

Seeds of Unfolding

The following is an interview of Dr. Ed Dunkelblau, PhD, conducted by Helene Dunkelblau and Carolyn Cooper of the CAFH Foundation in its Seeds of Unfolding series. This interview was originally published on the Seeds of Unfolding Web site.

What is emotional intelligence?

It's another way of being smart. We typically think of intelligence as IQ—the ability to learn and succeed in school-based academic kinds of endeavors. But we've found that there are other ways that we're "smart." Those social and emotionally intelligent ways seem to be more connected to success than traditional IQ. Daniel Goleman describes five areas of social/emotional literacy in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*. The five areas are:

- to recognize one's own emotions
- to express emotions and not act on one's impulses
- to recognize the emotional experience of others and to experience empathy
- to deal with others' emotions in the context of a positive relationship
- to motivate oneself toward a positive goal, to learn from feedback and to solve problems.

How did you become interested in EI?

I have been a psychotherapist for the past 20 years and have worked with clients to help them develop their social/emotional skills. When Goleman wrote his book, he labeled and popularized what I had been doing for a long time, so it became an easy and convenient way to summarize and describe what we were pursuing in psychotherapy.

So what link do you see between humor and emotional intelligence?

What we do in psychotherapy via social/emotional skill-building is to help clients understand their experience in a new way—to see the world in a way that's healthful, allowing them to deal with their own struggles and challenges constructively. To experience humor and laughter, we also have to see the world differently, in a slightly tilted way. We're forced not to take our experience so seriously and to recognize there are alternative ways to understand what we're going through, some of which are funny. By doing this, we're able to expand and develop our world view and our self-perception.

A lot of humor relies on inducing a shift in perspective; it gives you a different point of view from which to watch yourself.

Exactly. Harvey Mindess talks about "taking a God's eye view," where you rise above your own experience and look down upon it, letting it entertain you. It's a way to be less self-centered and less self-absorbed—to see the bigger picture and a different truth; to appreciate and enjoy what goes on; to gain respite from a painful or trying circumstance; to connect with another human being.

I can use my sense of humor to help me shift my perspective, but it must be a little trickier to use humor to help someone else shift his/her perspective.

Yes, it takes a lot of skill to unveil social imperfections and to get people to laugh at them instead of being hurt by them. This is why political humorists exist. They're able to say, "Look, the emperor has no clothes on!" without getting killed. In fact, the modern political humorist is the descendent of the old court jester. Jesters used to carry a little jester doll with them which they would "kill" when the king said, "Off with his head!" As long as the jester was entertaining the king, he could pretty much get away with anything, unlike everyone else in the kingdom. It's the same nowadays—if you are funny, you can say a lot more than if you're not being funny.

Can you give some examples from your practice of how humor allows a person to see something in themselves that they wouldn't see otherwise?

Sure. Once I was counseling a family with an extremely overprotective mother. If I had addressed this directly with her, she would probably have taken it as a criticism and become angry. I would have risked creating an empathic break in the therapeutic relationship. So instead of doing that, I told a joke about a mother who was pushing her son in a wheel chair at the local mall when they encountered a friend. The friend said, "It's nice to see you and little Freddy, but I didn't know little Freddy couldn't walk!" The mother responded, "Why of course he can walk ... but thank goodness he doesn't have to!" The whole family laughed and the mom looked at me and said, "So, do you think I am doing too much for him?"

Here's another example of an "enmeshed" parent, this time the mother of a teenage girl. I had asked the daughter a question like, "How are you doing in school?" and before she could even think, the mother answered for her, "She's flunked three classes." So, here was the same problem again. I didn't want to ruin my relationship with the mother, but I wanted to help her realize what she was doing. The only way to do this was to give a humorous "spin" to her behavior. I asked the daughter in a surprised voice, "How did you do that?" She said, "How did I do what?" I said, "I heard an answer and your lips never moved!" Then the mother started laughing. This happens a lot. Typically, the next time it happens, all I have to do is say, "Again?" and the mother gets it. Another good thing about this technique is that it gives the mother and daughter a non-noxious way to deal with the problem when it happens at home.

