



newsletter for nurturing support groups

Issue 44
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Dear Reader,

Welcome to **WE**, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together to give each other personal support. In this and the last issue we discuss *Discounting*. Previously we examined what people discount, explored the levels of discounting, and identified language which empowers rather than discounts.

In this issue, we focus on discounting beyond words, discounting that takes the form of laughter, teasing, sarcasm, and ridicule. Sound grubby? Maybe. Remember, it is all intended to lead to the accounting or responsible behavior which I labeled "attending" in the last issue and call "empowering" in this one. Also, in this issue, we talk about discounting by marshmallowing and how to handle discounts that come from others.

These materials are excerpted, in part, from the upcoming book, *Growing Up Again, Parenting Yourself So You Can Parent Your Children*, which Connie Dawson and I are writing and which will be published by Hazelden. I look forward to your response to this information. I especially invite you to share ways you have discovered to counter or deal with Gallows Laughter in others and to recognize it in yourself. There is a reply form on the last page.

Sincerely,

Jean Illsley Clarke

Jean Illsley Clarke



What is Discounting?

Discounting — the process of denying — is a way of not seeing, hearing or feeling what is really going on. When people discount, they respond to something as if it were less, more, or different than it truly is.

Since we discount outside of our awareness, each of us needs to become aware of our own discounting habits and decide what changes we want to make. Remember, that if our habits of denial are long standing, change will be slow. It will come a bit at a time following some very deliberate work.

People discount themselves, other people, and/or situations in order to protect old decisions and perceptions about lack of power. Such decisions, which may have been an appropriate defense at one time in their lives, may be deeply damaging now. By discounting, people maintain a position of lack of responsibility that prevents themselves from claiming their power.

Discounting occurs in different modes or on different levels.

Levels of Discounting

Level 1. Discount the existence of the situation, problem or person.

Level 2. Discount the severity of the problem.
"That's no biggie."

Level 3. Discount the solvability of the problem.
"You can't fight City Hall."

Level 4. Discount the personal power to solve problems. "Nothing I can do about that."

For more information on levels of discounting, see Vol. 8 No. 1.

Teasing

Teasing, like laughter, can either build esteem and encourage intimacy or can cruelly discount. The Random House Dictionary defines teasing as an attempt to irritate, provoke, annoy, disturb, deceive or ridicule. Used to taunt, label, criticize or exclude, teasing is sometimes an attempt to make ourselves look better at someone else's expense.

Any time we are tempted to tease in a hurtful way, it is important to stop and do something healthy instead. Even if teasing is a well-entrenched habit, we must replace it with new supporting and affirming behavior, of having fun with, not at the expense of others.

There is a kind of harmless teasing called banter, pleasantry, or joking. The message it sends is, "I like you, I want to laugh with you, not at you, here's a funny way of telling you that I care about you or I notice you." This kind of banter is friendly, even loving. However, there are some cautions about its use. Since children under six are working at the task of separating reality from fantasy they may miss the friendly intent of this kind of teasing unless there are some very broad hints such as winks, big smiles or little rituals that assure that this is joking and not ridicule. Also, if teasing is offered to children instead of needed information, rules or love, it is damaging.



Suggested Activity

As a group, share descriptions of loving, esteem building teasing. After each description, identify the aspects of the situation that made the teasing positive.

For example: *Benjamin's story*

Four year old Benjamin came racing into the house, interrupted his father who was watching TV, placed himself squarely in front of his dad and announced, "I had an ice cream cone." His dad asked quizzically, "You did?" Benjy replied seriously, "Yes." His dad said, "Did you bring me one?" Benjy shouted, "No!" The father jumped to his feet and shouted, in a sing song voice, "How could you do that? You turkey! You know I love ice cream cones! What shall I do to you because you didn't bring me ice cream?" Benjy, delightedly, "Restel me!" Dad and son rolled on the floor, wrestling, hugging and laughing.

