

Great Lakes MHTTC

The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Behavioral Health and Medical Health

Mark Sanders, LCSW, CADC
Illinois State Program Manager,
Great Lakes ATTC, MHTTC, and PTTC



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor: What the Research Says

Laughter and Pain

Laughter releases **endorphins** in the brain that fight pain.



Source: Flickr Commons

Research: Laughter and the Immune System

1. Laughter **lowers cortisol levels** and protects our immune system



PURPOSE

(**Source:** Laughter and the Immune System: A Serious Approach, by Lee Berk, Ph. D and Stanley Tan, M.D.)

Source: Flickr Commons



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter and the Immune System:

2. Laughter increases **antibodies**, which fight infection.
3. Laughter **activates T-cells** and prepares the body to fight foreign substances.
4. Laughter increases **Natural Killer Cell** activity. Natural Killer Cells attack cancerous cells in the body.

(Source: *Laughter and the Immune System: A Serious Approach*, by Lee Berk, Ph. D and Stanley Tan, M.D.)



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter:

- Improves brain functioning and protects the heart
- Increases oxygen in the blood, which encourages healing
- Reduces stress, depression, anxiety, and fear
- Elevates mood and increases energy

Research: Laughter and Stress

“Laughter is God’s gift to human beings. You never see a cow laugh.” Joan Rivers

Laughter can decrease stress, lower blood pressure, and decrease muscle tension.

(**Source:** “Neuro Endocrine and Stress Hormone Changes During Mirthful Laughter.” American Journal of Medical Sciences, 298:390-396.)



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Research: Humor and Health

“In a study of terminally ill patients, 4 out of 5 said they wished people would stop being so glum and joke with them!”

“For every 10 minutes I laughed, I had two hours of pain free sleep.”

Norman Cousins



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Research: Humor and Longevity

1. Studies of cultures where people often live the longest indicates that high esteem for old people and humor are key ingredients of longevity.

(**Source:** Longevity: Fulfilling Our Biological Potential, by Kenneth Pelletier)

