

Using comedy to tackle health inequalities

‘Comedy is simply a funny way of
being serious’

Peter Ustinov ¹

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Is there an audience for health comedy?

'Humour is by far the most significant activity of the human brain.'

This quote is attributed to Edward de Bono. He is interested in how to get people to think outside of their normal ways of doing things – as are health educators. 2

Comedy is not specifically mentioned in the Mosaic research used in this paper. However, using Sunderland as an example again, 'cinema and films' are popular with all the groups highlighted. They are most popular with young families with limited incomes, living in cheap terraced housing. Indeed, 44% of this group list cinema and film as an interest. Most other groups have figures of around 30%, though this drops to 27% with older people.

The UK Film Council figures for 2005 ranked comedy as the most popular genre of movies in Britain and Ireland.³ Indeed even in the category that came third, animation, the top film was a comedy, namely *'Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit.'*⁴

Although public health workers cannot produce their own feature films, they may be able to make more use of humour to promote health. This could be verbal, e.g. the use of stand-up comics, or in a written form

What is comedy?

Laughter is not the same as humour and humour is not exactly the same as comedy. Laughter can be caused by anxiety, joy or tickling as well as something being funny. Humour can occur spontaneously in every day life, where as comedy is always planned. People's motives for being humorous were described by Ann Snowden in the *Health Education Journal.*⁵ She said they were about

- Power
- Coping and defence mechanisms
- The expression of positive or negative feelings

Much comedy involves incongruity – the unexpected.

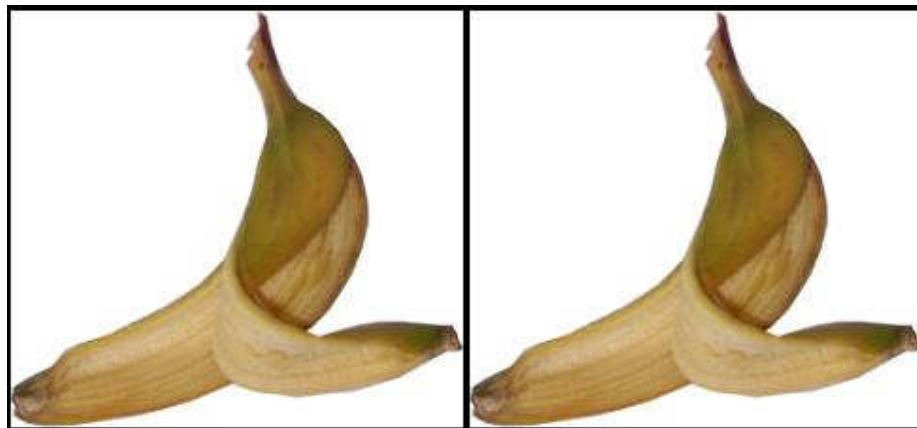
There are many different kinds of humour e.g. slapstick, puns, sexual jokes, nonsense or surreal humour etc. Good social market practice would therefore need to find out what kind the target group might respond to.

Many of the issues raised about how to use music as a health tool also apply to comedy. For example, where the target group is in terms of the cycle of change. However, there are differences. Unlike music, comedy cannot be downloaded or bought at a record store. Health workers will probably need to get someone to write as well as deliver the act. This means less certainty in terms of quality and content. There is therefore more need to

ensure the material does not cause any bad PR by being offensive to anyone who might see it. (Who will see it may also be wider than who is it aimed at.)

How to use comedy to tackle health inequalities

As in the music chapter I have listed a number of discrete ways comedy can be used. In practice of course these ways may all be combined into one act (Music could also be part of this act too as discussed earlier.)



