

CHAPTER
4

The Healing Power
of Play, Laughter,
and Humor

Steve Peterson

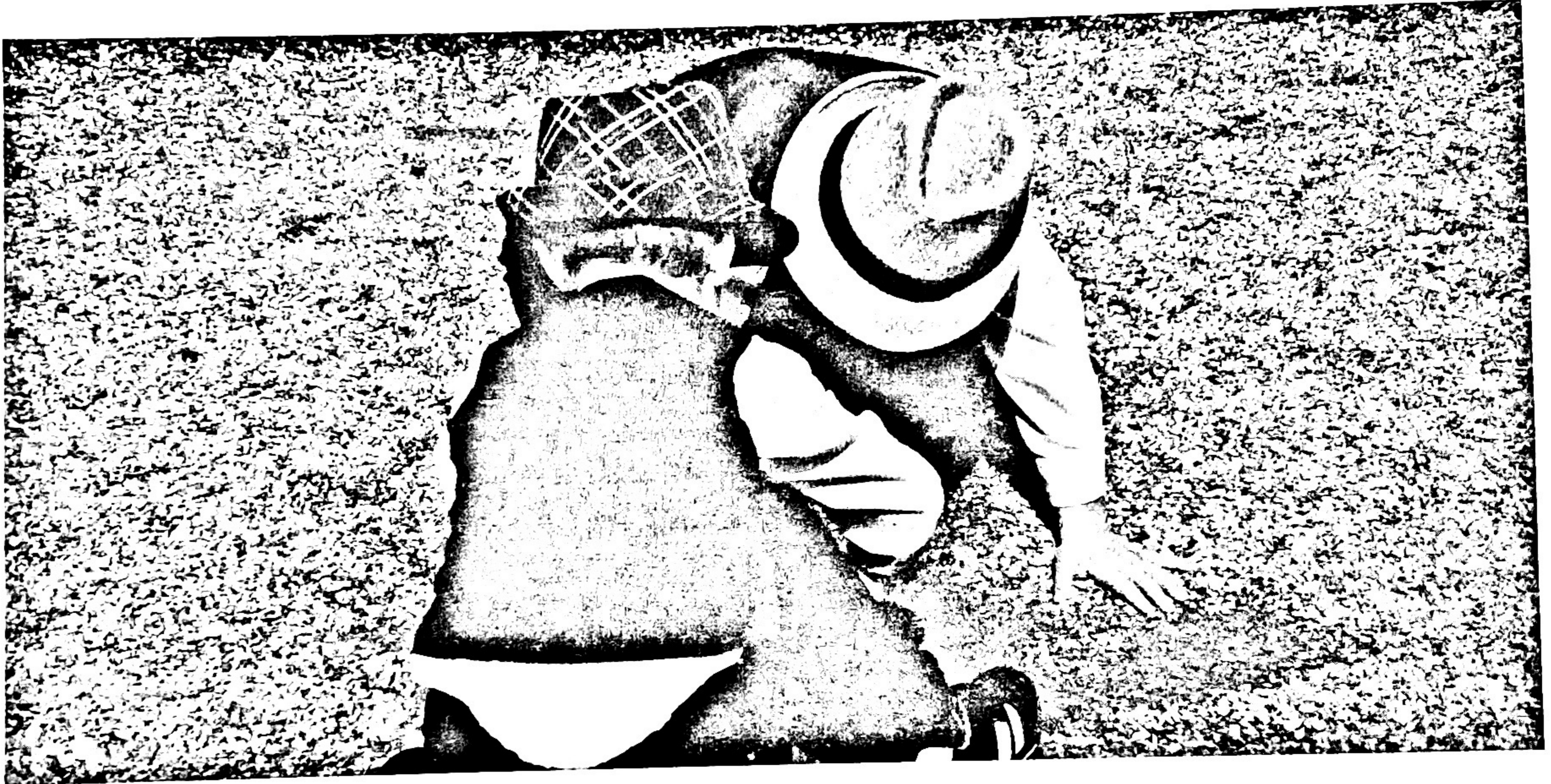


Photo courtesy of Maria Napoli

I laugh
I smile
I play
Life is good

Maria Napoli

Play, laughter, and humor are generally synonymous with positive emotions and the production of a smile! It is said that a smile is contagious. The moment someone walks into a room with a beaming smile across their face, the energy of that smile often transfers onto the faces of others. A smile is a universal non-verbal cue; the message of acceptance, being pleased, appearing kind or becoming amused¹ spans across languages, ethnic groups, and cultures. The simple act of smiling releases endorphins, serotonin and dopamine, which help relax the body and reduce blood pressure, decrease anxious feelings, and lower the heart rate.²

The release of dopamine, as it is associated with the brain's system of reward recognition, has been correlated with activation of areas of the brain that increase ability to learn and improve one's attention span.³ Dopamine release can even be triggered vicariously through someone else's smile.^{4,5}

Some *fast facts* about the power of a smile:

- Smiling makes us appear more attractive to others, promotes our attraction to others, and lifts the mood of those around us.⁶
- Serotonin release from the act of smiling acts as an anti-depressant.⁷
- A "Duchenne smile" is characterized by curling the muscles along the side of the mouth to such a degree as to show teeth as well as contraction of the muscles along the sides of the eyes.⁸ A "less-than-genuine" smile is void of much tooth exposure and eye contraction.
- Even a "less-than-genuine" smile can have similar effects on oneself and others as a true Duchenne smile.^{9,10}



Melissa King/Shutterstock.com



Doglikehorse/Shutterstock.com

ACTIVITY: WHAT MAKES YOU SMILE?

"In her smile I am reminded that it is the simple things in life that matter. For just a moment, my hurried existence is slowed enough to recognize that the human spirit is much stronger than the body."

- Kristene Diggins, MSN, RN¹¹

Before beginning this activity, spend a little time being mindful of strangers around you, your physical surroundings, and those you interact with. Allow your level of awareness to be heightened and immerse yourself in the moment of an experience. Without allowing judgment, become hypersensitive to what elicits a positive emotion and allow that positive emotion to make an impact on you.