Another interesting experience—I was seeing a woman who was severely depressed, so much so that she decided to kill herself. She got into a car, drove out of town, sealed all the windows and lay back, thinking that she would be asphyxiated while she slept. When she opened her eyes and saw black all around her, she figured she was dead. But then she noticed that she could still see the inside of the car. She realized that it was night and that she'd run out of gas! I started laughing and then she started laughing too. She said that she hadn't told the worst part: she was seven miles out of town and had to walk all the way back! Recognition of the irony and ridiculousness of her attempt made it go away—she was no longer suicidal. That moment of humor was disarming.

Have you ever tried humor on someone and it doesn't work?

Absolutely. Waleed Salameh, one of the co-editors of *The Handbook of Humor and Psychotherapy*, says that, in order for humor to work, people have to be in "play mode." If things are too serious, there's no way to access a laugh. Early on, when I was developing my craft, I sometimes misjudged my audience and was perceived to be disrespectful. If you're going to use humor in social interaction, you have to be able to judge whether or not your audience is "in play" and what they can tolerate. I once heard a really interesting presenter who talked about how to handle heckling in comedy clubs. He found that if the heckle was

hard and his response was soft, he'd lose the audience. Or if the heckle was soft and he responded with "both barrels," he would lose the audience. You have to modulate your response to match the nature of the heckle. That seems to be a rule for life as well.

That seems to dovetail with emotional intelligence.

Yes, sensitivity, empathy, recognizing other people's emotional experience is very important. You have to be very sensitive and perceptive to use humor well. If you're very skillful and a good storyteller, you may be able to derail a person's seriousness and draw them into "play mode." When we talk about therapeutic humor, we're talking about much more than jokes, which are often culture-bound and not always told well.

In the case of the woman who was suicidal, it was laughter that changed the situation, not any joke.

Yes, it was like magic—a spontaneous revelation. It's amazing how important humor can be. One of my clients actually chose me because she had read that I respected humor.

Let me give you a couple of other examples of how laughter works in a therapeutic setting.

Once I was counseling a client who was miserable because she had to make a choice between two difficult alternatives. At one point I said to her, "You're just trying to choose between apples and oranges," and she shot back with, "No, I'm not. I'm trying to choose between onions and garlic!" We both laughed, and that lightened things up enough to allow her to choose.

When my clients and I use humor, we're often drawing on pop culture rather than jokes. For example, with a woman who was trying to face her fears, I talked about the scene in the second Star Wars movie where Luke had to go into the cave and face his father. For months after that conversation, she used the image of Darth Vader chasing her and yelling at her. It was an easy way for her to objectify her fear, and it was playful, not threatening.

How can humor help us live with depth?

Some people believe that humor and depth are mutually exclusive - that all the events of life are serious and portentous. Humor provides an alternative view. Perhaps some of what happens in the world is a kind of cosmic joke that challenges our self-importance. A balance between seriousness and humor allows us to continue our pursuit of depth and meaning, while at the same time avoiding mechanical, uncreative thought, and it clarifies our thought processes the way shaking an etch-a-sketch clears the board.

So can humor actually help us avoid falling into excessive self-seriousness? Self-absorption can be a pitfall for someone on a spiritual path who is trying to uncover unpleasant aspects of their behavior and, through inner work, modify them.

Yes, remember the two cases I told you about earlier—the overly protective mother and the mother who always answered for her daughter? Laughter forced them both to recognize their harmful habits and, what is just as important, gave them playful, rather than judgmental ways to work with them. When we laugh at something in ourselves, it's as if the joke of over-seriousness and narcissism gets revealed.

There's another image I can use. The soul has been likened to a burning charcoal or ember that we carry with us. A theologian friend of mine, Chuck Jones, added that humor is a cool breeze that blows away the ash so as to allow the ember to burn.

Now let's get back to the question of how humor can help us live with depth.

