

# What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Laughter

When Martha first became field director, she had a mixture of emotions toward Peter. Martha was annoyed when Peter cracked jokes during field meetings, genuinely liked him because he was so funny, and envied him because he was so popular among other cross-cultural workers.

As time went on she came to really appreciate Peter for what he did. Martha realized that she was often so intent on getting the job done that she needed someone like Peter to temper her intensity at times. She came to value his jokes and no longer envied his popularity.

What Martha did not realize was that Peter and people like him are more than just a help to leaders in maintaining team unity, they are valuable in many other ways including physical health, mental health, and social relationships in general.

## Physical Health

People often say that laughter is the best medicine, and that is often literally the case. Laughter brings healing and renewal through the following physical changes.

- It relaxes muscles all over the body, and that relaxation may last for up to an hour.
- It lowers stress hormones which have an effect on the whole body.
- It releases endorphins which make people feel good and may even relieve pain.
- It boosts the immune system making it less likely that individuals will become ill.

- Although blood pressure may rise briefly during laughter, such laughter lowers blood pressure overall.
- It helps people relax and fall asleep.
- It has many of the effects of exercise (although it cannot replace exercise).

## Mental Health

Laughter is good for mind as well as body. Here are some mental health benefits.

- It makes individuals feel good so they can keep an optimistic outlook.
- It reduces anxiety, fear, anger, and sadness.
- It helps people relax so they can stay focused to complete tasks.
- It allows individuals to see things from a more realistic point of view.
- It creates psychological distance to keep people from feeling overwhelmed.

## Social Relationships

Shared laughter is good medicine for social relationships. It is a requirement for strong relationships and has the following effects.

- It produces positive feelings to strengthen emotional connections.
- It produces a bond which protects against stress and disagreements.
- It allows individuals to lower their defensiveness so that they can disregard criticisms and doubts.
- It lowers inhibitions so that people stop holding back and avoiding others.
- It lets individuals be more spontaneous and express their true feelings.

In general mutual laughter heals resentments and hurts helping to unite people

during difficult times and see each other's points of view.

## Laughter in the Bible

Not all laughter is good for us. The Bible mentions two kinds. Basically "laughing at" someone is bad, and "laughing with" someone is good. Laughing at someone in scorn or ridicule is not good medicine. Here are some examples.

- They will laugh at him saying... (Psalm 52:6).
- I have become a laughingstock to my friends (Job 12:4).
- But they laughed at him (Matthew 9:24).
- Here are some examples of laughter as good medicine.
- He will fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy (Job 8:21).
- A feast is made for laughter (Ecclesiastes 10:19).
- Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with shouts of joy (Psalm 126:2).

The same event may produce both kinds of laughter in the same people at different times. This was the case with Abraham and Sarah in events surrounding the birth of Isaac. When God told them they would have a child, both laughed in derision.

- Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself... (Genesis 17:17).
- Sarah laughed to herself as she thought about it (Genesis 18:12).
- God was not pleased with their laughter and rebuked them—and then rebuked Sarah's lie about it (Genesis 18:13-15).

After Isaac was born, Sarah laughed, but this time it was healthy laughter.

- Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).
- At God's command, Abraham gave the name Isaac (Laughter) to the son Sarah had borne (Genesis 17:19 and Genesis 21:3).

Who says that God has no sense of humor?

## Jesus' Humor

Asking parents to name their child "Laughter" after they laughed in derision when told they would have a baby shows God's sense of humor. Likewise, we find Jesus' sense of humor as he talked to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). Here are the events from their point of view.

- They were walking along the road when a man they did not recognize joined them (vv15-16).
- Jesus asked them what they were talking about, as if he did not know (v 17).
- One of them asked Jesus if he knew what had happened in Jerusalem (v18).
- Jesus asked, "What things?" as if he did not know (v19).
- They told him about the crucifixion, as well as their dashed hopes, and confusion (vv19-24).
- Jesus called them foolish, rebuked them, and asked if Christ had to suffer (vv 25-26).
- Then he explained prophetic Scriptures, still not revealing who he was (v 27).
- When they neared home, he pretended he was going on, still not telling (v28).
- They urged him to stay with them, so he did, still not telling (v29).

- As they ate with him, he gave thanks and broke bread—and suddenly they recognized him! (vv30-31).
- Then he disappeared! (v31).

Of course, then they remembered cues that should have let them know who he was. Imagine yourself in Jesus place watching their puzzlement and laughing inside!

## Getting Started

Anyone can get in on laughter which is free, fun, and easy to use. Living in another culture provides many things to laugh about. Here are some tips on getting started.

- Count your blessings. It is harder to begin laughing when thinking about things that make you sad, so literally write down a list of things you are thankful for, such as medicines that prevent or cure diseases.
- Smile at people. Like laughter, smiling is contagious in most cultures. People will often return your smile, and that may lead to laughter.
- Laugh at yourself. Stop taking yourself so seriously. Instead of trying to hide your embarrassing moments, share them with others so that everyone, colleagues, nationals and even you can get a good laugh.
- Move toward laughter. Sometimes laughter is the result of an “inside” joke for a small group, but more often it is “public,” and people enjoy telling it again. If you do not understand, ask, “What’s so funny?” Not understanding humor often occurs before you know the culture well.
- Keep things in perspective. We cannot control many things that happen to us, especially the actions of other people toward us. Rather than getting angry,

laugh about those absurdities in life in both your passport and host cultures.

- Read the comics. I enjoy “Pickles” because it pokes fun at people my age. The cover on one of the books of those comic strips on our table says, “The older I get, the better I was.
- Watch a funny TV show that you like. “Americas Funniest Videos” makes me laugh out loud, but my wife empathizes with people who fall down or run into things. DVDs of your favorite funny shows are probably available.
- Hang out with funny people. Find other cross-cultural workers who can laugh at themselves and at the absurdities of life and can find humor in a variety of things.
- Spend some time with children. Young TCKs know how to play and take life lightly. They can laugh at nearly anything.
- Post reminders to “lighten up” on your office wall or screen saver. How about a picture of yourself with a mustache drawn on it? How can you take yourself seriously if you see that all the time?
- Do something silly. Help someone wash their car and end up with spraying each other with water!
- Put on a silly skit for others on your team. Of course, in the skit, poke fun at your own agency—not malicious fun, but humorous fun!
- Share your language goofs!! Thinking they are talking about being embarrassed, Americans learning Spanish often tell people they are pregnant (embarazada). Beware of false cognates.

The more you laugh, the better it is for you! Have fun laughing at yourself.

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