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Humour and Connecting with Kids in Pain

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Emotional pain which manifests itself in problem behaviours is, for many children and youth, a part of their everyday struggle through life. Kids growing up in residential care or in a dysfunctional family or setting suffer this pain. Connecting with kids in pain, the primary task for youth workers, is made all the more difficult, the greater the pain that the young person experiences.

Ward & McMahon (1998) state that, “the worker who attempts to achieve communication with the child’s inner world is...operating in highly sensitive territory; here timing, patience and an ability to demonstrate real empathy are essential” (p.14). These are skills that an effective youth worker needs. The kids have their defenses up and are expert at repelling bids for connection. Their pain and pain-based fear create the need for these defenses and it is these defenses which need to be overcome by the caring youth worker. Their defenses do not need to be broken down through a direct frontal assault as is popular in some punishment-based approaches. Rather, it can be sufficient in the first instance, through the use of humour, to circumvent their defenses and ease their pain.

Just as pleasure and pain are mentioned in the same sentence, so it is that humour and tragedy can co-exist. Humour is often present in environments of fear, oppression, and chaos (Frankl, 1959; Mindess, 1971, 1972). The use of humour can assist a person in coping with pain and can be used as a way of making life a little more pleasant (Digney, 2005).

Humour is a personality characteristic often alluded to or mentioned when describing an effective worker: “she had an exquisite balance of warmth, humour, affection, gentleness, strength, firmness, clarity and child centeredness” (Steckley, 2006, n.p.). Sharing in humour or its effects is something that is viewed as useful when in relationship: “humor was plentiful, nothing like a good laugh, if you want to be relational” (Krueger, 2008, n.p.).

Humour is a gift, a positive trait, a tool, and “a weapon against narrow perspectives, burnout, stagnation, and sickness” (Zinger, 1988, p. 268). Tapping into a young person’s sense of humour can be key to establishing a connection (Adams, 1993; Robinson, 1983; Digney, 2005). It is useful to remember that young people often have a great sense of humour, though it is often buried and sometimes ‘warped.’

Often, when a young person and a new person in his or her life are beginning to get to know each other, they may feel a vulnerability or concern about their capacity to engage. In this new situation, a playfulness, a joke, or humorous comment or story can allow an individual to feel more at ease as it can be non-threatening way of breaking the ice. Henry Maier (2003), states that, “playful interaction between worker and child is a good way to form a beginning connection” (p. 40). This playful exchange need be only for the briefest of moments, for as Brendtro & du Toit (2005) state, “brief encounters can provide powerful teaching moments for developing meaningful connections” (p. 56). In such circumstances, using humour to set aside some of the social rules or requirements can create the opening for connection.

Seita & Brendtro (2005) write about adult-wary kids who have developed a variety of self-defensive techniques to protect themselves from hurt. Some youth may use humour, sometimes aggressive or sarcastic, as a defense against potential connection. Helpers need to be aware of this so that, “in addition to being able to use humour for the purpose of connecting, we can see when kids are using humour to protect themselves from us and perhaps be working against connecting with a person whom they do not yet know nor trust” (Digney, 2008, n.p.).

Connecting with these kids requires understanding their humour and the reasons they may appear to use inappropriate humour to make connection more difficult. It is important to be able to distinguish when they are using humour to increase their pleasure and when they are using humour to avoid potential pain.

Tapping into a young person’s sense of humour can be key to establishing a connection.

Humour can give rise to a variety of reactions, many of these pleasurable. Humour can cause one to giggle, to laugh, and to smile. These physiological reactions are then interpreted by others through complex brain functions. The brain scans the context of the smile or the laugh, asking questions such as: Is this reaction congruent with what is going on? How does this smiling or laughing make me feel? Can I trust this person who is laughing? Is this a bid for connection? These reactions can be considered “inherent methods of communication that are...automatic” (Fry, 1963, p. 101). Indeed, Klein (1998) states that a smile (which may or may not be in response to humour) is “a way of connecting nonverbally with a person,” and he likens a certain kind of smiling to, “a light on your face to let someone know that you are at home” (p. 31). But smiling or laughing in the absence of humour, a relationship of warmth, or friendship can stem from a feeling of superiority or latent aggression. This can be extremely counter-productive and indeed anti-therapeutic, as it can in fact become the cause of distress and anxiety (Digney, 2007).

TRUE Pleasure

For a positive connection to occur, an adult must attend to four important aspects of relationship: trust, respect, understanding, and empowerment (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005).

