



Exploring the Land of Mirth and Funny; A Voyage Through the Interrelationships of Wit, Mirth, and Laughter

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Originally published in *Laugh It Up*, Publication of the American Association for Therapeutic Humor, July/August 1994, p. 3.

It has been said that humor consists of wit (a thought-oriented experience), mirth (an emotionally-oriented experience), and laughter (a physiologically-oriented experience). And while each can be experienced independently of the others, when experienced together they synergistically create the witty/mirthful/“laughful” experience we refer to simply as humor.

Wit as a Thought-Oriented Experience

Wit changes how we cognitively process, appreciate, or “think” about life’s events and situations. Jokes are a classic example of how wit changes thinking. In a joke we are guided down one path only to be tracked over onto an alternative path. It is the discrepancy and even trickery of the alternative path—the punch line—that we experience as humorous. Such discrepancy and trickery teaches us to seek alternative explanations for events, which is one process of healthy thinking and creative problem solving. Norman Cousins once called this process “trainwrecks of the mind,” meaning that wit causes us to track over to other thinking patterns and perspectives. Alternative thinking processes (stimulated by wit) provide perspective and can reduce negative thinking common during depression, anxiety, and anger.

Mirth as an Emotional Experience

Humor changes how we feel emotionally by helping us to experience mirth. While labeling it humor, Mark Twain once described the mirthful experience in the following way:

Humor [mirth] is the great thing, the saving thing, after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.

Mirth can be a powerful experience for eliminating unhealthy feelings. We have all felt the joy (mirth) of a humorous experience and know the pleasure associated with that feeling. As we experience the emotional sensation of mirth, other feelings such as depression, anxiety, and anger are, at least temporarily, dissolved.

We cannot experience mirth and at the same time experience such powerful emotions as irritation, resentment, or distress. In fact, the experience of mirth not only replaces these emotions, but as Twain so astutely expressed, mirth transforms these emotions into a “sunny spirit” such as the lighter experience of joy, pleasure, happiness, etc.

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Laughter changes how we feel physically, and it affects our biochemistry. We are all familiar with the feeling of “lightness” that follows deep belly laughter. Norman Cousins reported that 10 to 20 minutes of deep belly laughter gave him hours free from the pain of his debilitating disease. Laughter has been described as a “jogging of the internal organs.” The physiological benefits of laughter—such as an increase in certain antibodies, decrease in levels of stress hormones, and a decrease in heart rate of “heavy laughs”—have been presented in numerous research studies. Laughter is also believed to stimulate the muscular and skeletal systems. Laughter serves as the physiological/biochemical element of humor.

The “humor experience” is a synergistic interrelationship of the effects of humor as it changes cognition, emotion, and physiology. People experience humor in different ways. For example, some people are more likely to *appreciate* wit (cognitive) without experiencing mirth or laughter. These people are likely to say they understand and like the joke but do not laugh or experience the mirth.

Others are more likely to experience mirth (emotional) without a cognitive or physiological reaction. Children, while engaging in what adults view as “silly behavior,” may be experiencing mirth but not appreciating wit, and they may not even be laughing (although they frequently are).

We also know that we can experience laughter that is independent of wit or mirth. Spontaneous laughter or laughter contagion are examples. Even laughter that is triggered during anxiety may be an example of laughter stimulated without wit or mirth. The fullest and most powerful humor experience, however, is one when all three components are activated simultaneously.

While each of us probably has a primary humor receptor (cognitive, emotional, or physiological)—or primary way of processing humor (e.g., cognitively, emotionally, physiologically)—we are likely to use all three avenues in varying amounts at varying times. The more that we can train ourselves to *appreciate* (cognitive), *feel* (mirth) and *physically experience* (laugh), the more potent and healthful the humorous experience will become for us.