Aspects that made the teasing positive:

- Dad was willing to be interrupted.
- Dad paid attention to Benjamin's invitation to play.
- Dad exaggerated his actions by jumping up and shouting in a way that was different from the demeanor he uses when he gives instruction or discipline.
- Dad and Benjy ended the interlude with positive touch and laughter.

Sarcasm and Ridicule

Sarcasm and ridicule are forms of discounting that strike at the being of the target person. They issue a bitter and mocking invitation for contemptuous laughter which says "You are not important and your needs are not serious." Because they leave the person feeling ashamed, small, stupid or diminished, these forms of discounting are extremely difficult to counter.

Sarcasm and ridicule command an instant response from children and thus, may seem momentarily attractive to parents. However, parents may not realize that criticism, sarcasm and ridicule not only stop unwanted behaviors, they may also wither important aspects of a child's growth. It is healthier for everyone when adults replace ridicule and sarcasm with instruction. Tell children what you want them to do and how to do it. And remember, such instruction works better with adults, too.

Using Sarcasm to Toughen?

Some people believe sarcasm toughens children. The theory is that if children can learn to survive sarcasm at home and in the play group they will be able to let it roll off when they get it in the outside world. On the surface, this seems to work. But, people trained in such a way pay a price. They often have trouble limiting this skill to the outside world and they use ridicule against their own in-group and against themselves. Girls who are ridiculed for not being as good at math as boys often believe it and do not extend themselves to become proficient in math. They may mistrust other women who are good at math. Minority groups trash themselves; men learn to hide their sensitivity. Wouldn't it be better to change the culture so people don't learn to expect discounts.

If you are not aware of the uses of the game, "Dozens", to toughen street boys, you can read about it in *The Jesus Bag*, by William Grier and Price Cobbs, McGraw-Hill. Thinks about how people who learn to use put-downs skillfully continue to do that to themselves and their peers.



Discounting by Marshmallowing

Another way that well intentioned parents sometimes discount their children is by responding to their needs in a patronizing, over-protective or lenient way. This kind of parenting is done to make the parent look good, like a martyr, or because the parent doesn't know how or care to learn how to set and enforce rules and limits, or because the parent does not understand the child's developmental needs and is not giving him enough responsibility. It is called marshmallow parenting because it seems sweet, but it is sticky and smothering and hard for children to push away from so it "gums up" the children's boundaries and makes it harder for them to become separate and independent.

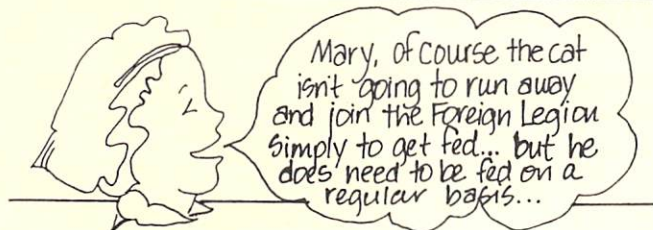
You can read more about how to give nurture and structure instead of marshmallowing in *Self-Esteem: A Family Affair* by Jean Ilseley Clarke, Harper and Row or in the *WE on Structure*, Vol. 6, No. 5 and on *Nurture*, Vol. 6, No. 6.

Suggested Individual Activity

How Can I Stop Discounting and Start Empowering?

Read through the following list of actions. Select two or three to start doing and do them. As you are ready, add others.