1. Identify an experience that left you feeling happy and that put a big, genuine smile on your face:

2. Now articulate your emotions during that experience. How did it make you feel, specifically?

3. Were you distracted, anxious, or generally inattentive prior to that experience?

Yes No

If you answered, "Yes," then explain how long that positive feeling you gained from the experience stayed with you before you returned to your previous thoughts:

Only Children Play?

If play could be described as perhaps any sort of activity that is for pure enjoyment and recreation without any formal, practical, or serious purpose...then at what point did this word acquire such a negative connotation for adolescents and adults? As one becomes older, the term "play" often becomes associated with lack of responsibility, failure to stay on task, and childish behavior. This is very unfortunate, because for a child playtime leads to happiness, smiling, humor, and laughter.



Hibrida/Shutterstock.com

Humor and the resulting laughter, regardless of one's age, not only provides a personal sensation of feeling uplifted and has a stress-relieving effect on the body¹², but also increases respiratory depth and improves oxygen consumption. Following a good belly laugh, the body experiences a period of muscle relaxation and decrease in respiratory and heart rate.¹³ These are mental and physiological benefits that can contribute to the health and well-being of anyone at any age and throughout the entire lifespan! Along the lines of healthcare palliative treatment, Dr. Morse wrote that "since there are no negative side effects (to humor and laughter), they should be used...to reduce stress and pain and to improve healing."¹⁴

It therefore stands to reason that play be accepted back into the lexicon for adolescents and adults of all ages; not as a regressive or immature behavior, but one of efficacy and with a health/wellness benefit.

Children and the Implications of a Playful Nature

"Decades of research have documented that play has a crucial role in the optimal growth, learning and development of children from infancy through adolescence...The time has come to advocate strongly in support of play for all children."

—Isenberg & Quisenberry¹⁵



Dasha Petrenko/Shutterstock.com

Humor is more readily facilitated when one is in a playful mood. This includes both demonstrating a humorous interaction and being receptive to another's humor. Playfulness can be considered a "prerequisite" to humor.¹⁶ For a child, play and the ensuing aspect of fun are important not only to healthy brain development,¹⁷ but they also afford children the opportunity to explore and conquer their fears, build personal confidence, and better equip them to handle life's upcoming challenges.¹⁸⁻²⁰

A fun environment not only facilitates a child's ability to learn,²¹ but also strengthens social relationships and helps children find a social construct within which to fit.^{22,23} Essentially, playful interaction provides children with a sense of belonging.

Parents may want to ensure their children have an activity-rich and extracurricular experience growing up, but the degree to which children are allowed free play and their own creative time can have an impact on their ability to navigate the pressures and stress they experience growing up, as well as provide a healthy foundation for responding to stress later in life.^{24,25}

The application of playfulness, humor, and laughter as an anxiety-reduction tool has become embraced by the pediatric health and dental care communities. Many children's hospitals, pediatric wards, and pedodontic offices have incorporated fun themes, colorful and whimsical designs, and playful animal characters to provide a welcoming and relaxed patient environment.

For many children, medical and dental experiences are cause for great anxiety and the assumption of pain and discomfort. A child's pre-determined thoughts of the situation, even if the situation/procedure is not harmful, can intensify their aversion to it.²⁶

More and more research indicates that the introduction of playful, colorful, and inviting environments for pediatric patients is not only conducive to well-being and recovery,²⁷ but also that humor and laughter are acceptable practices to reduce fear and anxiety in the hospital setting.²⁸

In pediatric dental offices, creating a playful, humorous, and fun atmosphere not only reduces initial anxiety, but also helps with systematic desensitization. It is suggested that humor in the pedodontic setting also serves emotional, informational, and motivational functions.²⁹



mikeledray/Shutterstock.com

Adolescents Need Play, Too!

"The opposite of play is not work; it is depression."

—Brian Sutton-Smith³⁰

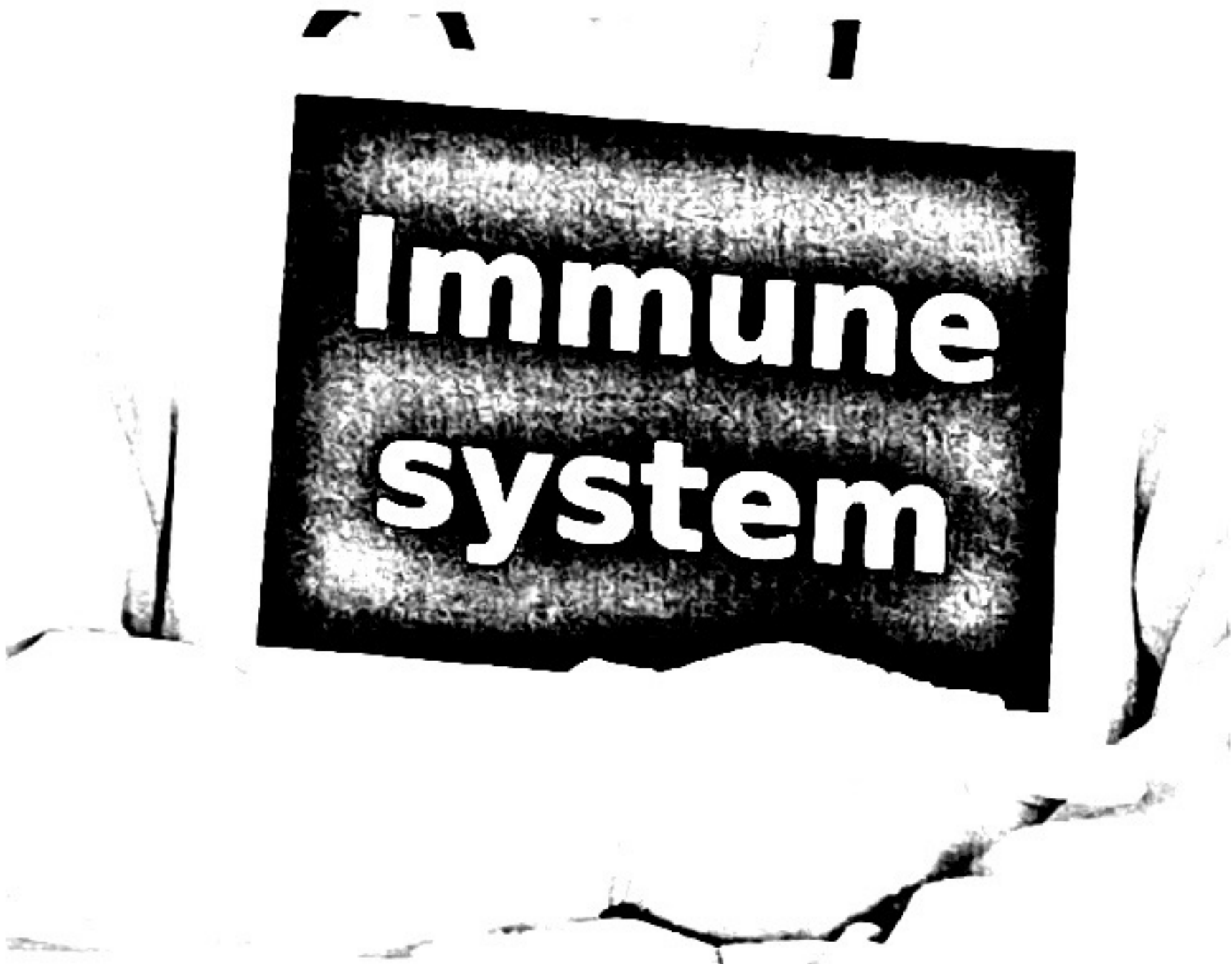
At this point it is necessary to distinguish recreation for entertainment from playfulness which results in smiles, laughter, and perhaps humor. The purpose for this clarification is that according to a Nielsen survey, U.S. adolescents age 13 and older spend an average of 6.3 hours a week playing video and computer games³¹ as a source of recreation. A 2013 survey by this same company revealed that of 112 hours per month of mixed media as entertainment, the average adolescent dedicated 99 of those hours to television viewing.³² Unfortunately, it cannot be determined what genre of entertainment the bulk of this media actually is.



YanLev/Shutterstock.com

If it were comedy, sporting events and the like, then it could be safely assumed that this form of entertainment would be playful and provide the benefits of laughter and humor. If that is not the case, then it is important to ensure that there are some playful outlets available to the adolescent.

Adolescents employ various coping strategies to deal with their stress and anxiety. Plancherel and Bolognini identified gender differences in these strategies, but also an underlying similarity. Females tend to invest in social relationship as a coping mechanism, whereas males may practice sports or use a sense of humor.³³ As mentioned previously, building a healthy social network requires an emotionally-positive foundation often rooted in commonalities and some component of fun.^{22,23} Having a sense of humor and laughing is stress-relieving to the body¹² as is participating in group activities.³⁴



Common to both females and males in this age group is the impact stress has upon their immune systems. Distress increases such stress hormones as beta-endorphins (chemicals produced that act as a pain-suppressant; elevated levels indicative of pain, hypertension, and stress)³⁵, catecholamines (increase cardiac output, blood vessel constriction, elevate blood pressure, and increase the level of lipids in the blood)³⁶ and corticotropins (stimulate the sympathetic nervous system, releasing epinephrine and norepinephrine)³⁷, which suppress the body's natural killer (NK) cells³⁸ and contribute to immune-suppression. However, it was found that laughter decreased these particular stress hormones and fortified the activity of the natural killer (NK) cells, effectively keeping the immune system strong.³⁹

Establishing romantic relationships is one of many identifying behaviors and rites of passage of the adolescent years. Literature and research review indicates a common trait held desirable by both males and females in dating preferences and mate selection is a sense of humor! Males engaged in humor as a courtship ritual and emphasized the importance of their partners' receptivity; females tend to value their partners' ability to produce humor.⁴⁰ Utilizing humor as part of relationship conflict resolution was also found to be one of the most effective and desirable techniques and contributed to healthier and longer-lasting relationships.⁴¹ Having a healthy dose of humor and laughter in a relationship has been contributed to not only overall relationship satisfaction, but also perceived ability to cope with other stressors in life.⁴²

The adolescent years also indicate the successful completion of high school education and, for some, further education/training of some post-secondary fashion. Either way, success in the classroom is of paramount importance, be it for immediate graduation or establishing effective and successful study habits for a future educational commitment.

Humor has been shown to build social relationships; let it not be forgotten that there is a relationship connection built between a teacher and the student. Maintaining a level of reciprocity in humor and fun in the classroom helps build that connection, whereby enhancing the learning process and helping reduce anxiety about some of the more difficult subjects for the student. Humor not only acts as a stress-reliever for students, but also helps them learn more effectively and provides a greater level of academic satisfaction.⁴³ Maintaining a modicum degree of levity and allowing adolescents to engage in humor or fun activities can help provide a feeling of psychological safety and afford them a greater opportunity to absorb the material.⁴⁴

Stop Acting Like an Adult All the Time

Adults need to find time to play because it helps them forget about commitments, responsibilities, and career for a brief period. It may be a challenge for many adults to engage in a fun and playful activity without accomplishing a goal. There need not be any specific purpose other than to enjoy oneself and socialize in a creative, unstructured, and whimsical way.

The same physiological and psychological benefits of childhood and adolescent play, laughter, and humor apply to adults. In some contexts ten minutes of hearty belly laughing can have the same benefit of two hours of relaxed sleep.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the willingness to participate in and commit to maintain-

ing a healthy level of playfulness and laughter appears to wane as one becomes older and more entrenched in their careers. It is important to talk about the benefits of playfulness, humor, and laughter and the effect it can have on time spent in the workplace.

A 2013–2014 Gallup survey reports that the average American spends 47–50 hours per week at their place of employment.⁴⁷ Being happy during work hours would equate to being happy during the majority of their week. A happy employee takes better care of themselves both physically and emotionally⁴⁸, fosters and maintains healthy relationships with coworkers, enjoys their work more and is more productive.⁴⁹ Happiness and laughter in the workplace boosts morale, promotes creative ideas, and fosters a sense of camaraderie among workers.⁴⁶

In January 2015 nearly 3%, or 3.5 million full-time employees, missed at least two days of work due to personal illness or a medically-related appointment.⁵⁰ Although it is not known to what degree this absenteeism was specifically stress related, it is very clear that stress contributes to many medical illnesses and disease states.⁵¹ Earlier studies have indicated that those workers who experienced high levels of stress were twice as likely to be absent a week or longer during the course of a year.⁵²

Whether an individual has the opportunity for a bit of playtime, laughter, or humor at work or brings a playful disposition and fun attitude *with them* when they walk in the door, the beneficial outcome is the same. Simple acts of laughter and humor can be accomplished in the workplace during breaks and meals. Being mindful of the little details throughout the day and how one's body is reacting to stressors can provide peace of mind and allow one to escape to a "fun place" in their mind.

Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com



Enlightened Media/Shutterstock.com

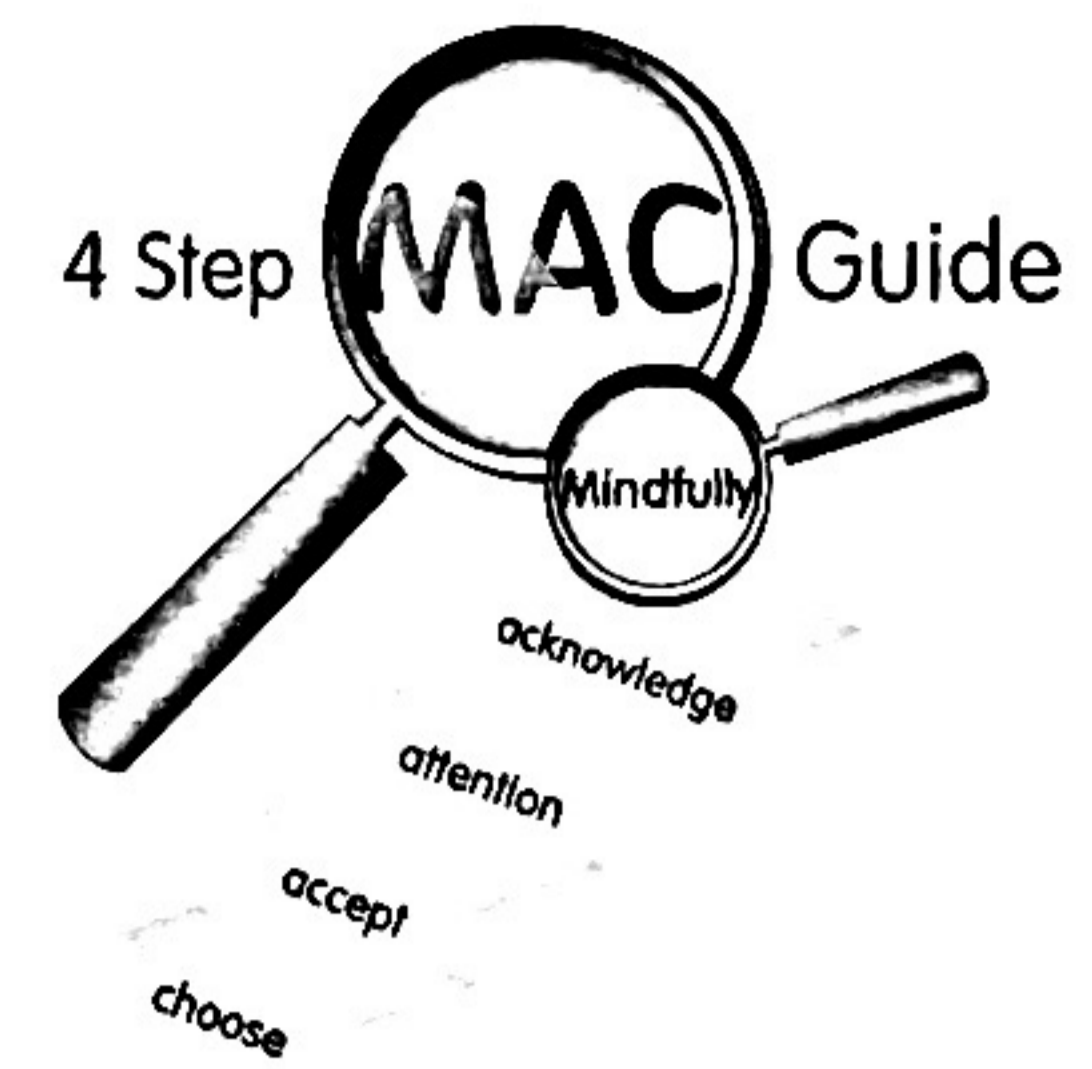


wavebreakmedia/Shutterstock.com



Practicing the MAC Model throughout the workday can help facilitate vicarious fun/mental escapism and reduce workplace stress:

- Observe subtle humorous nuances present in the workplace and acknowledge the moment that you make each observation.
- Pay full attention to the mannerisms, behaviors, and subtleties of those in the workplace and how you respond to these observations.
- Accept this moment without judgment and have fun with it.
- Make a conscious choice to allow this moment to have a positive impact on you and make you happy and others happy.



Be it within the workplace environment, at home or in a social setting, adults will dedicate a vast amount of time establishing new relationships or nurturing existing ones. Playfulness and playful communication allow adults to refine and continually develop their social skills, as well as remove barriers to improved communication and interaction with others.⁵³ Establishing an identity within a workgroup, school classroom, or at a family reunion can be facilitated with humor and laughter as this provides a bit of an “ice-breaker” and makes the person appear to be more welcome within the group.⁵⁴



Africa Studio/Shutterstock.com

Play and laughter can be an effective tool for nurturing and healing relationships. Making a conscious effort to keep play and humor alive in a relationship can bring a level of resiliency to the relationship, open up intimacy, build trust⁵⁵, and foster a team spirit. This has application not only in personal relationships but also in workplace relationships.