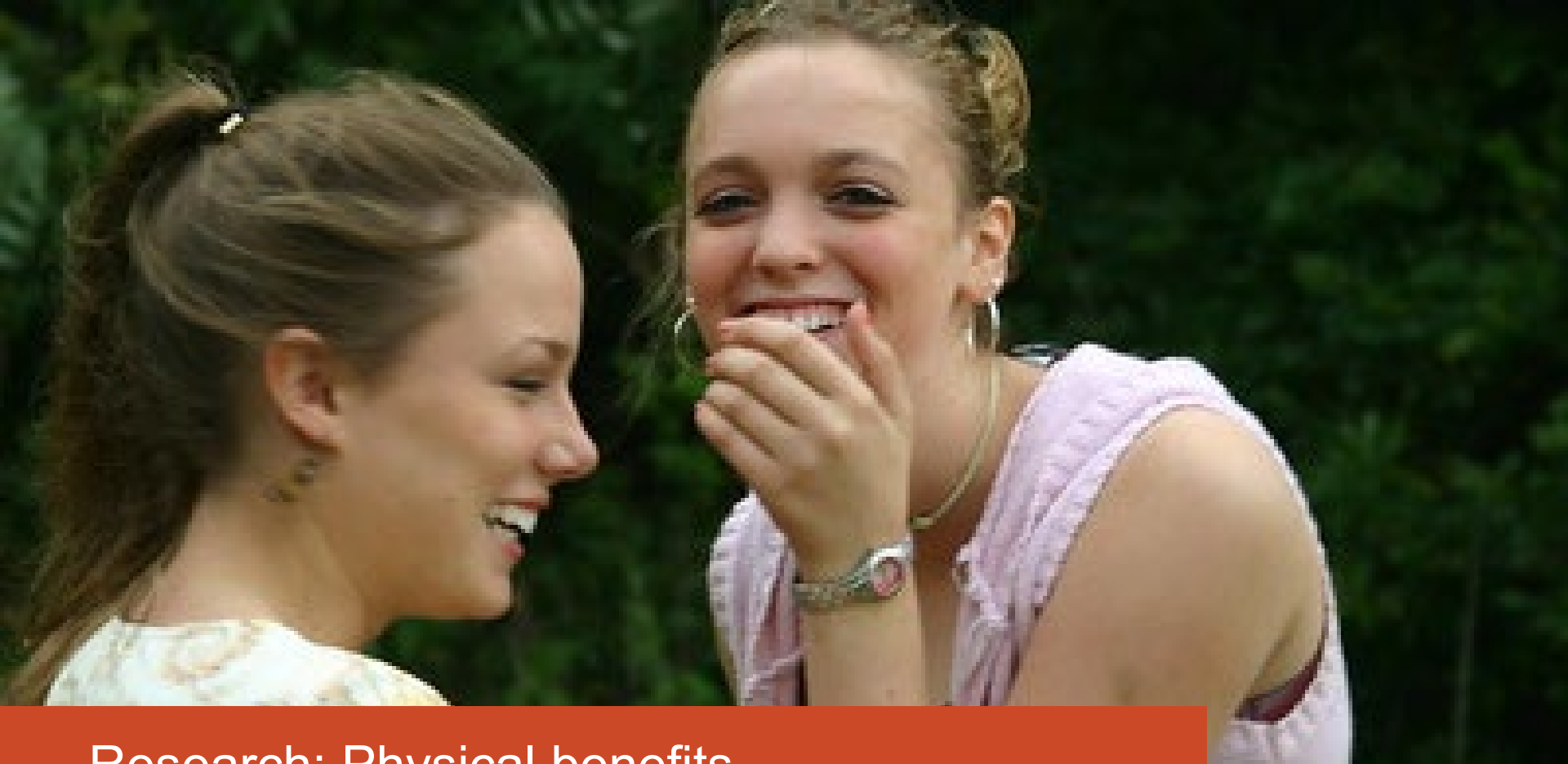


Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Source: Flickr Commons



Research: Physical benefits

2. Laughter gives the lungs a workout. When we laugh heartily, we take in six times more oxygen than when we are talking.



More Physical Benefits

3. When we laugh, the heart pumps more, increasing blood circulation. According to Dr. Fry, 20 seconds of hearty laughter gives the heart the same exercise as 3 minutes of rowing.

Laughter Benefits the Immune System

People who laugh a lot have higher levels of immunoglobulin-A in their throats and nasal passages and come down with fewer colds than people who seldom laugh. One study found that **new mothers** who laughed a lot had fewer upper respiratory infections, and their babies did, too.

(**Source:** *Humor Works*, by John Morreall, Ph. D.)



Benefits of Humor at Work

- Decreases stress by 39%
- Memory and recall is increased by 23% after watching a funny video at work
- Increases productivity x 2 after taking a humor break

Source: Association for Applied Therapeutic Humor





Laughter as Prevention of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Stages of Burnout

1. Honeymoon
2. Stagnation (Reality sets in)
3. Frustration
4. Apathy



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Compassion Fatigue

1. The stress of caring too much

Compassion fatigue differs from burnout in that burnout is caused by organizational stress and feeling ineffective and compassion fatigue is caused by caring.



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Compassion Fatigue, Continued

2. Emotional residue as a result of working with those who suffer
3. Secondary trauma – Secondary PTSD



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Compassion Fatigue Signs

Anger

Irritability

Tardiness

Loss of energy

Loss of hope

Loss of enthusiasm

Loss of idealism

Spiritual distress

A shift in one's world view



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Who is Vulnerable to Compassion Fatigue?

Counselors

Case
Managers

Recovery
Coaches

Individuals
with trauma
histories

Receptionists



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Who is Vulnerable?

- Paramedics
- Nurses
- Doctors
- Other hospital personnel



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Who Else is Vulnerable?

- Lawyers
- Police Officers
- Fire Fighters
- Clergy
- Military Personnel
- Criminal Justice Professionals



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter has been found to

- **Reduce** the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue

AND

- **Reduce** the impact of both occupational hazards



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter and Mental Health



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter and Mental Health:

1. Humor raises endorphine levels in the brain and reduces emotional pain.

(**Source**: Margaret Caudell, M.D., Ph.D., Mind Body Clinic – Boston)



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter and Mental Health...

2. It is also believed that humor activates neurochemicals in the brain, such as dopamine, and thus acts as an antidepressant.



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Laughter and Mental Health: Signs of Progress

3. The emergence of a sense of humor is one of the signs of mental health and progress in therapy.

(Source: *The Handbook of Humor*, by Krieger)



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Counselor Humor

“A sign that you enjoy life is a good sense of humor.”

Vanessa Williams Church

“A good sense of humor is one aspect of self-actualization.”

Abraham Maslow



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

A therapist is working in his basement...

When he notices a massive leak that could damage many expensive things. Desperate, he calls a plumber, who asks if it needs to be today, as he charges more on Sundays. The therapist explains that it can't wait, and the plumber comes right over. He takes a good, long look at the leak, pulls out a small wrench, and hits part of the pipe softly. The leak immediately stops. Satisfied, the plumber hands the therapist a bill for \$500.

“What?” shouts the therapist. “I’m a highly successful therapist and I don’t get \$500 for 5 minutes work!”