- Accept yourself as human. All people discount sometimes.
- Set some long-term goals to account, to stop discounting, in several areas that are important to you.
- Set a short time goal to change *one* of those areas.
- Use empowering responses or initiate responsible action at least once every day for a week. Do not be deterred if you feel awkward. Remember, if you do not stumble as you learn this new skill, you will probably be the first person in the history of the world to achieve competence without practice.
- Get outside support. Join a therapy group, a support group, a 12 step group. Get a friend who does not discount the area you are working on to cheer for you and plan celebrations for you.
- During the following week, add another area, etc.
- Plan celebrations to mark your successes in accounting.
- Use a journal to record your progress.
- Think about how discounting creates scarcities in your life. Decide to go for plenty.
- If you have big trouble replacing a particular discount with empowering, get some therapeutic help identifying and remaking the underlying, past decision.
- Ask a friend or associate to point out discounts to you *only* if you trust that person to do so with love and never, never to use that contract as an opportunity to get you, get even, embarrass or hurt you.
- Likewise, do not use your knowledge of discounting in a way that blames or shames others. Find solutions to problems without using accusations or name calling or put-downs.
- Be in charge of updating your beliefs to form the base for your life that will be most helpful for you and your family now.
- Love yourself, discounting and all.



Suggested Group Activity

What to Offer Instead of Ridicule and Sarcasm

Tell of one instance where sarcastic words pop into your mind. Examples: I know how to be sarcastic when Mary forgets to feed the cat, when Nathan calls from school and asks me to bring a project he forgot, when someone overdraws the bank account, when someone is late, when someone says the food is yucky.

Ask the group for a Suggestion Circle (directions on page 5) on what to do instead.

Suggested Individual Activity

How to Protect Myself When Someone Sends Ridicule, Sarcasm, or Destructive Laughter or Teasing My Way



DON'T LET IT IN

One way to deal with a destructive message is not to let it in.

When someone criticizes you,

Act Deaf!

When someone gives you a dirty look

Act Blind!

When someone slings mud at you,

Let It Roll Off!

Watch a duck preening in the water.

Visualize destructive messages forming into tiny droplets as soon as they hit you and rolling off your body the way the water rolls off the duck.

When someone sends you an arrow, throw up a protective shield of light or energy or any material you like, made invisible, and let the arrows bounce off and fall harmlessly to the ground.

Rules About Separating Helpful and Destructive Messages and Throwing Away Destructive

1. When someone says I'm bad, I'll decide if I should change and also remind myself that I'm not bad.
2. When someone criticizes me, I can show my hurt or not, cry now or later, and not run away.
3. When someone gives me a criticizing message, I can get a friend to support me when I hurt, and listen for the kernel of truth.
4. Judge the source. Listen for the kernel of truth.
5. I can sort through criticism, know if there is any help in it, and throw the rest away.
6. When someone criticizes me, I feel hurt. I don't need to hurt the other person to feel OK about me.
7. I let others know when they say something that hurts my feelings, in a respectful way.
8. If big people say something, I can listen and decide if what they say is helpful.
9. I can trust my feelings on whether the message is appropriate.
10. I deserve to be treated respectfully just because I'm me!
11. Take the bad with the good — but I only keep the good.

Laughter

Laughter can either *block* healing or *be* healing. Joyous laughter at a joke that disparages no one, or done in a connecting way builds esteem and offers intimacy. It invites the target person to be "on the inside," and to feel special. Laughter can also discount, alienate and disconnect as it puts the target person "on the outside."

Laughing at pain is sometimes defended as "having a sense of humor." Any laughter at the expense of someone's safety or self-esteem is destructive, not humorous. We may sometimes laugh ruefully at the human condition as we reflect upon our own past ineptness, but this kind of forgiving laughter comes only after anger, sadness, grieving, and acceptance of the situation and of one's own humanity are complete.

Look at the following situation and think how the laughter would sound at each of the four levels of discounting.

You fall and break your tail bone. The pain is intense.

Discounting:

1. "Ha, ha, ha." (There is no problem here)
2. "Chuckle, chuckle. Some fancy spill you took there." (This is not serious)
3. "Ha, ha, people fall on those steps every time it drops below freezing." (There is no solution to this problem, there are no options.)
4. "I'm glad it wasn't me who fell! Ha, ha, ha." (I have no personal power or responsibility to act in this situation.)

