

# COUNSELING TODAY



October 2008

An American Counseling Association Publication

## The graying of the baby boomers

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ACA 2009 Conference & Exposition • March 19-23 • Charlotte, NC



## Funny business

Counselors discuss the benefits of therapeutic humor

By Angela Kennedy

Several American Counseling Association members are using therapeutic humor in their mental health practices and discovering that a little laughter can go a long way on the road to well-being.

John Wagner is the founder of “Wagner Seriously Funny,” a speaking business in northern Kentucky. Wagner, or his preferred moniker, “Wags,” is a professional speaker, motivational humorist and Licensed Clinical Counselor. In his private counseling practice, he uses funny anecdotes and humor to lighten up counseling sessions.



*John Wagner*

Earlier in his career, Wagner was juggling a day job as a counselor and an evening job as a stand-up comic at local nightclubs. His dilemma was that his occupations were taking two very different directions — one serious and one funny. “Counseling has always been a love of mine,” he says. “It was satisfying and great, but I also had this passion for humor and comedy. It got to a point where I had to decide which way to go.”

Wagner ultimately decided to focus on counseling, but he also felt compelled to find a way to bring the two very different professions together. He began studying the effects of humor on the healing process and the positive impact it often has on human behavior. He then worked to understand how humor might become beneficial to the counseling process. He was further inspired to merge his two passions upon learning that the root of his nickname — “wag” — meant a comical or humorous person.

Wagner launched his speaking business in 1995. Ever since, he has been delivering an entertaining and motivational message about the positive

power of humor. Thousands have laughed at (and with) Wagner while learning how humor can help them thrive in the face of serious challenges and changes in their life and work.

Wagner’s client list includes Procter & Gamble, St. Elizabeth Hospital, Sara Lee, IBM, Honda, Toyota, Fidelity Investments, numerous schools and several ACA state branches. In these speaking engagements, he presents comical yet realistic and practical solutions for issues such as team building, motivation, leadership and conflict resolution.

“I have also been asked to keynote many state counseling association conferences,” Wagner says. “I would incorporate the theme of the conference into my speech and just get attendees motivated, uplifted, laughing and ready to interact positively. I try to make them feel good about themselves and their profession so that they are ready to grow and learn.”

“I’ve also presented educational sessions on humor and healing,” he continues. “I’m a certified reality therapist, so I bring a lot of the reality therapy and choice theory through humor because it’s compatible. There is a fun factor in helping people feel better. We ask (clients), ‘What do you do for fun?’ We (as counselors) use humor as an appropriate therapeutic intervention.”

He says the name of his business, Seriously Funny, is meant to reflect the balance in his work and the message he tries to convey. “As counselors, we do serious work, but humor has its place and can help us deal with serious challenges. It can help our clients find the humor in their lives. If they can find the humor in a

situation, it can help them survive it.”

The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) defines therapeutic humor as “any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual.”

According to AATH, the power of laughter can:

- Trigger endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers (this statement has yet to be scientifically proved)
- Stimulate good cardiovascular effects
- Relieve stress and prevent negative tension
- Help people creatively face life’s challenges

“The bottom line,” Wagner adds, “is that it is easy to understand how not to

be a victim, but it is hard to do. Rather than just react with negative habits, we can choose instead to have a positive attitude and take positive action. Our sense of humor can help us take on all of this responsibility for our success. Lighten up and make failure your teacher, not your undertaker.”

But like any comedian will tell you, humor is all about good timing, and Wagner offers one caveat when it comes to using humor in counseling. “You have to take yourself lightly and your work seriously,” he says. “Humor is a tool, and like any tool, it needs to be used wisely and cautiously. Using humor inappropriately can damage everything you try to build.”

He explains that humor can help in the counseling process by:

- Enhancing rapport
- Helping in diagnosis (for example, does the client laugh with ease at the appropriate times?)
- Providing perspective

- Enhancing communication, openness and creativity

- Mitigating tension and anxiety

He adds that counselors must be willing to admit to clients and to themselves when something isn’t working in a session. “It’s OK to make a mistake. It’s OK to struggle,” Wagner says. “Humor is a barometer that things aren’t going so well. In those situations, we have to laugh at ourselves.”

