positive emotions it produces may serve as one of the most beneficial health practices currently known to humanity. It would be unwise to suggest that humor-induced laughter can cure all ailments; this simply isn't true. But humor can "lighten the load," making the pain of some diseases more bearable. In some remarkable incidences, such as that reported by Norman Cousins, there may also be a true healing effect. There are currently too many missing pieces to complete the mind-body model to our full comprehension. But in the short time that humor therapy has been employed as a therapeutic agent in cancer wards, many patients have been given the opportunity to die with a smile instead of a lonely frown. And their loved ones have that fond memory to look back on.

Steps to Initiate Humor Therapy

Years ago, I designed and taught an experimental course entitled Humor and Health. At least once a week, students asked me how they could improve their sense of humor. From the volumes of resources I read in preparation for this course, I gleaned a number of ways to incorporate humor therapy into your arsenal of stress-management coping techniques. The best suggestions are as follows:

1. *Learn not to take life too seriously.* Chris Flanagan, R.N., is the former head nurse on the oncology unit at Shady Grove Adventist Hospital in Rockville,

Stress with a Human Face

It was a hot summer day, and the pool looked so inviting. Andrew was a bright, good-looking, athletic kid about to enter high school. That day, he and his younger brother were making the most of their summer freedom. The odds of what was about to happen were about as great as winning \$20 million in the lottery, except Andrew wasn't that lucky. For some reason no one seems able to explain, the angle at which he entered the deep water was just enough to snap his second vertebra and paralyze him from the neck down. Within the blink of an eye, *freedom* became a word he would cry over. And cry he did. In his therapy, he withdrew into his own world of darkness.

But one of his nurses had a natural funny bone that reverberated in his enthusiasm, and in time it became infectious. Soon Andrew asked to have some cartoon books

brought in to him, as well as some comedy videos. His bouts of depression became fewer and fewer. It seemed that with his change in attitude came a desire to leave the hospital and get back to as normal a life as could be expected.

If you could see Andrew today, you would be drawn immediately toward his smile, an attribute he cherishes. Oh, he still has his downtimes like the rest of us, but he will be the first to tell you of the healing power of humor and how it enabled him to cope with a stressor he would have never imagined facing that fine summer day. Currently, he is a self-proclaimed ambassador of humor therapy for the disabled, traveling around the country to share his stories of comic relief. The newest joys in his life are his wife, Lauren, and their daughter, Alexis.



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Maryland. Chris was awarded a grant from the Hyatt Foundation to start a Humor Cart on her cancer ward. Describing her work, Chris said, "We have a policy on my floor: Take your work seriously, but take yourself lightly." Most oncology wards have high turnover rates among nursing staff, but this philosophy has kept the nursing staff at Shady Grove intact for several years now.

In a nutshell, this attitude means seeing yourself as more than your work. Many times we place all our eggs in the career basket, and if we have a bad day at work, then our self-esteem withers away. See yourself as a whole person, with many aspects and talents, not just as a student, spouse, or professional. People who are able to laugh at their mistakes are considered more emotionally sound than those who fret at the slightest hint of imperfection. We start out in life as a square block. Through a multitude of life's experiences, we polish the rough edges and, by the end, finish up a gem.

2. Find one humorous thing a day. Humorous events and concepts are around us all the time. Life is full of ironies, incongruities, and just plain funny stuff. One's frame of mind is either receptive to these or simply dismisses them. If humor is a perception, as is currently believed, then the way to adopt comic relief as a coping mechanism is to

adopt this humorous frame of mind and make it your own (cognitive restructuring). It is commonly understood that if you make yourself consciously aware of and receptive to an idea, you will attract things to reinforce this perception many times over. Take planning a holiday, for example. You decide that this summer you want to go on a safari in Kenya. Once you commit yourself to the trip, you discover all kinds of people who have gone on safari with the same touring company, you start noticing ads in magazines and TV specials, and your mind becomes a magnet for news and ideas about Africa. The same can be done with humor, if you make yourself receptive to the lighter side of life. Tell yourself that you want to find one funny thing each day. You will find that instead of just one little tickle, you will discover a wealth of humorous experiences each and every day (BOX 13.4). In addition, allocate some fun time for each day, whether this means watching a funny YouTube video, reading comics, or going to your nearest comedy club.