Compare these with the empowering, responsible response —

"Are you hurt? Can I help you?"

When someone is hurt, laughter is never appropriate.



Parental Laughter

Being laughed at is one of the cruelest ways to discount because it ridicules the target person at the same time it discounts the problem. Discounting laughter from parents rings in the ears of a child for days and that same long forgotten laughter can echo through his life years later in a way that signals, "You are not important. Don't dare to get close." It engenders timidity, withdrawal or rebellion or prompts habits of thought and behavior that are harmful to self and others. The message of such laughter is that familial love and support are scarce.

Before you laugh at a child's mishap, stop to think, will the child find this as funny as I do? Wait to see if the child laughs. Perhaps the mishap is truly not serious or painful. Then you can laugh together.



Children Who Laugh at Their own Pain

Disparaging laughter is especially harmful to children. When they are laughed at disrespectfully, they learn to laugh at their own pain in an attempt to be one of the "in group" or "in" the family.

If a child smiles, or laughs at his own pain, either physical or emotional, before he acts hurt, confused or embarrassed, stop and take stock. Has he already learned that he is supposed to laugh at his own pain? If so, you can expect him to neglect to take care of himself because he has learned to discount the information that pain sends: that he is to do something to protect or care for or heal himself.

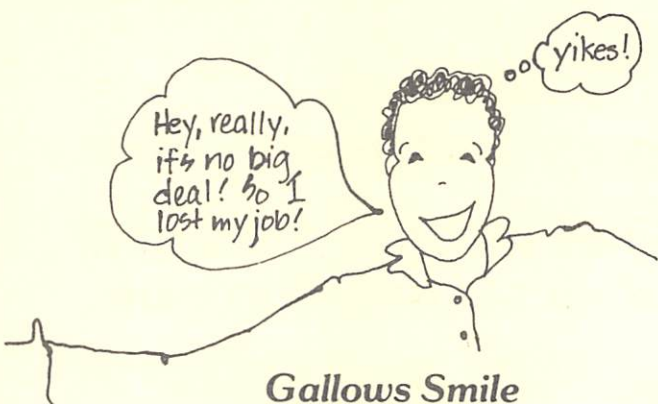
What can a parent do to stop discounting, self-destructive smiling or laughter in children?

- Stop laughing at pain or mishaps or dangerous, mean or destructive behavior yourself.
- Say "That does not seem funny to me." or "Let's talk about what we can do to help you instead of laughing at your problem/pain/embarrassment/mistake." or "I feel uncomfortable when you laugh at pain." or "Please don't do that."

If a young child is in a group that expects him to laugh at his own pain, do something. Tell the other kids to stop. Enlist the aid of other adults. Find a new play group for the child. Change day-care or nursery schools. Move if that is the only way you can stop the laughing at pain.

Tell a junior high-aged kid engaging in the frequent ridicule practiced by her age group, that though this is common behavior among kids her age, it is destructive, and you expect her to outgrow it shortly and *not* to use it at home.

If, in spite of your parental love and structures, your child continues to smile about her own misfortune or misbehavior, it signals that the child has internalized being discounted and is now internally discounting herself. Get whatever help she needs to get her turned around before you are faced with more serious behaviors.



Gallows Smile

Eric Berne, in *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* Grove Press, called an unconscious smile at our own pain a "gallows smile" because we are, in effect, smiling at our own destruction. The name comes from the old practice of a

Suggested Activity

condemned person on the gallows, telling a joke as the rope is placed around his neck so the crowd will be laughing as he dies.

As awful as it sounds, many of us do smile at our own pain or misfortune. Such smiles signal that we have touched some early area of our lives when our needs were not — nor could we get them — met. It was a situation that we needed to accept, at that point. It was a fine decision then to decide whatever we decided in order to stay alive and grow. But if, years later, we are still smiling about pain, about not getting what we need, it is a poor decision to hold onto. Now it keeps us from being responsible to ourselves and others.