Wagner says his other real-life roles of husband and father constantly provide him with a humbling reality check, and his family continues to be a great source of comedic material. Wagner has served as a dean and administrator at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College for the past 18 years. He recently took a faculty counseling position at the school so he could devote more time to speaking.

**Never take life seriously;  
nobody gets out alive anyway**

Wagner isn’t the only counselor willing to brave the sometimes fine line between

## Ten ways humor helps counselors

Licensed counselor and motivational humorist John “Wags” Wagner encourages counselors to tap the power of humor to shield themselves against burnout associated with the sometimes intense nature of the work they do with clients. He emphasizes that humor can assist counselors in prepping themselves to perform at their best while also helping them to maintain a healthy balance.

Wagner offers the following advice to his fellow counselors:

1. Take yourself lightly and your work seriously.
2. Smile. It will increase your face value!
3. Laugh. It will give you a positive physical workout and ward off stress.
4. Be open to see the humor that is all around us. Be willing to laugh at life’s absurdities.
5. Use humor to reframe challenges into opportunities. Identify the silver lining.
6. Take a humor break. Find something to laugh about and someone to laugh with.

7. Put together — and use — a humor survival kit that includes favorite humorous books, cartoons, pictures, videos, toys and funny gadgets.

8. Develop urgency/stress breakers — cues to let you know it’s time to lighten up. A few examples to test drive: Some days you’re the windshield; some days you’re the bug. Am I on *Candid Camera* or what? One day I hope to grow up to be the person my dog thinks I am.

9. Choose a positive attitude and then connect it to others by letting them know how fabulous you think they are.

10. Laugh at failures and setbacks so you can more quickly learn the lesson, make improvements and move on.

For more information about Wagner, visit [wagnerseriouslyfunny.com](http://wagnerseriouslyfunny.com).

— Angela Kennedy

inappropriate and effective use of humor in therapy.

"I always inject humor (in sessions) through stories, jokes and cartoons. It makes my point, provides some laughter to make the work less onerous, and it builds warmth," says Harvey Kelber, a retired high school counselor and private practitioner in Wilmette and Schaumburg, Ill. He is also a past president of the Illinois Counseling Association and the Illinois Mental Health Counselors Association and was recently appointed to the Illinois Professional Counselor Licensing and Disciplinary Board.

Kelber says counselors can use humor both to relax clients and to help them see the positives that might ultimately emerge from the pain with which they are currently dealing. "I don't think humor's usefulness is limited to specific issues or topics," he says. "I think it's a universal need, and when people are seeing us for help, they need any lightness we can provide while they do the hard work."

Kelber believes his personality is

reflected in the ways he incorporates humor into counseling sessions. "I often poke fun at myself and tell clients about my screwups so they can see we're all human. It makes them more willing to be vulnerable. I tell them that I try to get my first screwup of the day done by 7:30 a.m. so I don't have to worry about when it's going to happen."

On a more practical note, Kelber likes to give clients in couples counseling a handout that includes a page of cartoons relevant to relationships.

Frank T. Rizza, a private practitioner and counselor educator at the College of New Rochelle, believes humor can assist clients in regaining or fostering an internal locus of control. "Often, when one feels the loss of control over the situation, we lose our internal locus of control. Humor lets us restore this and reminds us that we are always in control of our mind-set and our emotional state of mind," he says. "This is one of the greatest benefits of humor."

Rizza adds that using humor in counseling isn't about wearing funny

hats or telling jokes in session, but rather encouraging clients to see the humor in everyday life. "It's helping the client with the paradigm shift from the most devastating aspects of a situation to the humorous interpretation of the situation," he says. "I remember, during my training, being told not to use humor, as it was inappropriate in the serious business of counseling. I ignored my teachers and have now come to realize that humor is important to overall human survival. It keeps us sane and helps build resilience."

For more information on using humor in therapy, visit the AATH website at [aath.org](http://aath.org). ♦

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