

‘Humour is necessary to overcome stigma’

Professor Ivan Brown on the benefits of using humour in dealing with disabilities

Ivan Brown is a Toronto-based professor with over thirty years of experience in teaching and studying disability. Ervaringswijzer met him at a lunch meeting at the VU in the Netherlands, where he was starring as a guest speaker on a topic that struck our interest: ‘Disability humour – Is it ok to laugh?’. This had also been the theme of his dissertation. Ivan started out warning us that he wasn’t a stand-up comedian, even though he would be using various cartoons to explain some theory regarding the interesting relationship between humour and disability. Yet, he managed to both entertain and touch us with his talk. Ervaringswijzer got a chance to skype him in Canada afterwards, on a question that has been intriguing us lately: can the use of humour help in dealing with mental health issues?

Is it ok to use humour in relation to disabilities?

Disability is part of life – so it can and should be a source of humour! We don’t want to laugh at people with disabilities, but we can use it as a way to enhance our relationships, as a way of bonding. For instance, if you don’t say anything about a wheelchair, it’s like the elephant in the room – it will become awkward. Instead, make it part of your relationship by conversation – or even better, by using humour. In doing so, the wheelchair can become something you both can enjoy.

Does it work the same way with mental disorders?

Of course. We all use humour in the same way, disability or not. We had an employee at the University with depressive episodes. She was open about this when we hired her. Talking and joking about it among the staff (instead of it becoming the spoken “elephant”) turned out to be therapeutic for her and for all of us. For one thing, it opened up the topic, and others could relate their own experiences with depression. Even though their complaints were milder, it made her feel less alone.

Does opening up by using humour also help in reducing stigma?

Yes, stigma is exactly the reason why we need to open up. Humour gives us a chance to reframe disabilities as part of the human condition. So why don’t we use disability as a source of humour and all enjoy it together? Until we can be comfortable enough doing so, we won’t be able to really accept disability as just another aspect of human life and overcome the stigma!

The cartoons you showed us were jokes regarding physical and intellectual disabilities. Is the relation between humour and mental disabilities less common?

I think so. We’re not as sophisticated in accommodating people with mental disabilities, probably because we don’t understand mental health problems as well. When people with a physical disability speak up, it reduces stigma. It would be great if stand-up comedians with schizophrenia or depression would step forward more. Especially when joking about *yourself*, it becomes socially safe for other people to laugh about it, too. It helps in creating a new frame: it *is* ok to laugh about those things. This new frame fosters understanding and acceptance.

Can humour also be of use in therapeutic settings?

Humour is what I call a 'social lubricant'. It is often used as an icebreaker, making people socially comfortable with one another. This may also be the case in therapy, especially at the beginning of a session. The therapist can also apply humour to look at something in a different way – this is called reframing. By looking at a situation in a funny way, you practise using different perspectives. The problem with mental health issues is that we often get stuck in looking at things in a certain way. Humour gives us the opportunity to explore things beyond our usual mindset. Most problems will disappear or become less problematic, when it is something to laugh about, as in the case with the wheelchair I mentioned earlier.

Can we practise using humour in order to reframe?

Absolutely. We not only can, but should. It's up to you how you look at things. Many of us do this reframing naturally, others learn to do it as a coping mechanism. When you are aware of the benefits of humour and laughter, you can remember to purposely practice using it in your daily life. Using humour has health benefits, too. Oxygen levels are increased, your lungs expand. Blood pressure goes up while laughing, but lowers right afterwards. I try to purposely laugh and joke every day, especially when feeling a little frustrated. I then ask myself: how can I look at this in a humorous way?

Interview: Ireen van der Lande en Laura Vegter