To find out if you are modeling gallows smiles or laughter for your child, ask a friend to report to you if she notices you smile or laugh at something painful or disturbing. Choose a friend who will report honestly and with love and who will not use this opportunity to “get” you. If you aren’t sure about a friend, use a counselor or therapist.

Talk with your counselor about what concerns you most about your life or your family. Your counselor can soon tell you if you are smiling. If you smile, welcome it as a physical sign of internal discounting. Granted, at first you may want to deny the smile, and you may be angry about its discovery; after all, a true gallows smile or laugh is done unconsciously, outside of our awareness. But now that you know about it, you can change it!



Checking Out a Gallows Smile

When checking out a gallows smile, first check to see if you had an automatic discount response that echoes one of these samples of the four levels of discounting.

The friend or counselor says: “You asked me to tell you if you smiled when you described pain, embarrassment, or failure. Did you know that you smiled when you told me you got ticketed for drunken driving?”

1. I didn’t smile. (There is no problem)
2. How can you turn a little smile into such a big deal? (Not serious)
3. Everybody laughs at that sort of thing — you want to see a grown person cry? (No solution)
4. I can’t help it. Sometimes my mouth just smiles. (No personal power)

Next, check your physical response by placing your fingers firmly on either side of your mouth. Feel your smile. Repeat what you said when you smiled. If you feel your cheek muscles push for the smile, press firmly with your fingers to prevent the smile and repeat what you said before. Notice as soon as you prevent your smile, you stop discounting your sadness, fear, anger, or whatever you were denying. Now, you are ready to get on with the healing of that particular pain.

Remember, as you learn to stop discounting types of laughter, you create lots of opportunities in your life for delightful, healing, joyous laughter. Norman Cousins, in his books *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norton & Co., describes how he used laughter to help heal a serious illness.

After reading the article about Laughter, pick specific items about which you would like more ideas. Ask your group to generate ideas in a Suggestion Circle. For example:

“My daughter’s classmates laugh at her because she is fat. How can I help her?”

“My family sometimes laughs at my struggles about being adopted. They say I should forget my past and take care of them. What can I do or say?”

“I don’t want to accept that I may use the Gallows Smile. How can I deal with my guilt (shame)?”

Here are the directions for leading a Suggestion Circle.



How to Lead a Suggestion Circle

A Suggestion Circle is an efficient tool for collecting high-quality options for solving a specific problem. It takes three to five minutes to collect suggestions from a dozen people. Unlike brain-storming, participants offer only their best suggestions. Here is how to run one:

1. The leader invites people to sit in a circle and asks a person in the group to share a problem. (Deal with only one problem in each Circle.)
2. Have the person state the problem specifically and briefly. Questions of clarification should be answered briefly so that the group understands the problem.
3. Ask someone to be ready to record the suggestions made so the person with the problem has a written list to take home.
4. Ask each person in the group to think of his or her best idea.
5. Invite whoever wishes to start to offer a concise, one- or two-sentence suggestion. Then the next person in the Circle should offer a suggestion or say, “I pass.”
6. In response to each suggestion, the person with the problem says something like “Thank you.” No one should comment on or add to another’s suggestion.
7. When everyone has had a turn, the leader may choose to ask those who passed if they want to offer a suggestion.
8. When the Circle is complete, the leader invites the parent to take the suggestions home, consider them, and use them in a way that makes sense for him or her.

—Nat Houtz

From *Help! For Parents of Three to Six Year Olds*, by Jean Illsley Clarke, Gail Davenport, Nat Houtz, and Maggie Lawrence.

Harper & Row

Suggested Group Activity

Update Your Rules About What and How to Reject Sarcasm, Ridicule and Criticism

Unless we think about the old rules in our heads, we use them automatically. You can lead this exercise with a group of two to twenty people (or you can do it by yourself.)

