



# Learning to Laugh at Yourself

by Dr. Elizabeth Carr

Laughter helps us to feel better and shift our perspective. But can the ability to laugh at ourselves and life's most challenging situations be cultivated or coached? Some people seem to do it effortlessly, taking life in stride, even when the going gets tough. Others take themselves,

and the world around them, so seriously, experiencing every bump in the road as a major setback and as grounds for misery or bitterness.

Could the development of this skill be a roadmap for happiness? The answer is, "Yes."

To understand humor from a psychological standpoint we must begin at the beginning, with Sigmund Freud, of course. The term psychological *defense* was first coined by Freud in 1894. Today, we understand the use of humor to be such a defense. In short, defenses keep us out of trouble, both



unacceptable feelings or actions. It does so by refocusing our attention on the somewhat comical side of a situation as a way of relieving negative psychic tension (or uncomfortable feelings). The expression, “You had to laugh or cry,” reflects our awareness that laughter can actually be *chosen* over the less appealing act of crying.

Which brings us back to the question: If humor is such an adaptive skill, can it be learned, and, if so, how? The key is in relinquishing control.

We must let go of our stranglehold on life. Often, we think that by controlling all aspects of life we will achieve greater peace and happiness. It will make us thin, rich, successful, forever young, etc. Instead, the reverse is true. Excessive attempts to control our lives can be a major source of misery. For example, if you know you’re not willing to limit your driving to 55 mph on I-270, then you should accept that on occasion you might get a ticket. Surrendering to this reality and the occasional consequences of your

actions is the best way to avoid berating yourself (or the system) when things don’t go your way. Ironically, surrendering to your unwillingness to change is often the first step in finding the will and strength to change. Ask anyone in Alcoholics Anonymous.

The same is true in our most intimate relationships. Research shows that most of our marital conflicts are repeat performances of a handful of core disagreements. Our preoccupation with getting our way in these perpetual arguments is a source of widespread marital disharmony. Of course, the same is true in most human relationships.

By letting go of your need for control and by embracing human shortcomings, you’ll cultivate self-acceptance and the grace to accept others. It might even give you something to laugh about.

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from the external world as well as from painful internal experiences. This is done through various forms of mental gymnastics, some are adaptive; others are not. Humor is considered one of the most adaptive defense mechanisms, because it is a benign strategy used to protect us from