It is important to remember, however, that there are times when it is inappropriate to laugh. People can interpret laughter as rude during serious moments, so use caution and judgment. On the other hand, life is full of *laughable moments*, when it is

You may have heard of the IQ test, but have you heard of the CQ test? CQ stands for creative intelligence. The test was designed by Paul Torrance in the 1950s and is still used today. Experts have noted that while IQ scores have increased, as a whole, over the years, CQ scores in America have decreased, leading many experts to suggest that American ingenuity is in dramatic decline. The blame seems to lie with too many hours in front of the television and video games and too much emphasis on school testing. Creativity is a skill, however, and skills can be learned and cultivated. Mark Runco, who directs the Torrance Center for Creativity and Talent Development at the University of Georgia, found that people who utilize their creative muscles with regard to problem solving have better relationships and, through the empowerment of creativity, are better able to handle stress when problems, big or small, arise (Bronson and Merryman, 2010; Blair, 2013).

Experts agree that a happy mind is a creative mind. The inability to deal with many problems is directly related to the inability to tap into and utilize creativity. It would be unfair to point the finger of blame solely at television or video games. Many critics believe that the American educational system continues to play a role in the decline of creative skills as well, by stifling the limits of imagination with conformity and critical-thinking skills (FIG. 14.1).

Moreover, American companies are now looking to hire Asians who are deemed more creative. The dominant style of thinking in the Western hemisphere is considered left-brained: linear, logical and rational, analytical, and judgmental. Left-brain modes of thinking are those most rewarded in both school and work environments. And this style of thinking has devalued recreational and play time.

Music. Poetry. Architecture. Fiction. Art. Pottery. Photography. If necessity is the mother of invention, then play can be said to assume the paternal role in the relationship. Creativity definitely has a playful, relaxed side to it. Playing is as much a part of human nature as is work, although playful behavior often atrophies as individuals make the transition from childhood to adulthood. But play, like the creativity it stimulates, can be nurtured. It has been said that more good ideas have arisen from play in garage and basement workshops than anywhere else, including the genesis of Xerox Corporation, Hewlett-Packard, and Apple Computers. Why is creativity so important? Why do corporate executives currently pay big bucks to bring in creative consultants to conduct workshops for their employees? The answer can be summed up in one word: change.

Change is inevitable. There is comfort in familiar routines, even if they are boring or stressful. Change meets resistance. Someone once said that the only person who likes change is a wet baby. But we live on a planet that travels at a rate of 66,000 miles per hour in its ellipse around the sun, with a population approaching 7 billion people. Given these dynamics alone, change is inevitable. In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote a book, *Future Shock*, describing the rapid changes the human race would encounter in the age of high technology by the end of the twentieth century and beyond. The book might have been titled *Future Stress* because, as Toffler indicated, the shock from rapid change can be very difficult to handle, and even more difficult to adapt to. Resistance to change seems to be a basic part of human nature. Change is often equated with chaos, and chaos spells stress. This is where the importance of creativity comes in. Futurists

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FIGURE 14.1

CHAPTER 14

Creative Problem Solving

Make it a practice to keep on the lookout for novel and interesting ideas that others have used successfully. Your idea only has to be original in its adaptation to the problem you are working on.

—Thomas Alva Edison

Light bulb. Bicycle. Printing press. Airplane. Cotton gin. Telephone. Laptop. iPad. Smartphone. Airbnb. Uber. Snapchat. Each one has become an item of necessity. Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention, and the human mind has risen to the occasion to create some fantastic inventions. There is no better time for necessity to bear the fruits of creativity than during times of frustration or crisis, when one needs to get from point A to point B. If you have been following any of the news headlines recently then you are well aware that the world has no shortage of problems today. Problem solving requires both a personal and planetary effort, giving credence to the expression, if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem (Meng, 2016).

