



How to be seriously funny

[Mark Tyrrell](#)

I don't know about you, but sometimes people make you feel defensive (or maybe it's me that makes me feel defensive). I was speaking to an audience when a man interrupted my outpourings with the line: "This is all well and good – but where's your research to back it up?" All the research was included in the notes he'd already been given. Fortunately, I was 'in flow', so my response came instantly from my creative unconscious mind. More on that story later...

Humour is a serious business

It's a mistake to dismiss humour. Humour has always been banned under dictatorships; comedians are seen as a threat. Why? Because humour can illuminate truths, break through the constraints of narrow thinking and puncture self-importance. Humour shows we are not afraid. Tyrants hate to be laughed at and they certainly don't laugh at themselves. But the really surprising truth is that we all live under dictatorships.

Human beings construct (and then have to live under) their own personal psychological dictatorships. These personal restrictive 'prisons' are built on a solid foundation of rigid rules and assumptions of right and wrong, with walls of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' and 'mustn'ts', strong bars of perfectionism, unbreakable locks of defeatism, and guards of arrogance on constant duty to 'be right'. And that arrogance can extend to 'being right' that one is totally inferior to other people. Or that life is bad.

The right humour applied at the right time by the right person can work as an escape hatch from stifling narrow seriousness and restricted 'one track' perception. And laughter can prolong life.

Laughing your way to health

We are all increasingly aware of the mental and physical health benefits of regular laughter. Many studies highlight that belly laughter is a great fun workout, laughter reduces stress hormones, relieves pain, [relaxes](#) us and produces endorphins – the natural feel-good hormones. Laughing regularly can ward off depression and help you sleep better and generally enjoy life more. We even call people who make us laugh 'a real tonic'.

I want to focus on how humour frees up restricted and limiting thinking, on how the mental shackles and restraints we bind ourselves in can be loosened – and sometimes entirely discarded – through the use of humour. I also want to consider why all good teachers, therapists and leaders have instinctively known how to use humour (and, of course, when not to use it!).

Here's how humour can be used as a tool to deflate pomposity...

Appreciating the attempt

A presenter friend of mine was once talking to an audience of about a hundred people. A woman in the audience suddenly launched into a diatribe on the inadequacies of men, the superiority of women in all things, and how women had to suffer the 'pathetic efforts of men'. She then sat back with her arms crossed, looking expectantly at my friend (who wasn't even talking on this subject) and concluded with the immortal words: "I really do try not to be patronizing to men!"

He looked at her for a second then said: "Well, I'm sure we all appreciate the attempt, madam!" You could have heard a pin drop as the assembled listeners processed his remark. The roar of laughter that followed was deafening. The woman's pomposity melted and she too began to laugh.

Now how could he have handled this?

A less experienced speaker might have attempted to placate the woman, or to defend his gender from this over simplified 'attack' He could have indignantly stated that he *did* find her tone patronizing, and so on. But with just five well chosen words my friend confounded the expectations of all those present when he commented on her *attitude* rather than the *content* of her words. She had said she tried not to be patronizing and he implied that she *was* patronizing by calling her effort to be un-patronizing an 'attempt'. Perhaps more than anything else he gave her the opportunity to view herself objectively, 'from the outside'. She later privately apologized to him and admitted she had been 'over the top'. I don't subscribe to the idea that education should always be 'fun', just as I don't think all nutrition should have added artificial sweetener, but humour can produce the right mind state to receive a new perspective and a useful memory peg to attach learnings to. How does it do this?

Humour as a learning tool

Humour confounds expectations, applies a mild shock and therefore forces people to think and examine assumptions and limited thinking. A good therapist will be flexible enough to know how to use humour, when and to what extent. Over-seriousness is a microscope that narrows focus and enlarges detail at the expense of the bigger picture. Serious things can be appreciated in non-serious ways. Consider a recent arrival on the dictatorship scene: political correctness.

In our politically correct times humour is seen as dangerous because it may 'offend'. We have been in danger of saying: "Are we *allowed* to be laughing about this?" When we have to worry that something is or is not permissible, we are back in dictatorship mentality. Things are 'correct' or not depending on context – not as a universally applied set of restrictive rules implemented by someone else.

Real humour, of course, won't condemn whole races or religions or even individuals. But it will illuminate hidden pomposity and restricted vision in whatever context it is found. Real humour is universal and knows no boundaries. My favourite type of humour is off the cuff and also 'makes a statement' and gives unexpected and widening perspectives. I love it when people produce their own spontaneous and creative humour, which is why pre-packaged jokes thought up by others don't always do it for me.

The art of not being funny

Some people try to be funny by telling jokes. This can be funny, but really it's a rather lazy way of going about it, because the jokes are borrowed. Such jokes are also often divorced from the situation or context the joke-teller is in at the time, and this can jar with the other people present. Real humour is inclusive and comes 'organically' from the situation.

A good humorist will strengthen rapport with others by injecting humour into the situation or conversation as they are *all* experiencing it, perhaps by commenting on it in a fresh way.

They will not just commandeer the conversation and take off at unrelated tangents by artificially introducing 'a joke'.

If you want to be a good humorist, you will ensure that your humour enters into the flow of conversation that the other person is already included in and so *strengthens* their feeling of inclusion. This fosters real connection with people.

Laughter and luck

You laugh at something because it is unexpected, and this very unexpectedness can totally alter your take on something for ever after – this is why humour can be so therapeutic. When something makes us see a part of reality in a fresh way it is called a 're-frame'. The injection of humour at the right time, in the right way, delivers a powerful re-frame.

A [depressed](#) man in his sixties came to see me. His right leg had been amputated after an accident and he was having a hard time adjusting. He talked at great length about his life and particularly about his ex-wife and how difficult he'd found her to live with. At one point he mentioned that she had been married twice before, but that both her former husbands had died while married to her.

I had established good rapport with this man, and had sensed that, although I hadn't seen him laugh in more than twelve hours of [therapy](#), he did have a sense of humour. Tentatively, I ventured: "So... her previous two husbands lost their lives... and you lost your leg!"

He looked at me, stunned. I became aware of a slow rumble coming from his chest (no humour is without risk!). Slowly he began to laugh uncontrollably. Eventually, with tears of laughter in his eyes, he said: "Yes, I was the lucky one! I was the one that got away!"

When politicians were funny

When a man asked Abraham Lincoln how long a man's legs should be, he famously replied: "Just long enough to reach the ground!" This kind of humour applies a mild 'learning shock' and asks politely: "What kind of question is that?" The retort is still connected to the topic instigated by the other person, and in that way retains the rapport on some level. The worst kind of 'humorist' (from my restricted view point) is the person who hails you with: "Wait till you hear this, it will make you scream with laughter!" Humour is funny and an opportunity to learn because it is *unexpected*, and who wants to be pressured into finding something funny ahead of time? It's better when you don't think something is going to be funny and then it is.

But humour doesn't have to make you laugh to widen your perspective.

'Funny' is in the eye of the beholder

What's funny differs from person to person, but sometimes it doesn't matter if it actually makes you laugh just as long as it gently nudges you into a wider vision of the situation. The best stand ups will make you think as well as laugh – or at least one of the two!

When you use humour, you indicate that you are relaxed enough to think, that you have an opinion all your own and that you are mentally nimble.

Oh, and in response to the man who sternly asked me what my research was, I replied: "Now you're making me feel like a used car salesman!"

That was for the interruption. After that he did get his references.

Read article online: [How to be seriously funny](#)