Would Hollywood have been spared the horrors of slapstick in the early part of the Twentieth Century if California had had a falls prevention co-ordinator? The most famous comic of the period was of course, Charlie Chaplin. He went on to use comedy to explore the degrading and unhealthy lives of industrial workers and the poor in his classic 'Modern Times'.⁶ Two other greats of the period, Laurel and Hardy, are still sometimes used during accident prevent campaigns^{7,8 (a)}

How to use comedy to change people's image of an organisation

In everyday life evidence suggests that humour is often used as a way of building better relationships. Experiments have shown that when the same speech is done with or without humour, that the speaker is liked more when there is humour. Similarly research shows that teachers are more liked if they use humour.⁹ The research further goes on to show that it is best to use a variety of kinds of comedy. The comedy has to appropriate for the audience of course.

In the 1980s the Labour Party followed in the footsteps of Marx. Grouch Marx. They used comedians as part of the Red Wedge campaign to reach young people.¹⁰ Amnesty International are also known for their comedy shows. The 'Secret Policeman's Ball' being the best know example.¹¹ Perhaps organisations, such as public health departments, would appear more approachable and relevant to people if they engaged them with humour. They could commission stand-up comedy on health themes in places where specific target groups go.

Comedy can also be used in a written form if the research is clear about what the target group read and find funny. (It's actually easier to write humour for a specific audience than a general one. With a general audience a large percentage of readers may not get the joke at all.)

How to use comedy to give out health information

'Humour is extremely helpful in learning... because when you are happy, your brain produces chemicals called endorphins which help you relax and are likely to enhance motivation.'

Bill Lucas, Training Journal June 2005. 12

'There are various ways to give up smoking – nicotine patches, nicotine gum. My Auntie used to pour a gallon of petrol over herself every morning.'

This Paul Merton gag could be developed into a whole act around jokes and information about giving up smoking. It might help smokers realise that they would not be ticked off by stern NHS matrons if they approach quit services for help. 13

Information alone does not change people's behaviour. The three legged stool model suggests that skills and attitudes/feelings are also important. However, comedy may make people more likely to listen to health information. In terms of the AIDA model it may attract their **attention** and keep their **interest**. After that it would be the job of health workers to make sure this is turned into a **desire** for change and **action**.

The Centre for Life in Newcastle is a good example of organisation that routinely uses humour. They use comedy as part of their programme of science education. (Much of their approach with children focuses on human body functions. Kids love this. It seems to keep their attention as information is given to them. On the downside, does it reinforce negative attitudes of shame about the human body?)

It is easy to see how the Centre's approach could be adapted for education around the more scientific aspects of health issues. (Keep a check on www.life.org.uk/ to see what they are planning next.)

In the written form of comedy, the '*Horrible History*' books by Terry Deary have proved commercially very successful. These are humorous and look at the gory, trivial facts of history. They have been so popular with children that they have spawned similar series on *Horrible Science* e.g.

- *Deadly Diseases*
- *Blood, Bones and Body Bits*

As well as PSHE type topics e.g.

- *Coping With Parents*
- *Coping With Love*
- *Coping With Girls/Boys 14*

To find out more go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horrible_Science and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coping_With

'The biggest fear for many youngsters when they go into hospital is not understanding the situation. The Clown Doctors, can help to explain medical procedures and jargon to minimise the distress and confusion of the children. We can also help them come to terms with their situation through humour and play.'

Lead Clown Doctor, John Quinn.

Clown Doctors use song, dance, circus skills and storytelling to help hospitalised children come to terms with their situation, and feel a whole lot better. 15

How to use comedy to change people's attitudes

For the Ancient Greeks, 'comedy was any drama that exacted laughter by holding up a mirror to all that was characteristic of Athenian social and political life.' ¹⁶

Many centuries later comedians such as Mark Thomas, use jokes and comic stunts for the same purpose. 17

The Attitudes and values leg of the stool model can be addressed at a logical level that is still humorous. For example Peter Cave and Nick Romero did a 2005 Radio 4 series on philosophy called *'This Sentence is False'*. ¹⁸ Their brief appeared to be to both educate and entertain. Some of the comedy is just amusing, other parts of it illustrate philosophical paradoxes. Philosophy has a key role in school health education. Young people need to look at issues of morals and ethics. For example, does it matter that less well off communities are also less healthy? Should people drink and drive simply because they want to? The Radio 4 series showed that these topics did not need to be presented dryly. (For more information go to http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploadedFiles/cms/store//Demo_BHA/article_HPGMembers_files/ATTACHMENTS/This%20Sentence%20Is%20False%20Def%20Flyer.pdf)

Attitudes and values however are also about feelings. So a purely logical approach to them may not always work. Humour may help here. Research has shown that 'there is more attitude change when recipients of a message like the source and are in a good mood, as can be produced by humour.' ¹⁹

In a sense humour marks the boundary of what people are comfortable with. Comedy tells people about their own and society's hang ups and conflicts. These are often round issues of power and helplessness. This could include social injustice around class, race, or

gender. Alternatively it may be due to personal circumstances. Social taboos around the human conditions are another great source of comedy e.g. sex, death and mental health. Comedy may be a way of approaching these issues in a way that is less threatening. It may point out personal or societal contradictions and absurdities. Show that there is a less threatening way of seeing an issue. If a group of people are looking at difficult issues, humour can help them bond quicker.²⁰ This may help them share more, although it can also be used as a defence mechanism to avoid issues. Laughter may also have a physical action on the body that helps people feel good. ²¹

Perhaps the core skills sections of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine could have competencies around using humour in formal presentations and group work.

It has been suggested that psychiatrists be trained in the use of humour and perhaps the same should go for public health specialists. ²²

Comedy may work best when there is some follow up. In some ways the comedy, may both open people up and give them permission to talk to someone about the issue. This may be a led discussion to pick up on some of the emotional issues that are raised. It might be a chance to talk to a worker face to face for some advice. At the very least, people need the chance to pick up a leaflet to get some follow up information, such as a phone number.

One example of comedy around health is 'Hurt Until It Laughs'. Comedian John Ryan performed this show at the Leicester Comedy Festival. It was about men and their health behaviour (www.comedy-festival.co.uk)

How to use comedy to give people the skills to be healthy

'There's a hell of a distance between wise-cracking and wit. Wit has truth in it. Wise-cracking is simply callisthenics with words.'

Dorothy Parker's words illustrate the importance of health comedy being about something e.g. demonstrating skills rather than just being funny for its own sake. ²³

Skills are the final leg of the three-legged stool model. Comedy could be used here too. The Radio 4 comedy programme on philosophy also dealt with logic, the skill of thinking. These are the basis of any rational individual change model of health education. They are also essential for any discussion about health issues in a democracy.

'Anne Sinners Parties' improve mental and sexual health

When Aids was at the top of the agenda in the 1980s, there were comedy shows aimed at students about sexual health. These focused in part on the practical skill of putting on a condom. A modern variation on this could be to have mock *Ann Summers* parties. These

would be aimed at women who go to them. So as not to break copyright perhaps they could be called Anne Sinners Parties. They could look at issues to do with both sex and relationships. In a sense they would also echo reality TV programmes such as *Trinny and Susannah Undress* or *Wife Swap*.^{24, 25}

Relationships are linked directly to NHS targets for sexual health and domestic violence. However, they also have an impact on other targets. Two in five UK marriages will end in divorce, well above the European Union average. ^{26, 27} Cohabiting relationships are four times as likely to breakdown even when there are children involved. ²⁸ The divorced are more vulnerable to physical and mental illness than married people. ²⁹ Indeed divorce increases the risk of death in every age group, when a comparison is made between divorced and married adults.³⁰ Compared to the general population, divorced and widowed men are nearly twice as likely to consult their doctors for mental disorders.³¹ Divorced/widowed women are one and a half times as likely. ³²

Women and children are more at risk of poverty than men after divorce and, on average, suffer from substantially reduced incomes. ³³

As long ago as 2000, family breakdown was estimated to cost the UK £25 billion per annum. The direct cost of family breakdown was around £15 billion per annum. To put this in context it is the equivalent of about a quarter of what the Government spends on the NHS or a third of its spending on education. It was also suggested that another £10 billion maybe generated in indirect costs. The biggest direct costs were on social benefits and welfare (£9,534 million) and health (almost £1,500 million). ³⁴

There may be no simple answer to the issue of relationships breaking up. Reducing poverty is probably a factor. The last few decades have also seen a change in people's expectations about relationships from defined roles of male dominance to equal partnerships. However, society has not had a chance yet to work thorough what this means in practice. So a health education approach that looks at relationship skills as well as information and attitudes/feelings may also be helpful. However, there is no evidence to suggests that people will queue up to join 'How to save your failing relationship' classes. One alternative, for a particular subgroup, if the social marketing backed it up, could be comedy e.g. Anne Sinners Parties.

The parties could initially use trained workers, but could be developed to use peer educators as well. The party workers could have interesting items to

- Demonstrate theories about relationships
- Spark discussion
- Teach new skills e.g. communication, assertiveness and self-esteem
- Take home as reminders of the learning

Depending on the group these could include the following

- *Empathy Penis*: An empathy belly lets a man know what it feels like to be pregnant. This penis would help a woman understand what it's like to be male. In reality the party worker would use it as a prop to spark discussion about men's conditioning and the skills needed to deal with it
- *'They may look lovely, but they're damn hard work'*: Baby simulators are often used in schools to teach adolescents about babies. Here the women would invent a simulator. This would show what it's like to have a partner and the skills needed to make a relationship work. A party worker would play the role of the simulator, going on the information given to her by the women

The Five Secrets to a Great Relationship:

- 1. Find a man who cooks and cleans and has a job**
- 2. Find a man who makes you laugh**
- 3. Find a man who is dependable, respectful and never lies**
- 4. Find a man who you love to have sex with**
- 5. Make sure that these four men never meet** ³⁵

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people, according to comic Victor Borge.³⁶ Comedy may be a way of opening up taboo subjects for discussion and forging a bond between people

Perhaps the Anne Sinners Parties could also include music e.g.

- *Is That What You Really Want?* (Libby Roderick)
- *Show Some Emotion* (Joan Armatrading)
- *Honesty* (Billy Joel)
- *It Wasn't Me Who Hurt You* (Heather Bishop)
- *Love Me For What I Am* (The Carpenters)
- *Be Kind To My Mistakes* (Kate Bush)

Making sure that comedy leads to health improvement

'If comedy is an escape from anything, it is an escape from illusions. The comic... reminds us of True Reality, and in that moment of recognition, we laugh... Good comedy helps people know they're not alone.'

US comic Bill Hick puts forwards his view on how comedy should be used. More often however it is merely a safety valve. It allows people to harmlessly let off steam or take their minds off the reality of the world. There is nothing wrong with that. However, unless it is well thought out, comedy for health purposes could easily fail to give people new perspectives or skills. ³⁷

Comedy might be a powerful health tool if it is aimed at the right target in the right way. However, much humour does not deal with insight but with stereotypes. It is unlikely to affect a change in health behaviour. For this reason, the use of humour in health is a team effort. Health workers need to work with researchers, comics and the target audience. The process is described in more detail below.

Talk with the target audience to be clear what their beliefs around different health issues are and what health response is needed

- The response could focus on information, values or skills. (Alternatively it might not be a health education problem and issues like transport or staff attitudes may need to be tackled.)

Clarify what kind of humour is in broad terms likely to lead to the response wanted

- Assuming humour is an appropriate campaign approach, what sort of humour from what kind of person would the target group respond to?
- Where will they see or hear it? What do they read or listen to, if anything? Where do they go?
- All of this will vary not just with social class, gender and race but also age. Children find different things funny depending on what stage of development they have reached

Work with professional comedians and/or writers to come up with the humour

- A good place to start to find out about comedy as a social tool is <http://thecomedyschool.com/>. The Comedy School can offer institutions both staff training and tailored comedy performances. Alternatively contact a local comedy club or council arts team. The Arts Council might also be able to help. To find the local regional office go to www.artscouncil.org.uk/regions/index.php.
- Often the comic's approach will be to do with overstating or understating real life to show paradoxes etc. Health workers need to work with the comedian to pick up on these absurdities. This is so they can prepare 'chat up' lines to use with people after the show. If the health workers are not very good at this, consider employing other people to do this. Local people, such as health trainers, might be good in this role

Check that the comedy is focused on challenging behaviour and not reinforcing stereotypes

- Unless of course this is useful. The Cycle of Change model emphasises that individuals and groups may need to be encouraged to maintain healthy behaviour at times

Talk to the target group again to pre-test the comedy

- If other people other than the target group is likely to see it, they also need to be tested, so any negative reaction can be planned for

**"Let me show you how much ash a 20-a-day smoker makes.
Of course, they're not all cremated - some are buried".**

Match the humour as precisely as possible to the target group. This John Cleese TV campaign was based on social market research.) 38

Fascinating AIDA ³⁹

The AIDA model from advertising is a good one for a health comedy team to think through

- **Attention** should initially be grabbed by the comedy, as it is both fun and different
- **Interest** is maintained by the humour and being able to relate to the routine's content
- The **desire** to change could be brought about by
 - confronting people with their own behaviour
 - creating a fun atmosphere where they feel safe with other people
 - getting them to laugh and release the physical tension in their bodies
 - giving them new information on health behaviour
- **Action** should be encouraged by follow up workers and written materials

Just kidding – comedy and health for children ⁴⁰

From 18 months to 3 years children begin to enjoy slapstick

They find fallibility reassuring. Parents can start to build honest and trusting relationships if they allow their children to laugh at them in good humour.

“...children can only really understand jokes from the age of eight onwards; which is when they can see other points of view and the effect jokes will provoke. Understanding jokes is about considering how other people feel”.

Cliff Arnall, psychologist quoting Piaget. ⁴¹

Between 4 and 7, children find toilet humour funny and may push taboos on issues adults find difficult

Perhaps how parents, schools and society in general respond to this has a big effect on health. For example, if people have hang-ups about body functions this may make sexual health education more difficult. If certain things are taboo it may also affect mental health. Especially if it means that there is no one a young person in future can now trust to talk to. Comedy could be used to explore these sorts of issues with both children and adults.

Research also suggests that a sense of humour is important to building resilience in a child. Steven and Sybil Wolin carried out research amongst adults who had extremely deprived childhoods. The ones who did best were those who had a healthy emotional resilience. Humour was vital to this. Mental health campaigns can perhaps help develop this skill.

Bottom up comedy

Comedy is not just a top-down public health tool. It can also be used within target groups to get them to look at issues and develop new skills and confidence. An example of this is the work of Rudi Lickwood. He is an award winning comic and taught comedy in Brixton Jail. His project there was made into a BBC 3 programme *'Banged Up Stand Up'*. ⁴²

Another community based approach is laughter yoga. Laughter has health benefits in its own rights. For example, laughing is good for blood pressure, as well as the cardiovascular, respiratory and immune systems. It also just makes people feel well. An Indian physician Dr Madan Kataria started off, what is now an international laughter network, in 1995.⁴³ There are now more than 1,800 free laughter groups in India and throughout the world. People learn how to laugh without the need of comedy. However they still get the physical benefits of a good belly laugh. For more information go to <http://www.laughteryoga.org/>

Ricky Gervais: 'Humour comes from a good or bad place.' ⁴⁴

Care needs to be taken with humour:

- Relationships where husbands use humour to avoid the concerns of their partners are more likely to break up ⁴⁵

- Within schools and other organisations laughter is a live issue. Bullying is often synonymous with ‘laughing at’ and teasing
- There is also the issue of racist and similar jokes
- What one group finds funny, another may find disgusting. If a humorous health campaign is seen by the ‘wrong’ people there may be a PR backlash
- How acceptable is it from one background to use comedy as a health education tool with people of a different background. Could it be seen as condescending?