As I understand it, "depth" occurs in two realms—it occurs intrapersonally (with respect to our own experience —our beliefs, psychological and affective states, and physical state) and interpersonally (with respect to the depth of our relationships to one another, to our community small or large, or maybe to the Divine). "Depth" implies a strong, meaningful purpose and an understanding of our experience. If you think about depth (interpersonal or intrapersonal) as a journey down the road, humor is like a shock absorber. It doesn't really get you there, but it certainly makes the trip much less painful.

How is humor linked with joy? Does it have to do with feeling connected to others?

Humor is joyful—you can't laugh and feel anger at the same time. You can't laugh and be sad at that same moment. Very often when we find ourselves sad, we find ourselves laughing because of our vulnerability. But for that moment, we're not sad. That's the psychological experience of humor and laughter. There's enjoyment in watching a funny movie or reading a funny book, even if you are by yourself. But there's a special joy when you share a laugh, whether it's over an old story, a reminiscence or a joke. Everyone has an idiosyncratic sense of humor since everyone finds different things funny, yet humor is never enjoyed more than when it's shared. So humor is a bridge-building mechanism. We connect with other people through shared experience. When we laugh at the same things, there's an immediate, recognized connection.

One of the funniest lines I've ever heard was, "What makes the noise like the phone ringing when you're in the shower?" Apparently lots of people have had that experience, though nobody talks about it. The humor lies in the recognition, "I've thought that too!" That's the joy of recognizing our shared humanity. That's pure Seinfeld—all of Seinfeld is that kind of humor.

What skills in generating humor, seeing humor or transmitting humor do you think a person has to learn in order to live well?

You have to be willing to be silly, to take on a child's perspective and see things honestly. You have to practice seeing irony everywhere. You just have to look for it. There's a phenomenon in psychology called the "Rosenthal Effect." This is a self-fulfilling prophecy—you find what you look for. If you look for humor, you will find it. I'll give you an example of what I mean. About five days after 9/11, my sister and I flew down to Florida. I had to wait 21/2 hours for her flight to come in, so I sat in one of the cafes and challenged myself to find some humor in what I was experiencing. I ended up writing an essay about going through security. It was mildly amusing. I really had to challenge myself to find something funny at a time when things were not funny. It was a very interesting experience for me to see whether I could practice what I preach.

This reminds me of spiritual practices in which we choose how we're going to view something. We don't just take the first view that pops into our head. We decide to look at a situation in a constructive way, and then we work at doing that.

A lot of therapeutic humor aims at showing clients that they can choose their emotional response—they can even choose to see the funny side of something serious.

Is there a way to develop the capacity for playfulness?

The easiest way is to be around young children. Young children play as a means of expressing themselves, and so do animals. They don't know that life is serious, and they ignore you if you

believe it is. Another thing you can do is find other people who believe in humor and support it and encourage it. Get to know yourself and your own sense of humor. Everyone has a sense of humor, but sometimes we aren't able to access it.

Could you give an example of how the capacity for playfulness can help us cope with crises—personal or global?

In the midst of a crisis, people who are willing to access play can experience the healing power of humor. I was debriefing a group of teachers 48 hours after the World Trade Center attacks. There were a lot of tears, pain and fear. At the end, I told everyone to go home and take care of themselves and to tell us how they were going to do this. There was a big burly guy in the group who drove a motorcycle and had tattoos. He said that the only thing that had helped him the night before was to get into a bubble bath and just sit there for a couple of hours. So I said to the group, "Tonight, if you're feeling really bad, just picture Jerry in a bubble bath." The laugh that followed was absolutely out of proportion to the joke—it was huge. People needed to let go—it was a purifying laugh. The joke gave them permission to feel alive again in that moment, because, when you laugh, you know you're alive. In spite of the tragedy, they allowed themselves to enter the playful mode.

If life is full of pain and suffering, there's not much we can do about the pain, but there's an alternative way to understand what's going on. To recover from tragedy, we need psychological distance and chronological distance. Humor both requires and provides the psychological distance.

