



Revisiting the Land of the Mirth and Funny

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This article is an update to my original article "***Exploring the Land of Mirth and Funny***" (1994) and my detailed chapter "***Integrating Humor into Psychotherapy***" (Play Therapy with Adults, 2002). In this article, I have added a brief discussion about the universal triggers that activate one's sense of humor. This article also reflects updated thinking on the therapeutic experience of humor. In the original article, I discussed *laughter* as a physiological reaction to humor, *mirth* as an emotional reaction, and *wit* as cognitive reaction.

Over the years my thinking has shifted. Since the emotional experience of mirth and the cognitive experience of wit also activate biochemical/physiological changes, I have revised the model to present laughter as a physical experience rather than physiological, and based on the research on emotion and cognition, now present laughter, mirth and wit as all activating physiological changes. It is these physiological changes that are primarily cited as the therapeutic benefits of humor.

To understand the therapeutic nature of humor, we must understand that the

experience of humor involves a stimulus (the presentation of one of the universal triggers) and a reaction (laughter, mirth and/or wit). While each individual's sense of humor is unique, it is also true that there are universal triggers that activate a humorous response. The universal triggers that engage one's sense of humor include 1) an external stimulus that is perceived as incongruent, absurd, or ludicrous; 2) an event that is initially perceived as dangerous but quickly reevaluated as non-threatening (Candid Camera stunts illustrate such an event); 3) a sudden surprise; 4) a situation where one "gets it," and 5) a traumatic event which in the future is reevaluated with perspective.

The experience of humor begins with the presentation of one of the universal triggers. Once a trigger is perceived (consciously or unconsciously) as a humorous event, then the internal experience of laughter, mirth, and/or wit is activated. The therapeutic benefits of humor are a result of 1) the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes and 2) the physiological changes that occur when one's funny bone is stimulated.

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Laughter:

The Physical Benefit of Humor

The perception of an event as humorous may stimulate laughter. Laughter is a *physical* experience. When we laugh our internal systems are engaged in a *physical* way—our muscles contract, our blood flow increases, and our respiration increases. While laughter has been popularized as the primary (and even exclusive) therapeutic benefit of humor, it is only one therapeutic benefit of humor—the physical one.

Mirth: The Emotional Benefit of Humor

Humor also stimulates mirth—the *emotional* experience of humor. When we experience mirth, we feel emotional pleasure such as joy and delight. Mirth provides two therapeutic functions. First, when we experience mirth, distressing emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, guilt, and resentment dissolve. Even if these emotions only dissolve momentarily, the experience of mirth relieves emotional distress and teaches us that we have an ability to manage emotional discomfort. Second, mirth is a powerful, emotionally uplifting experience that activates joy, happiness, and pleasure. Modern research is uncovering the therapeutic benefits from the experience of pleasurable events.

Therefore, mirth serves two therapeutic functions. It dissolves emotional distress, and it activates emotional pleasure. Both of these functions have therapeutic value. While the majority of the research on the therapeutic benefits of *humor* has focused on the physical experience of laughter and the resulting biochemical changes, and the research on mirth is

virtually non-existent, we can infer the therapeutic benefit of mirth (emotional and biochemical) in the following way. There is an abundance of research that indicates that distressing emotions such as anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, and resentment are related to a wide range of health issues. For example, chronic anger and chronic depression have been linked to heart disease, and chronic anxiety has been linked to an assortment of gastrointestinal problems such as ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome. Since distressing emotions are clearly linked to ill health, and we know that the experience of mirth dissolves distressing emotions, we can conclude that the enduring or persistent experience of mirth offers a health benefit by reducing the potency of distressing emotions, thus reducing the negative biochemical outcomes resulting from chronic emotional distress.