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

And the plumber says...

“Well, neither did I when I was a therapist.”



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Source: Flickr Commons

The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Counseling

A goal of counseling is to help clients feel better and act differently. Many models of counseling attempt to reach this goal by interventions that focus on one of four areas:

- feelings
- behavior
- thinking
- biochemistry

Humor can affect changes in **all four** of these areas.



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Counseling and Medicine:

1. It is the great equalizer.
2. It brings the idealized counselor or doctor back to life.
3. It can decrease resistance.
4. It can decrease cross-cultural tension.



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Counseling:

5. It can facilitate bonding.
6. It can facilitate self-disclosure – by creating a friendly environment.
7. It can allow some relief from pain.
8. It can allow clients or patients to change how they perceive a situation.



More Therapeutic Benefits of Humor in Counseling:

9. It can ease some of the anxiety caused by taboo subjects
10. It can provide insight.
11. It can decrease stress and anxiety.
12. It can make the therapeutic hour seem quicker.



Benefits of Laughter in Therapy:

13. Increases client or patient talking and eye contact
14. Decreases stigma
15. Helps clients or patients cope with loss and illness
16. Laughter is contagious. It facilitates bonding in group therapy
17. Laughter improves marriage and partnerships



“Someone asked me why I wear my wedding ring on the wrong hand.
It’s because I married the wrong person.”



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

“Marriage is not Heaven and it’s not hell. It’s purgatory”

Abraham Lincoln



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Utilizing Humor in Counseling With Clients

- Many counselors agree that the best humor by counselors is thoughtfully spontaneous, well timed, and takes into consideration who the client is.
- The goal should be to lessen client tension, increase client comfort, and/or to help the client gain insight.
- The primary purpose of humor is to benefit the client.



Utilizing Humor in Counseling

Approaches

1. Planned spontaneity
2. Exaggerations
3. Changing dialects



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Utilizing Humor in Counseling: “Funny Bone History”

4. Taking a “funny bone history”
 - A. What makes you laugh?
 - B. Do you like to tell jokes or hear jokes?
 - C. What kind of humor do you find unpleasant?
 - D. What kinds of things that make others laugh are not funny to you?
 - E. What are the funniest movies you have seen?
 - F. Who are your favorite comedians?



Utilizing Humor in Counseling With Clients:

- Reframes
- Offering a menu
- Stories
- Making fun of yourself



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Utilizing Humor in Counseling With Clients: Tools

9. The use of humor tools – movie clips, cartoons, anecdotes, signs, prompts, masks
10. Repeating a funny punch line



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Utilizing Humor in Counseling: More Tools

11. Pointing out absurdities and illogical reasoning
12. The use of art
13. Role plays
14. Group activities



Humor Homework



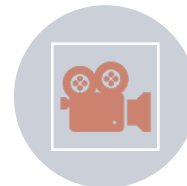
Share funny stuff
with others



Watch a comedy
show



Keep a humor
journal



Watch funny
movies



Spend time with
friends who make
you laugh



Schedule time to
be silly



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Humor Homework, Continued

- Read the funny pages
- Buy joke books!
- Host fun nights with friends
- Go to a “laughter yoga” class
- Make time for fun activities
- Watch Netflix comedy specials



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Humor in Groups

Auction

1. To be president
2. Peace of mind
3. A good pair of shoes
4. To smoke a joint
5. A gold mine
6. To influence the education of children
7. A new car
8. To snort cocaine



Utilizing Humor in Counseling and Medicine: **Ethics**

6 Types of Inappropriate Humor

1. Laughing at the client or patient
2. Cheap shots
3. Put downs
4. Sarcasm
5. Racist and sexist jokes
6. When there's not enough distance from the crisis.



When is Humor **Inappropriate?**

- When the client or patient is offended by it.
- When it makes the client or patient feel like they're not being taken seriously
- When it's used so often it's seen as boring
- When the counselor uses it to avoid dealing with the client's or patient's or their own anxiety
- When it is inappropriately timed



“When I Was A Kid”

1. My favorite game was
2. My favorite food was
3. My favorite cartoon character was
4. My favorite song was
5. My favorite toy was
6. My favorite holiday was
7. My favorite teacher was
8. My best friend was



Source: Flickr Commons

7 Cousins of Laughter

1. Love
2. Hope
3. Faith
4. Touch
5. Creativity
6. Good nutrition
7. Goals and a sense of purpose



Thank You!

Trainer's
Contact
Information

Mark Sanders
msanders5@wisc.edu
773-549-7914



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Follow Us On Social Media!



Photo: iStock

- Facebook and Twitter!
@GMhttc
- YouTube

www.mhttcnetwork.org/greatlakes



Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration