Managing Conflicts with Humor

Using Laughter to Strengthen Your Relationships and Resolve Disagreements

By Lawrence Robinson

We've all heard that laughter is the best medicine, and it's true. Laughter relieves stress, elevates mood, enhances creativity, and makes you more resilient. But it's not just good for your emotional and physical health. It’s also good for your relationships. Laughter brings people closer together and creates intimacy. And it’s an especially powerful tool for managing conflict and reducing tension when emotions are running high. Whether with romantic partners, friends and family, or co-workers, you can learn to use humor and play to smooth over disagreements, lower everyone's stress level, and communicate in a way that builds up the relationships rather than breaking them down.

What is the role of humor and laughter in relationships?

Humor plays an important role in all kinds of relationships. In new relationships, humor can be an effective tool not just for attracting the other person but also for overcoming any awkwardness or embarrassment that arises during the process of getting to know one another. In established relationships, humor can keep things exciting, fresh, and vibrant. It can also help you get past conflicts, disagreements, and the tiny aggravations than can build up over time and wreck even the strongest of bonds.

Sharing the pleasure of humor creates a sense of intimacy and connection between two people—qualities that define solid, successful relationships. When you laugh with one another, you create a positive bond between you. This bond acts as a strong buffer against stress, disagreements, disappointments, and bad patches in a relationship. And laughter really is contagious—just hearing someone laugh primes you to smile and join in on the fun.

The social power of humor

Humor can help you:

- **Form a stronger bond with other people.** Your health and happiness depend, to a large degree, on the quality of your relationships—and laughter binds people together.

- **Smooth over differences.** Using gentle humor often helps you address even the most sensitive issues, such as sex or in-laws.
- **Diffuse tension.** A well-timed joke can ease a tense situation and help you resolve disagreements.

- **Overcome problems and setbacks.** A sense of humor is the key to resilience. It helps you take hardships in stride, weather disappointment, and bounce back from adversity and loss.

- **Put things into perspective.** Most situations are not as bleak as they appear to be when looked at from a playful and humorous point of view. Humor can help you reframe problems that might otherwise seem overwhelming and damage a relationship.

- **Be more creative.** Humor and playfulness can loosen you up, energize your thinking, and inspire creative problem solving for any relationship issue.

Using humor to manage and defuse conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of all relationships. It may take the form of major discord between the two of you or simply petty aggravations that have built up over time. Either way, how you manage conflict can often determine how successful your relationship will be.

When **conflict and disagreement** throw a wrench in your relationship, humor and playfulness can help lighten things up and restore a sense of connection. Used skillfully and respectfully, a little lighthearted humor can quickly turn conflict and tension into an opportunity for shared fun and intimacy. It allows you to get your point across without getting the other person’s defenses up or hurting his or her feelings.

Humor isn’t a miracle cure for conflicts but it can be an important tool to help you overcome the rough spots that afflict every relationship from time to time. Humor—free of hurtful sarcasm or ridicule—neutralizes conflict by helping you:

**Interrupt the power struggle,** instantly easing tension and allowing you to reconnect and regain perspective.

**Be more spontaneous.** Shared laughter and play helps you break free from rigid ways of thinking and behaving, allowing you to see the problem in a new way and find a creative solution.

**Be less defensive.** In playful settings, we hear things differently and can tolerate learning things about ourselves that we otherwise might find unpleasant or even painful.

**Let go of inhibitions.** Laughter opens us up, freeing us to express what we truly feel and allowing our deep, genuine emotions to rise to the surface.

Managing conflict with humor tip: Make sure you're both in on the joke

Like any tool, humor can be used in negative as well as positive ways. Making snide, hurtful remarks, for example, then criticizing the other person for not being able to take a joke will create even more problems and ultimately damage a relationship.

Humor can only help you overcome conflict when both parties are in on the joke. It’s important to be sensitive to the other person. If your partner, co-worker, family member, or friend isn’t likely to appreciate the joke, don’t say or do it, even if it’s "all in good fun.” When the joking is one-sided rather than mutual, it undermines trust and goodwill and can damage the relationship.