At one time, the United States took pride in its American ingenuity. Young in age and pregnant with possibilities,

early generations of Americans made more improvements to the proverbial mouse trap than there are stars in the sky. Before the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was a productive society, the vast majority of its citizens making more than 70 percent of their household items themselves. As the country became a consumer society, however, more and more items were bought rather than made at home. The availability of several new inventions, like the washer and dryer, provided more leisure time. But with some of these inventions, lifestyles became very comfortable, and our collective creative skills became dull (Bronson and Merryman, 2010). With the advent of television, it is said, the creative American mind began showing signs of atrophy. People now take a passive role in the creative process, letting other people do the important creative problem solving.

Image: iStockphoto.com/Agency 333/Getty Stock Photo.

tion. But I do have a good car insurance policy. It's the law! So whenever I come down with the flu or start to bleed, I get in my car and drive around looking for an accident."

Three elderly men are at the doctor's office for a memory test. The doctor asks the first man, "What is three times three?" "274," came the reply. The doctor rolls his eyes and looks up at the ceiling, then says to the second man, "It's your turn. What is three times three?" "Tuesday," replies the second man. The doctor shakes his head sadly, then asks the third man, "Okay, your turn. What's three times three?" "Nine," says the third man. "That's great!" says the doctor. "How did you get that?" "Simple," he says, "just subtract 274 from Tuesday."

BOX 13.4 American Graffiti

A bunch of inmates gathered together every Friday afternoon after basketball practice to tell jokes and lift their spirits. Because they had been together so many years, rather than telling the actual joke, they assigned a number to each joke. Some guy would call out a number and the group would laugh, sometimes uncontrollably. One day a new inmate joined the group and after observing the process of joke telling, yelled out the number 9. No one laughed! After a few moments, one inmate muttered under his breath, "Jeez, some people just can't tell a joke."

Comedian's lament: "I don't have health insurance. Too expensive . . . and I was told I have a pre-existing condition."

quite acceptable to laugh and smile. When these times arise, capitalize on them and give yourself permission to let go and enjoy.

3. *Work to improve your imagination and creativity.* Creativity and humor are virtually inseparable. One has only to read headlines in supermarket tabloids to be reminded of this: "Termite Baby Eats Newlywed's House," "Bigfoot Seen Boarding a UFO," "Ski Mask Found on Surface of Mars," "Teenager Swallows Seed, Grows Palm Tree in Stomach." Lately, the creative "muscle" of many an American has atrophied as the adrenal glands have hypertrophied. Remember, the funny bone is just as susceptible to the general adaptation syndrome as is your adrenal gland. Start placing more emphasis on this target organ. It is commonly thought (and currently under study) that the use of one right-brain cognitive function enhances other functions of the same hemisphere. Imagination is a right-brain function. So is humor. They tend to feed off each other. So how does one augment imagination skills? Here are a few suggestions:

- a. *Read more books (fiction and nonfiction) and watch less television.*
- b. *Write a story, fable, or poem every now and then.*
- c. *Play with children.* Kids have wonderful imaginations. Maybe some of theirs will transfer to you by osmosis. Get closer to the earth. Observe the world from the eye level of a young child.

- d. *Go exploring.* Do something completely new and outrageous. Spend an afternoon in a hardware store, a museum of fine art, or a greenhouse. Get out of the comfortable rut you take refuge in and discover the world all over again.

- e. *Create something.* Pull out a cookbook and play "Wolfgang Puck." Make your own holiday presents this year. Invent something. Plant a garden. Bonsai a tree. Plan a trip around the world. Start a new hobby. Make your world a better place to live in.

4. *Start a joke/cartoon-of-the-week swap with a friend.* Use either Twitter, Facebook, or email so that you have something to look forward to, as well as making someone else's day with a chuckle.