SAY: The purpose of this exercise is to list old ideas or early messages that we have received about separating helpful and destructive messages and about throwing away destructive messages. We will update them later. "Old" means, "When I was younger, I got the idea that this is how I'm supposed to do it." I may or may not agree with those ideas now.

Pass out half sheets of paper.

ASK:

- Will you spend about three minutes listing the earliest messages that you remember hearing (or knowing without actually being told) about what to do with criticism?
- Write quickly. Jot down whatever comes into your head. Use six year old's words like, "Big people must be right."
- Don't worry about being right or wrong.
- Try to remember messages from when you were little. Some of the items may contradict each other and you may not believe these things now. Remember that you don't have to share your list if you don't want to.

If you are working with a group of people, collect the lists.

SAY: If you are willing to hand in your lists without your names on them, I will combine them.

Combine and duplicate them or list them on newsprint.

SAY: Here are the directions. Turn the items into a list of ways to separate helpful from destructive messages and throw away the destructive. Look at each of the items individually.

1. Cross out items you do not believe are true.
2. Star those that you think are important to keep.
3. Rewrite those that you want to change.
4. Add any rules that you think are important.

Remember that these are individual rules. We will not all cross out or star the same ones or add the same new rules. There will not be a right or a wrong list.

After three minutes . . .

ASK: In groups of three, will you compare what you did with each item? Listen to each other. It is not necessary to agree.

After eight minutes . . .

ASK: Will one person from each small group share one awareness with the large group?

SAY: Thank you and I invite you to take the list home and continue to create your updated list of personal rules about rejecting destructive messages.

Pass out the Handout found on the following page so the members can read how other people have revised their rules. 6.

GROUND RULES

Offer Protection From Discounts

Adequate ground rules offer each group participant protection from discounts. One Group member could discount another by ridiculing her ideas, ignoring her requests or suggestions, laughing derisively at anything about her, and spreading information she would rather not have known.

Look at the following ground rules and identify which one or ones protect members from each of the discounts mentioned above.

GROUND RULES

Everyone Participates
Right to Pass
All Beliefs Are Honored
Mutual Respect
Confidentiality

You can identify other ways that people discount during group activities. If these ground rules do not protect members from the discounts you identify, make up new rules that will.

OPENING ACTIVITY ♡♡

Appreciating Laughter

- Hand out name tags.
- Choose a partner. Make a name tag for him and ask him to tell you about one time recently when he and other people laughed with joy or amusement at something that did not put down anyone. How did that laughter affect the group?
- Introduce your partner and tell the group the effect joyful, non-discounting laughter had on your partner and on the group but only if you both wish to share that information.

CLOSING ACTIVITY THAT OFFERS EVERYONE A POSITIVE PERSONAL MESSAGE ♡♡

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask several people to share what they learned during the meeting.
- Ask for resentments. Listen to resentments, do not defend or explain.
- Ask for appreciations.
- Ask people to read the following affirmation in unison.
"I value myself, and others."
"I will leave behind cutting laughter, derisive teasing, sarcasm, and ridicule."
"I will laugh with joy, tease lovingly, set clear boundaries in a respectful way, and affirm myself and others."

Suggested Format for Group Meetings

Place

Date

Time

Person in Charge

Program:

- Opening activity that offers everyone a positive personal message
- Ground rules
- Celebrating wins and sharing problems
- Asking for support
- Practice skills, new learnings, play
- Suggestion circle
- Plan the next meeting
- Resentments and Appreciations
- Closing activity that offers everyone a positive personal message.

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Led by Jean Illsley Clarke.

Write to WE for details.

Response: Please send to WE

1. Specific ways I deal with, confront or counter Gallows Smiles or Laughter from others.

2. Ways I recognize and deal with times when I use Gallows Smiles or Laughter.

WE
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- Thoughts on theory and purpose of support groups
- News from other support groups

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