Wit: The Cognitive Benefit of Humor

The third therapeutic experience of humor is, what I label, wit. Wit is the cognitive or thought oriented reaction to humorous stimuli. When we experience a humorous event, in addition to potentially laughing or experiencing mirth, we are likely to shift our perspective. Wit is activated when we perceive the universal trigger of incongruity or “getting it.” It is the making sense of the incongruity or “getting it” that creates a shift in our thought process and activates wit. The experience of wit challenges and changes our thoughts and even our deeper beliefs. We frequently see such a shift when humor (wit) functions to add perspective to life or to diffuse traumatic events. In this way wit reduces “negative thinking” patterns. One of the prime functions of therapeutic humor is to shift

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our perspective helping us to see the world through different eyes—eyes that are less negative and distorted. Examples of humor shifting negative thinking include Ziggy and Peanuts cartoons that place the world in perspective and in that way offer therapeutic benefits.

In addition to the research indicating that distressing emotions are linked to ill health, there is an abundance of research indicating that negative thinking patterns also lead to ill health. When people maintain negative attitudes and think negatively about themselves, about their world, or about their future they are likely to develop an assortment of health issues which may be psychological or physical. The experience of wit shifts thinking from the negative. While we do not have direct evidence indicating that the shift from negative thinking (through the experience of humor) leads to a positive outcome, we can conclude that since negative thinking leads to ill health, and the experience of humor shifts negative thinking, then the experience of humor (by shifting negative thinking) clearly has a positive health impact.

In addition to the research on negative thinking, a new area of psychology called positive psychology has discovered that positive or optimistic thinking has a beneficial health impact. People who are optimistic are healthier than those individuals who view the world negatively. Therefore, since humor shifts perspective and attitude from the negative to the positive, we can infer that indeed it will have a beneficial health impact.

Therapeutic Benefits of Humor

Among the many questions that remain in terms of the therapeutic benefits of humor, is the question of the mechanism of how laughter, mirth, and wit actually generate therapeutic benefits. It seems reasonable that these benefits result from the biochemical changes that occur with laughter, mirth, and wit. Fortunately, we have some research in this area. While I am not going to review the details of the physiological reactions to laughter, mirth, and wit, the research does suggest that there are specific biochemical changes that occur with laughter. These biochemical changes include a reduction in serum cortisol (a hormone secreted when we are experiencing stress), an increase in specific antibodies, an increase in tolerance to pain, and an increase in blood flow.

While there is no research that directly links mirth or wit to a therapeutic benefit, based on the extensive research which clearly demonstrates that both distressing emotions and negative thinking result in ill health, and mirth and wit shift distressing emotions and negative thinking, we can reasonably conclude that mirth and wit offer therapeutic benefits.

Conclusion

Because of the powerful impact distressing emotion and negative thinking have on health, it is my belief that future research on the therapeutic value of humor will discover that the emotional experience of mirth and the cognitive experience of wit have major therapeutic value. While historically research has focused on laughter's therapeutic benefits, it is my belief that the

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therapeutic benefits of mirth (emotional), and wit (cognitive) will be at least as powerful if not more so. I base this belief on the abundance of research that concludes that distressing emotions and negative thought patterns lead to ill health. The experience of humor is a powerful intervention to counteract the distressing emotion and negative thinking.

In summary, the experience of humor is a perceived event activated by the presentation of one of the universal triggers of humor. Based on the perception of an event as humorous, one or more of three internal systems (laughter -physical, mirth-emotional, and/or wit-cognitive) is activated. The activation of laughter, mirth, and/or wit creates biochemical changes. While we are only beginning to understand the biochemical changes as a result of humor activating wit, mirth, and/or laughter, future research is likely to discover that there are multiple therapeutic benefits that are triggered by humorous events. Note that in this article I have implied that the physical experience of laughter, the emotional experience of mirth, and the cognitive experience of wit are independent entities. It is likely, although difficult to measure, that these three experiences interact with, and stimulate, each other. A humorous event that results in laughter may also trigger mirth and/or wit. The experiences of and interactions of wit, mirth, and laughter and the resulting biochemical reactions remain to be explored. I'm optimistic that in the next 5 to 10 years, we will discover that the therapeutic nature of humor far exceeds the therapeutic value of laughter alone and includes powerful emotional and cognitive shifts as suggested in this article.

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