5. *Learn to hyperexaggerate when describing a situation or story.* A comedian begins his monologue, "I knew a guy so ugly . . ." and a call comes back from the audience, "How ugly was he?" The comedian continues, "He was so ugly that if you were to look up the word *ugly* in the dictionary, you'd find his picture beside the definition." Exaggeration is a staple in virtually all comedians' joke repertoires. Comparisons are hilarious when they are exaggerated, and they can lighten up the description of the most stressful event. Ways to employ exaggeration include substitution of familiar words with others (e.g., since your last communiqué . . .) and use of figurative versus literal meanings (e.g., Why do

we drive on a parkway, and park on a driveway?). Creative use of metaphor is also a component of exaggeration for a good laugh, as in “My final in economics was worse than the Spanish Inquisition.”

6. **Build a humor library.** One of the essentials of coping is the use of available resources, which can include anything and everything. For humor therapy, resources involve the collection and use of books, CDs, and DVDs, and even hand buzzers and water guns. Designate a small corner of your home for a humor library and start to fill the shelves with a collection of every conceivable resource. Online streaming services have designated comedy sections; book stores have humor sections. No matter how often you have heard favorite CDs or read favorite books, they will still trigger a laugh. Don't let these resources collect dust, either. Make a habit of using them frequently.

Here is another idea: Start a **tickler notebook**. Buy a notebook and fill it with anything that puts a smile on your face (**BOX 13.5**). It can include, among other things, cartoons, favorite jokes, letters, funny photographs with your captions attached, favorite

newspaper columns, love poems, and a host of personal items (e.g., JPEGs/photographs, birthday cards, postcards) that make you feel good inside. When I assign the tickler notebook to my Humor and Health students, I give these instructions: “Imagine that one day you are diagnosed with a major illness (e.g., cancer). What humor time capsule can you assemble that upon review is bound to jack up your white blood cell count and put you on the road to recovery?” We all have down moments; this is perfectly natural. But an extended period of negative emotions is neither natural nor healthy. A tickler notebook is your personal humor prescription. And it is a growing organism; keep feeding and looking after it. Treat it well, and it will repay you a hundred times over.

7. **Find a host of varied humor venues.** Telling jokes is only a pebble of the mountain we call humor,

Tickler notebook: A personal collection of humorous items (e.g., cards, letters, JPEGs, jokes) to lighten your spirits.

BOX 13.5 Classic Jokes for Your Tickler Notebook

The Good Son

An old man lived alone in Idaho. He wanted to spade his potato garden, but it was very hard work. His only son, Bubba, who always helped him, was in prison for armed robbery. The old man wrote a letter to his son and mentioned his predicament:

Dear Bubba, I'm feeling pretty low because it looks like I won't be able to plant my potato garden this year. I've gotten too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me. Love, Dad.

A few days later, the old man received a letter from his son:

Dear Dad, For HEAVEN'S SAKE don't dig up the GARDEN! That's where I buried the GUNS and the MONEY! Love, Bubba.

At 4:00 A.M. the next day, a dozen FBI agents and local police officers showed up at the old man's house and dug up the entire area. After finding nothing, they apologized

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Courtesy of Patch Adams, M.D.



FIGURE 13.6 Patch Adams, M.D., has dedicated his career in the healing profession to making health care free and nonhierarchical for all people in a loving playful hospital. So to use humor as both a context for medical practice and for living life, he sees clowning as a trick to bring love close. Sharing humor seems to multiply the effects of laughter on well-being. Here Adams is with refugee children from the former Yugoslavia.

yet it is often the first thing we think of when we hear the word. But humor can be found in a multitude of venues, and the greater the access to a wide variety of humor media, the more advantageous this coping skill will be to deal with stress (**FIG. 13.6**). Humor venues include (but are not limited to) movies, theater, books, music, television, and live stand-up comedy. Humor and entertainment are also very compatible, if not always the same. The human mind likes to be entertained. Be on the lookout for ways to incorporate a wide variety of humor venues into your lifestyle.