Sharing play and humor creates connectivity (a sense of intimacy) between two people and helps define a solid, successful relationship as there is a positive bond that is built, which helps buffer against stress, disagreements, and challenging periods within the relationship.⁵⁶

Here are some ideas of how laughter, positive humor (free of ridicule), and playfulness might help manage relationship conflict and add longevity:⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹

Humor promotes resiliency by taking difficult issues in stride and without anger.

- Gentle humor can be used to address sensitive issues.
- Playfulness and humor creates a bond between people.
- Laughter helps people loosen up and inspires more open-minded thinking.
- Playful settings disarm defensiveness.
- Inhibitions are released during periods of humor and laughter.
- Tension can be eased during a power struggle and help regain perspective.

ACTIVITY: THORNS AND ROSES⁶⁰

"Some people grumble that roses have thorns; I am grateful that thorns have roses."

—Alphonse Karr⁶¹

For this exercise consider the current challenges and stressors in your work/school day and also in a relationship (personal or otherwise). These are going to be considered your *thorns*.

Now think of how play, laughter, or humor has either diffused those challenges/stressors or provided you a positive distraction. These are your *roses*.

If these challenges/stressors were not diffused or you were not distracted, be prepared to articulate how play, laughter, or humor *could* have been employed to provide a positive outcome.

Example: "I could have done this or I should have thought of..."



Susii/Shutterstock.com

My work/school thorn is _____

My relationship thorn is _____



Dragana Gerasimoski/Shutterstock.com

My work/school rose is _____

My relationship rose is _____



Michael C. Gray/Shutterstock.com

Late Adulthood— Time to Laugh and Play

Late adulthood may pose increased potential of experiencing unique debilitating and disabling disorders due to advanced age and pre-existing medical conditions. Unfortunately, Alzheimer's disease is the most common neurodegenerative disorder and

depression the most common affective disorder among older adults. Although many therapies exist to treat these disorders, laughter has shown itself to be an effective complementary therapy to improve mood and depression in these patients.⁶²

Even for those not diagnosed with a specific medical condition, laughter therapy demonstrates the opportunity to reduce the incidence of insomnia and improve sleep quality in the elderly.⁶³ Some older adults may face physical or situational constraints that may limit their ability to participate in playful activities. This does not mean they cannot reap the mental and physiological benefits because, as was discussed earlier, “playtime” is any activity for pleasure that has no intended goal, formality, or serious purpose. Therefore some low-key, low-impact playful activities that can elicit a smile or perhaps even some laughter could be:—

- Going to a park or family recreation area and watching children play or even just people-watching may not only add a smile to a face, but can help boost immunity because of the exposure to nature and the outdoors.⁶⁴
- Simply going outside and participating in some ambulatory event, 30 minutes a day for a month, can increase happiness, energy levels, and improve sleep patterns.⁶⁵
- Mindful engagement with nature’s sights and sounds, as an observation or while playing an outdoor board game, can improve memory and cognitive function.⁶⁶

Many older adults are healthy and not only enjoy playing but generally have more time to play and have fun. Engaging with family, especially grandchildren can bring a feeling of youthful enjoyment and feelings of connectedness.

The fact that people today are living longer has created an environment where organizations that focus on late adulthood travel and activities such as biking, hiking, adult education and social groups are becoming the norm.

Some older adults finally have the time to take up an instrument or sport, which can bring a feeling of accomplishment, defraying the possibility of loneliness, particularly when retirement brings more free time.

