The healing properties of laughter

Does it seem like everyone is too angry today? Wherever you turn - in the news, on social media, on the highways – it seems like people are too wound up and too quick to anger. Maybe we all need to lighten up and focus on what unites us, not divides us. Maybe we need to rely more on the healing properties of laughter!

Laughing isn't just kid's play, it's very important to our overall health. It's a great stress buster and tension reliever. Many medical professionals even point to laughter and humor as having pain reduction and healing properties. Laughing can lower blood pressure and release endorphins. Like yawning, laughter also seems to be contagious. There's no doubt that it's social – we see examples every day of how one person's laughter can spread from person to person, even to a large group.

Try to bring out laughter in others by cultivating your sense of humor and playfulness. Humor is a great tool for bonding. It's humanizing and a terrific way to put people at ease and spread goodwill. Don't be afraid to poke fun at yourself. Humor can build trust, nurture resilience and spark creativity.

But a word of caution: We've all seen examples of when humor goes awry. Recently, a few professional comedians have gone off the rails, sparking anger instead of humor due to hurtful or offensive comments. When using humor, be respectful and let kindness be your yardstick. Avoid mean-spirited or biting humor. Don't try to get a laugh at someone else's expense. Keep things appropriate. Avoid hot-button topics and jokes or comments that could be perceived as sexist, racist or offensive in any way. At work or in social situations, aiming for a gentle, playful humor is a good rule of thumb.

Timing is everything. Be appropriate when and where you use humor, or as comedians say, "read the room." Don't overdo it. Sometimes with humor, less can be more.

Charlie Chaplin was fond of saying that a day without laughter is a day wasted. An old proverb says that if you are too busy to laugh, you are too busy.

Here are some suggestions for how to cultivate more laughter in your life and to hone your sense of humor:

• Smile more. Smiles are contagious, too. They spread goodwill and set the stage for laughter.
• Look for the funny side of things that happen in your life and share them with others.
• Set a goal to make at least one person in your life laugh every day.
• Don't be afraid to be silly!
• Spend time with people who make you laugh and who nurture your spirit of playfulness.
• Set aside a little time each week for something that makes you laugh: silly pet videos on social media, comic writers, a sitcom or a funny film.
• Play games. Even better, spend time playing with children and pets.