Sometimes we just don't have the necessary distance to appreciate humor. Look at the different reactions people have to the movie *Life is Beautiful*. For some, it's disrespectful to link humor with the Holocaust. At first I couldn't understand why people felt that way, as my take is that the story isn't about the Holocaust; it's about the relationship between a father and his son. The father used play to shield his son from horror. It was a very purposeful use of humor. However, now I can well understand that someone who experienced the Holocaust could have trouble appreciating that movie because I, too, know what it's like to lose the capacity for humor. After 9/11, I had a similar experience. It took time for me to regain the playful mode.

Some people use humor to gain psychological distance in life threatening situations. I was giving a talk in Toronto and there was a doctor in the audience who uses humor a lot. He kept jumping up and sharing funny examples from his practice. I said, "So your patients feel better when you use humor?" He said, "On two separate occasions, patients who died mentioned in letters they had written just before their death what a wonderful doctor I was and how much fun I was." My response was, "I hope you aren't using that as a marketing device. Look at the patients who died who said what a good doctor I am!" The audience laughed, as did he.

The doctor gave another example of using humor to lighten anxiety. In a hospital he works in, kids are wheeled into the operating room sitting up on a gurney fitted out to look like a fire engine. The kids are thrilled, and the parents' anxiety is eased somewhat as they see their children's delight.

What do you have to say about inappropriate humor?

We practice "no hurt" humor. There's no cadaver—no body hurt. Jokes that are sexist, racist, ageist or any other kind of "ist" are not good. Make yourself the butt of the joke, if it's that kind of joke, or some entity that can't possibly be hurt. I would avoid sarcasm because it's risky unless you know your audience very well. Remember that humor can be seen as disrespectful.

How would you counteract hurtful humor?

I would try a direct approach first, "I find that offensive," or "I'd rather you didn't say that." Often humor can be very effective here. I was working in a law firm once. They were a pretty jocular group, indulging in some racist and sexist jokes. One of them said to me, "Now are you the kind of guy who thinks that all humor has to be politically correct?" I said, "Yes, but probably not for the reason you think. Not because it's insulting, not because it can hurt someone, not because it can be an indirect way for you to express anger, but because, if you do it, it could cost you millions of dollars!" That got their attention. They couldn't argue against me—and they also heard the real reasons why that kind of humor should never be used. I teach children to handle sarcasm with humor by responding only to the words of the message, not the tone in which it is delivered. "Hey, some shirt!" (in a sarcastic tone). "Oh, thanks." "But I wasn't saying it was nice!" "Oh, OK!" This approach confuses the sarcastic jokester. It's a kind of judo response. Instead of hitting back, you disarm.

Could you sum up the benefits of laughter—physical, emotional and spiritual?

There's research showing that laughter is physically good for you as it supports your immune system and helps control pain. It's also good psychologically, as it helps clarify your thinking and reduces anxiety and stress. One of the most important things humor does is force a shift in perspective. When you do these things that are good for you, joy has an easier time finding you.

When you're laughing, you're absolutely alive—truly in the moment. Laughter never occurs in retrospect—it's always NOW. The experience of laughter is physical, psychological and emotional. It's a full-brain experience. There's now research from PET scans suggesting that there's no one part of the brain that laughs; it is a whole-brain activity, though the processing of humor seems to be focused in the frontal lobe. When you laugh, the whole brain is going, and some call it a kind of vacation for the brain. It clears away the cobwebs.

Tell us a joke that encapsulates a piece of wisdom.

The great teacher was dying. All his students were lined up at his door. They stood in order, with the most brilliant at the top of the line and the dimmest at the bottom.

The most brilliant took the opportunity to ask a very important question, "Master, what is the meaning of life?" The teacher thought for a moment and said in a shaky voice, "Life is a river." Then he closed his eyes to sleep. The most brilliant student nodded his head knowingly and turned to the second most brilliant student and said, "The Master says that Life is a river." The second and then the third all repeated the Master's words, and so on all down the line. Finally the last student heard the words, "Life is a river." He stopped for a moment and asked, "What does he mean, 'Life is a river'?" This response was then passed back up the line until it got to the second most brilliant student. He asked the most brilliant student, "What does the Master mean, 'Life is a river'?" The most brilliant student woke up the teacher and asked, "Master, what do you mean, 'Life is a river'?" To this the Master replied, "OK, maybe it's not a river."