Humor Theories and the Physiological

Benefits of Laughter

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Excerpt, adapted for use in 7-10th grade classrooms

LAUGHTER AS A COPING MECHANISM

Some theorists suggest that laughter and humor are instinctive coping mechanisms that help people deal with the disappointments and struggles of life. Specifically, it is believed that by finding humor in stressful or potentially threatening situations, people can replace negative with positive affect, thereby giving them an increased ability to cope with negative states of affairs. Humor based on incongruities, or things that appear inappropriate for their context, is particularly well suited to reappraising negative situations from different, less threatening perspectives. By being in touch with their patients’ emotions and sense of psychological well-being, nurse practitioners can decide when it might be useful to encourage their patients to engage in positive reframing. As Dossey and Keegan explain, nurses can help relieve their patients’ stress by helping them to find humorous perspectives in their problems. That being said, it is also important to be sensitive to patients’ reactions to humor. Just as two clients with the same symptoms may not always get the same medication, different patients may require different doses and different types of humor.

Throughout history, oppressed people have used humor as a survival tool. Referring to its use in Native American communities, Luna et al commented,

In Indian humor, you can make fun of anything and even at the worst times . . . I think what I came to realize is that it’s a way of easing the pain, that laughter is a good cure and that maybe if we didn’t laugh so much, we would be depressed.

Likewise, in “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Frankl documented his and his fellow prisoners’ use of joking and humor while imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. In the words of Vereen et al, “People consistently see [humor’s] value in shaping their perspective in times of difficulty and in helping them to adjust to stressful situations.” Such perspective shaping might be particularly useful for patients suffering with debilitating diseases or for family members dealing with uncertainty about the future outcomes of loved ones. So as not to be viewed as unprofessional when using humor to lighten the seriousness of patients’ conditions, nurses should provide a brief explanation of the role of humor in helping to reframe situations along with information on the health benefits of humor.

Different aspects of humor, such as turning negatives into positives, being optimistic, and having hope in life, are all effective coping strategies. Research shows that believing in the benefits of laughter alone is sufficient for the body to experience physiological benefits, such as decreased pain.

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