



USING HUMOR TO REDUCE STRESS

by Linda Hutchinson

What is the greatest source of stress? In her wonderful book, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Jane Wagner answers, "Reality is the greatest source of stress amongst those in touch with it." Since she put reality on the back burner, her life has been jam-packed and fun-filled.

One way of reducing tension in our lives is to invent a lighter view of reality — to lighten up. What is your interpretation of reality? I grew up with the notion that life is hard work. When I put that notion on the back burner, my life is jam-packed and fun-filled.

In my "humor shops" we explore various ways to use humor to turn tense situations around and to reduce the impact of stress on our lives. One of my main messages for preventing tension is: **Do not be offended, even if it is intended.** Easier said than done. As humorous beings, we are great at turning molehills into mountains. Since I have applied the practice of not being offended, I am a lot happier and more serene.

On the other hand, do not allow people to degrade you. It is a paradox. **Do not be offended and do not allow putdowns.** Pick your battles. People who are offended by toxic humor should use the offense as an opportunity to educate. One simple technique is to ask them to explain the joke or comment. Often, jokes and other forms of humor lose the "funny" when it has to be explained.

There are different ways to address tense situations. If you can, avoid tense situation. Do not entertain people you experience as offensive. Another way is to build your immune system - be prepared. Humor does not have to be spontaneous. Prepare humorous comebacks for situations or circumstances that repeatedly happen.

For the majority of us "fight or flight" is the automatic reaction to tension or conflict. It is possible to develop a third way to respond to conflict that is going with the flow. Imagine a world where we are not just reacting, but consciously choosing whether to fight, flee, or go with the flow.

Thomas Crum teaches the martial art Aikido as a metaphor for embracing conflict as an opportunity. The same movement for an attack is the same movement for a dance. Rather than fighting back or running away, you learn to go with the flow, to embrace the energy. Crum urges us to

relate to conflict as a gift of energy, in which neither side loses and a new dance is created.

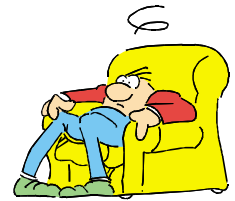
Another example of humor as Aikido or "tongue-fu" from Joel Goodman, Director of the Humor Project, is the story of a woman who got an obscene phone call at three o'clock in the morning. The voice on the other end of the line asked, "Can I take your clothes off?" The woman yelled into the phone, "Well, what the hell are you doing with them on anyway?" Wouldn't you like to be that quick-witted at three in the afternoon, let alone three in the morning?

In one of the best basic books about humor, *The Healing Power of Humor*, author Allen Klein uses the metaphor of another martial art, Jujitsu, in which you "gain an advantage over your opponent by turning his strength and weight against him." Klein refers to "joke-jitsu" as the ability to give a difficult situation a twist, reversing the energy and sending it spinning in the opposite direction. He tells how actress Eve Arden dealt with a co-star, a prankster, who arranged to have the telephone ring when it was not supposed to on stage during a live performance. Arden calmly answers the phone; then she hands it over to the prankster saying, "It's for you."

Besides using humor as Aikido, joke-jitsu, and tongu-fu, there is also humor therapy. What is it that you take too seriously? What would you like to lighten up about? Humor therapist, Annette Goodheart, recommends that you say out loud what it is that you take too seriously and at the end of the statement, you say, "Tee Hee!"

There are many kinds of tense situations in which to use humor: ill health, terminal illness, death, natural disasters, and all forms of human conflict. Of course, there is one foolproof method of avoiding tension — from the wisdom of the cartoon character, Ziggy, **"The secret of living without frustration and worry — is to avoid becoming personally involved in your own life."** ▼

Linda Hutchinson is an adult educator, keynote speaker, consultant and author with 30 years of professional experience designing and delivering training programs for large and small corporations, non-profit organizations and professional associations. Owner of Hutchinson Associates, Linda also teaches college courses on humor and spirituality. She is currently completing a book about the uses of humor that will be released this fall. You may contact Ms. Hutchinson by email at Linda@haha-team.com or visit the Web site www.haha-team.com.



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