Trust: Using humour appropriately, adults can show kids that they trust them enough to share a pleasant and positive experience with them; though when using humour and attending to the notion of trust, it is imperative to ensure that there are no signs of rancor, disrespect, or sarcasm (Hilton, 2008) contained in humour. As Brendtro and du Toit (2005) note, it is easier to seek out and trust someone “with whom we feel comfortable... believing that this person intends no harm” (p. 57). Astedt-Kurki, Isola, Tammentie, & Kervinen (2001), in studying the role of humour, report that it aids in forming a trusting relationship between nurses and patients: “a nurse who has a sense of humour...that’s the sort of nurse you can talk to, that’s the sort of nurse you can turn to and ask for help” (p. 123). This study was undertaken with subjects who were chronically ill and ‘in pain’ patients, although their pain was physical pain. One person was quoted as saying, “when you’re sick as you can be and do nothing but lie down and another person does everything in her power to help, humour really makes you feel good” (p. 121). The same principles apply to emotional pain. Humour helps dull the pain and makes one more

inclined to trust another who is making the effort to cheer him or her up. Brendtro and du Toit cite a study conducted by Willner et al. (1970) in which youth in a residential programme rated desired adult behaviour. “Joking” behaviours received a score of 3.6 out of 4.0 and ranked third, only narrowly behind “offering to help” and “having a calm, pleasant voice.” “Smiling,” scoring 3.0 out of 4.0, came in ninth place. The use of humour, through joking, can provide the momentary positive interactions necessary for the creation and development of relationships.

Respect: Part of the reason why humour works as an aid to connection or creation of relationship is that it is a social equalizer. When young people are brought into a humorous discussion they can be made to feel special, to believe that they are worthy, that they belong. Alternatively, if they are left out they may mistakenly believe that they are the ‘butt of the joke’ (Digney, 2007) and being disrespected. Adults must always show respect to the youth, their families, and the people and things they hold dear when attempting to use humour with them. Kids in pain are no different from anyone in that they too, “gravitate to those who show positive regard and make us feel valued” (Brendtro & du Toit, 2005, p. 57). It is also of note that humour is often considered an asset and a protective factor. Flach (1989) considers both humour and a respectful community to be significant resiliency factors.

Understanding: Connected to the above two concepts, trust and respect, humour can also be used to help ‘test the water’ and it can be an aid to showing and developing understanding in relationships (Digney, 2008). Understanding the needs of youth and responding in an empathetic manner are vital, as is being open and accepting of youth and all that they bring. Empathy can include being able to tune into a youth’s sense of humour. Using humour may be useful in allowing youth workers to gauge or understand other people’s moods at a particular time, to assess how receptive they may be to a particular type of intervention, or to guide them in deciding whether they can ‘get in there with them’ or whether they need to ‘back off for a while.’ In addition adults need to have some understanding of how they may be perceived by youth, as their perception will influence if and how youth attempt to connect or engage with adults. “People who connect can understand each other, often without the exchange of words” (Brendtro & du Toit 2005, p. 57). This can come about though a shared understanding or a shared sense of humour.

Empowerment: Humour can aid in the creation of a forum that can be empowering of youth. In addition to treating youth as social equals, humour can allow them opportunities to use humour themselves and it can allow them to decide how to be in relationship with adults (Digney, 2008). Certain types of humour are defense mechanisms (gallows or black humour), used to help survive through the tough times. Paradoxically, humour is a talent or a skill that many kids in pain have developed; it is something at which they have become proficient. Youth workers can help them take these skills and refine them. Adults can teach those who have this skill how they might use humour safely and appropriately and they can help to develop it in those who do not yet possess it. When they take more responsibility for their lives, kids proficient in the appropriate use of humour can come across as more confident, more able, and more in control of their lives than their peers who have not built up this capacity.

Remember the pain

It is essential to remember the potential pitfalls of using humour in relationship with young people, especially young people who have had difficult experiences with adults and who find it difficult to trust. Humour can cause pain. Youth workers must always have a clear and positive objective in mind when using humour, being both self- and situationally-aware and being able to gauge and predict the outcome. They must also be very aware of the environment, the others who are present, and any dynamics that exist between these individuals.

Adults should never attempt to force humour and must remain sensitive to the feelings of young people with an understanding that they may be in crisis and timing and understanding are vital. Hilton (2008) reinforces this point when he speaks of humour: "in the wrong hands, or used recklessly, it is like having the schematic available for making a bomb posted on the internet" (p. 60).

Bruce Perry (2009) warns how young people who have suffered abuse and trauma may interpret adults' actions, "where we intend to give a reassuring hug, their template may categorize that as 'seductive and sexualized'; where we mean to be firm and clear their templates may categorize that as 'yelling'; where we mean to establish eye contact for relational respect and intimacy their template may interpret 'threat'" (n.p.). As humour often involves laughter, remember that young people who are used to being treated as objects

may assume the worst. Laughter in working with young people, as with most aspects of humour, can be very useful and therapeutic. However, if not read correctly by the youth, laughter can undermine and seriously damage relationships.

Humour can be a great partner in the work that youth workers do. It can bring about connection through induction of pleasure, but if not handled correctly it can be most destructive and increase the young person's pain.

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