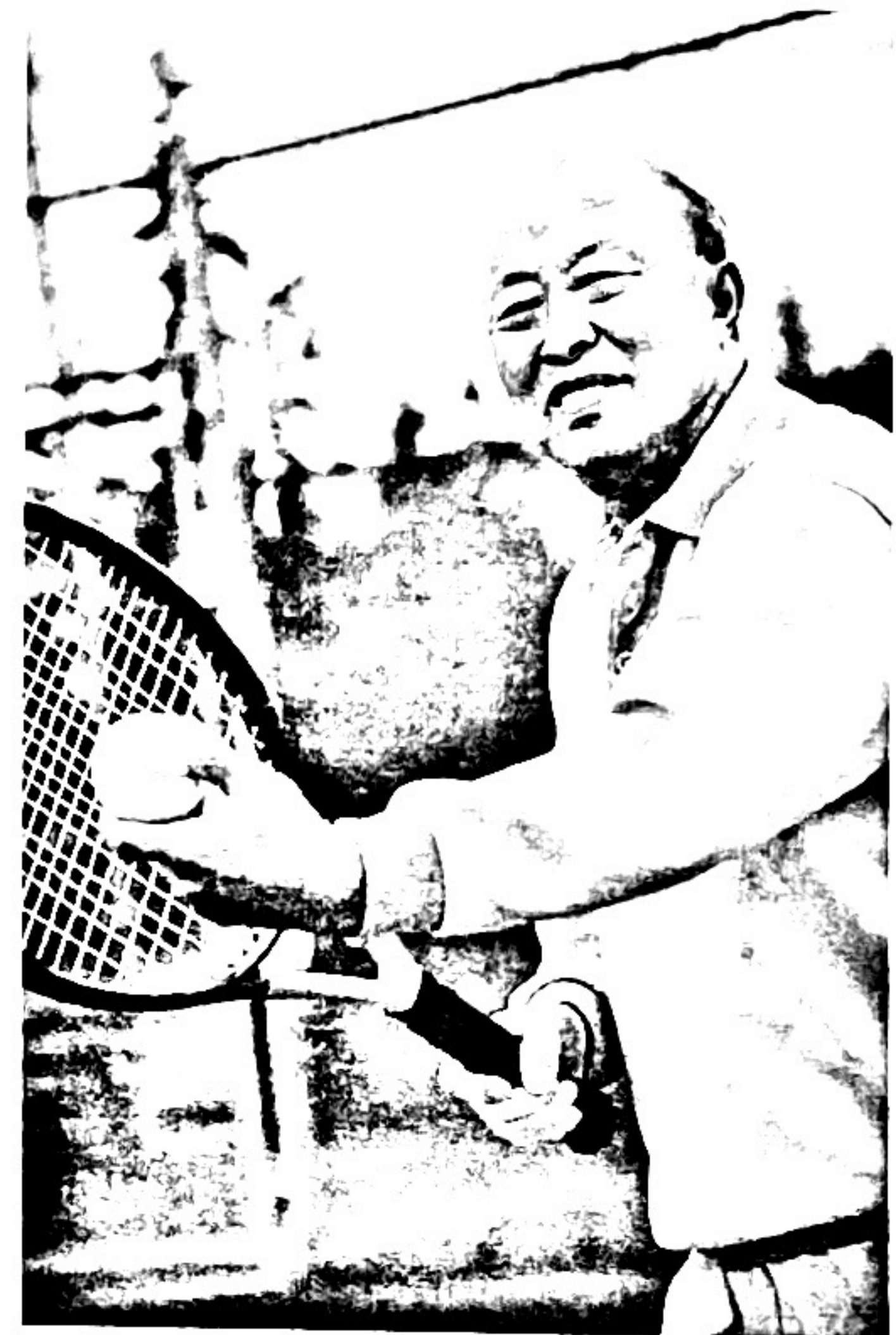
Simply stated, making time in our lives, whether young, old or in between, for play, laughter, and humor is the best medicine for connecting and forming relationships, increasing our immune system power, and bringing joy as well and purpose into our lives. We need food, water, air, and exercise to keep our bodies alive and play, laughter, and humor to keep our spirits alive!



Diego Cervo/Shutterstock.com



Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com



arek_malang/Shutterstock.com



Alextype/Shutterstock.com



Warren Price Photography/Shutterstock.com