When and where can I start?

Comedy can be performed at the same kind of events listed in the music chapter. However as comics need less equipment than many musicians; they may be able to perform in more places.

Red Nose Day may be a good time to get media attention. Try www.rednoseday.com Alternatively there is April Fools Day and any local comedy festival weeks. Comedy on particular topics could tie in with the various health days or weeks.



***Laughter tracks.** Comedy, unlike music, may lose its power if repeated with the same audience. However, not all comedy relies on surprise. Think of all the people who quote whole sketches from Monty Python ad nauseam. It may therefore be worth recording a health comic’s routine on to CD to give out after an event or at a later date. (a)*

How much will it cost?

'Fundraisers take note – a study carried out by Universities of Kent and Liverpool revealed that laughter makes us more likely to give generosity to strangers. Participants in the study were more likely to part with their money after being shown funny video clips than those who were shown more serious films.' ⁴⁶

Though the NHS does not generally fund raise, this information maybe useful for health charities planning events or campaigns.

It might be possible to reduce some of the costs by sharing routines on the same hypothetical wiki site as mentioned in the music chapter. This might cut down on the need to write a script. Somebody would just be needed to perform it. If any staff have a talent for stand up, they could brush up their skills at 'It's A Funny Business'. Go to <http://www.itsafunnybusiness.com/standup.htm> (They have special rates for corporate clients. They also claim stand up skills are good for learning how to hold an audience's attention and team work.) Alternatively try the Comedy Trust who specialise in working with health services. Their website is <http://www.liverpoolcomedyfestival.co.uk/comedytrust/FunnyBusiness/Standupcourses.htm>

Read jokes in work time

To find out more about comedy try

- *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* by Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves (It has an excellent introduction to the theory behind comedy, though it may offend some people) ⁴⁷
- *Step by Step to stand-up comedy*, Greg Dean ⁴⁸
- *Zen and the art of stand-up comedy*, Jay Sankey ⁴⁹
- *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* ⁵⁰

Leicester Comedy Festival as a case study

“Their brilliant programme, of comedy with a social conscience, makes me intensely proud of being a Leicester MP. The work they do, delivering comedy based work with a very serious purpose, has now become a mainstream part of public health in Leicester”.

Patricia Hewitt, MP

Leicester Comedy Festival started in 1994. It has always had a community education programme. These are attended by thousands of people.

Hurt Until It Laughs was the original health and comedy stand-up show that came from the Festival. This is still being performed by John Ryan across the UK. It goes to working men clubs, workplaces, conferences, festivals and comedy clubs. Later projects included the *Laughing Fit* project and tour funded by Arts & Business, *The Odds* film and on the on-going *Ditch the Chips* project which now extends to Northamptonshire.

In 2007 the community programme was rebranded as *Make Me Happy*. A range of agencies are involved in this, including North West Leicester Mental Health Action Group and Braunstone Community Association. This latter group received £48,500 from Arts Council England for school and community projects.

Bring Me Sunshine is a project within *Make Me Happy* that uses comedy to look at personal, social and health education issues in schools and colleges. It has covered topics such as healthy eating, exercise, drinking, smoking and racism.

For further information go to www.makemehappy-online.co.uk or www.comedy-festival.co.uk/community/index.php?nav_id=8&level=1 The Liverpool Comedy Trust are also doing a lot of work around comedy and have an annual conference. For details go to www.liverpoolcomedyfestival.co.uk/comedytrust/AboutUs.htm