

Prescribing humour in Healthcare - Part I

by Joseph Agius

The most creative aspect of language is humour and it is one of the most important topics in the study of communication. The healing power of humour and laughter has been recorded and used throughout history. Humour is universal and there are claims of very beneficial effects from the use of positive feelings and emotions associated with laughter. Bertrand Russell notes that *"Laughter is the most inexpensive and most effective wonder drug. Laughter is a universal medicine"*. During last October and November, I had the opportunity and pleasure to deliver an eight week course on **'Prescribing Humor in Health Care: And I ain't kiddin!'** to health professionals. The course was very well organized and coordinated by the Malta Institute of Medical Education (MIME). Eighteen participants took part in course and professionals included doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, radiographers, psychotherapists, occupational therapists and speech language pathologists among others.

My position in the field of health and humour

Virus is a Latin word used by doctors to mean 'your guess is as good as mine' Bob Hope (1903-2003)

Why did I start with a joke? When Professor Peter Serracino Inglott was arguing why a book that he published **'Peopled Silence'**¹ began with a joke, he stated:

"It's not this joke that was important, but a joke; any joke really would have done. It's simply that I think that jokes are the paradigmatic example of language. The playful use of language is the most illuminating of all its many and various uses, because the most singular aspect of language - namely its creativity - is most manifest in wit and humor - in jokes".

So, this is serious business. Another 'why' question. Why am I interested in this area? In anything one does, the passion is highly essential. I happen to be passionate both in my work as a speech language pathologist/ fluency specialist, and in my interest in comedy. It just happened that both fields crossed paths.

What inspired me to research on the relationship between humour and therapy? I was inspired by a client of mine, Simon (not the real name to protect anonymity),

who was a lively young boy and who actively and joyfully participated in my group therapy sessions for school aged children who stutter. He was full of fun, wit, and always smiling - and he stuttered! He was an inspiration to his mates and also to speech pathology undergraduate students who were on observation placements in my clinic. They were impressed by his popularity and charm. Eight years later, now a young man aged 18 years, he was referred again for stuttering intervention. He presented as a serious young man, anxious, tense and without a smile. He claimed "I lost the young Simon". He had lost his zest for life, his wit and his excitement. If only our intervention could bring back the harmony, serenity and wit of the 'young Simon'.

This led me to study attitude changes towards communication when using creativity and humour during intervention. Findings from the study provided a framework for the 'Smart Intervention Strategy (SIS)' for school-age children who stutter. It includes components of creative expression through thinking skills and humour.

Humour and Health

Although humour seems to be an obviously important coping skill to get along our daily life, it has not always been considered important enough for researchers to study humour 'seriously'. It is only recently that psychologists and medical researchers began to systematically look at the ways in which humour contributes to physical and mental health.

However, we are often presented with media reports of scientific evidence claiming to demonstrate that humour and laughter are beneficial for various aspects of physical health. Martin² notes that over the past two decades, about 50 published articles have reported empirical investigations on the effects of humour and physical health. Such studies have investigated the effects of humour in various aspects of health such as immunity, pain tolerance, blood pressure, etc. The most consistent research support has been found for pain tolerance. There are several studies that report encouraging results, showing that after a laughter experience subjects are able to tolerate greater pain.

References

1. Serracino Inglott, P. (1995) Peopled Silence. Malta University Press, Malta. 2. Martin, R. (2007) The Psychology of Humor- An Integrative Approach. Academic Press.

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