8. *Improve your self-esteem.* It is hard to laugh when your self-esteem is deflated. At times, we all think we are fat, ugly, or stupid, and these characteristics constitute the punch line of many a joke. Low self-esteem derives from negative feedback we create in our own minds and come to believe. Remember Einstein's theory: Everything is relative. Separate fact from fiction. Give yourself positive affirmations every day, accentuate your good qualities, and learn to accept and love yourself and your human potential.

9. *Access your humor network.* Every now and then, there are bound to be times when you find yourself on the bottom rung of the emotional ladder. These moments should be recognized and, perhaps for a short time, even appreciated. But if, after an allocated period of "emotional downtime," you need some help getting up again, don't be afraid to call for help. We all know someone who can make us smile at the mere thought of his or her name. Call this person and ask for a "humor lift." It's the next best thing to being there. Conversely, it would be a good habit to minimize time spent with people who seem to live with black clouds over their heads; their pessimism is not conducive to enhancing your positive emotions. You don't have to go down with their ship.

Best Application of Comic Relief

Humor therapy integrates a little cognitive reappraisal, a little behavior modification, and a lot of fun. Employing comic relief as a coping style involves a conscious effort to

live life on the lighter side. Humor therapy does not try to eclipse the emotions associated with anger, fear, or sadness; it only attempts to neutralize them so that there is balance to your emotional responses. To best apply the use of humor in your life, take note of what sense of humor you best identify with and see if you can sharpen this edge a little. Also note which type of humor you find most gratifying and make a habit of employing more of it in the course of each day. In addition, monitor your high and low moods and their durations. If you find that the majority of your thoughts are negative, jaded, or laced with pessimism, try to balance these out with a greater

number of positive, even humorous, thoughts. No one who advocates humor therapy suggests that everybody should always be smiling. This is neither realistic nor healthy. Emotional well-being is the ability to feel and express the *full* range of human emotions, both positive and negative. The danger lies in the imbalance of positive and negative emotions because a preponderance of the latter will ultimately inflict bodily damage. Cousins highlighted humor as a symbol of all the positive emotions that can lend themselves to emotional well-being. Use humor therapy to find and maintain that balance of human emotions in your life.

SUMMARY

- Cousins legitimized the use of humor therapy when he treated himself with hours of funny films, which contributed to the remission of his potentially fatal disease. The premise of the therapy was that if negative thoughts can result in illness and disease, positive thoughts should enhance health. Cousins also believed that for his health to return he had to take personal responsibility for it.
- Greeks advocated humor therapy more than 2,000 years ago, as did ancient Africans, American Indians, and medieval European kings and queens. However, laughter was declared by the Puritans to be the work of the devil, and to laugh or smile was considered a sin.
- Humor is not a positive emotion, but it can elicit several positive emotions. Humor, like stress, is a perception.
- Humor is a very complex phenomenon. There are many types of humor, including parody, satire, slapstick, absurd/nonsense, black, irony, dry, and sarcasm. Self-parody is thought to be the best type considered a sin.

- of humor to reduce stress, whereas sarcasm is the worst.
- Just as there are different types of personalities, there are also several senses of humor, including conventional, life of the party, creative, and good sport.
- There is no one accepted reason why we laugh. Four theories attempt to explain the nature of the funny bone: superiority theory, incongruity (surprise) theory, release/relief theory, and divinity theory.
- Research investigating the psychoneuroimmunological effects of laughter have found that there is a strong relationship between good health and good humor. In essence, laughter helps restore physiological homeostasis.
- Studies also show that humor promotes mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.
- There are many ways to tickle your funny bone and augment your sense of humor, but like anything that is worth having, you have to work at it.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How is humor best defined?
2. List five different types of humor.
3. List the four theories of humor (why we smile/laugh). Each humor theory can be associated with one component of the wellness paradigm (mind, body, spirit, emotions). Which goes with which?

4. How do humor and laughter work together as a coping technique for stress?
5. List four ways to incorporate more humor and laughter into your life.

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