

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 201: JENNIFER AAKER AND NAOMI BAGDONAS

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Making progress along a new S curve requires that we disrupt our current thinking, our current thought patterns. One of the best ways to pattern interrupt while also lowering stress and your instinct to run away is humor. Even the anticipation of laughing decreases cortisol, our stress hormone, and epinephrine, our flight hormone, by 39 and 70 percent, respectively. Laughter helps you disrupt yourself.

And that's what we're talking about today with Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, both professors at Stanford, and the authors of the new book, *Humor Seriously*.

So, Jennifer and Naomi, welcome, we are delighted to have you on. It's taken us a while to actually make this happen, but we wanted to start by asking the question, why this book and why did you decide to write it?

Naomi Bagdonas: Well, it started about five years ago when we, Jennifer and I set out to answer these three simple questions and we wrote a book along the way. So the questions were, number one, how would our businesses change for the better if we had more joy at work? Number two, how would our world change for the better if we navigated our lives on the precipice of a smile? And most importantly, how do we get there? And this was really personal for both of us. Our journey has sort of come in different, in different forms. So, Jennifer, you start how is personal for you?

Jennifer Aaker: You know, there's a couple of, of things that really got me to, to want to write this book with Naomi. But one of them, at its core, was really the work that my mom has done her entire life.

She's been a volunteer for hospice for 40 years. And so I grew up with my two sisters hearing stories about what people wish for in their last days of life, um, because we're fun. That's what fun families do, Whitney.

So one of the things that we heard time and time again is that people mentioned humor. People wish they had laughed more and didn't take themselves so seriously. And they, remember they're saying this in the last days of their life, one of the most serious, most meaningful moments of their life. And it struck me as so odd. You know, humor is free. Laughter is something as, you know, you give away as generous as, you know, anything.

And to think that humor and joy contribute to a more meaningful life struck me as profound.

Whitney Johnson: Ok, so pull us forward. So, you had this experience growing up with your mom working in hospice. People wish they had been more sort of lighthearted throughout their lives. So that had this, this imprinting for you. How did you get to the point where you wanted to write this book with Naomi?

Jennifer Aaker: Well, the other thing that happened, I think I met you along the way, Whitney, I was writing this book called *The Dragonfly Effect* with my husband, Andy. And it was about how you make positive change in the world, harnessing the power of story and social networks. So about eight years ago and we decided to take a year off and work with some Stanford students to see if we could put the book to work and actually see if we could get 100,000 people in the bone marrow registry.

Because the story that inspired our book was basically authored by one of my students, Robert Chatwani, who shared the story of his best friend, Sameer Bhatia, who needed to find a match and didn't find one in the bone marrow industry. So during my class, Robert had really launched an effort with Sameer's friends and family to find a match and in that process were able to recruit 25,000 South Asians to be part of the bone marrow registry and find a perfect match for Sameer.

But they found it too late and Sameer passed on. So Andy and I thought it would really be interesting and beautiful if we spent one year trying to create legacy for Sameer and so we had a goal getting 100,000 people in the bone marrow registry. And when you put that out there in the world, you know, families come to you and doesn't matter if their kid has leukemia or if a parent or grandparent does, they come. And we worked with all of these families and we, we got over a 113,000 people on the registry, but we lost almost every single person we worked with except for one person. And his name was Amit Gupta.

And what was so interesting about Amit Gupta, was that the way that he lived and he still alive with us today was authentically humorous and his team and at his company were easy to laugh. And his friends and family cultivated this sort of culture of optimism. It wasn't that he took his leukemia unseriously, he took it very seriously, but somehow they were able to move forward, not taking themselves too seriously, and in so doing, they were nimble, they were effective and even the comedians involved in their campaign and he did find a match and he's alive and well today. And that got me thinking, what does humor do neurologically, physically, psychologically?

And that's where I met Naomi.

Whitney Johnson: Ah, enter Naomi. Naomi?

Naomi Bagdonas: So I came at it from a slightly different angle. There's this quote, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog."

Few people are interested and the frog dies of it. I always loved biology growing up. So, so that got me interested.

No, for me, my journey was less about meaning, at least at first. And it was more about just not feeling soulless at work. And so while Jennifer was on her journey with her first book, I was spending my career climbing the ranks of a major consulting firm by day and doing improv and sketch comedy at night.

And I sort of felt like I had been leading this double life because one day a client told me in passing that she had never seen me laugh. You know, we worked together basically every day for three months. She'd never seen me laugh. And by the way, she imagined that I spent most of my weekends alone with my cat, who she guessed was named, Cat. So it was this moment of realizing I'm leading a complete double life where I'm doing really well at work. I am accomplishing all of my stated goals, and yet I'm only finding joy on weekends. And I feel like I'm

living pretty inauthentically in a way that's going to lead to burnout. So I wanted to believe that I could have both, be good at my job and also be joyful at work. So, that set me on this path to understanding how can we bring those two things together?

And in doing that, I came to really, deeply believe that humor and laughter is one of the most powerful tools we have for accomplishing really serious things. So, I was doing designing and facilitating these innovation sessions with groups of executives or, or board retreats, and I would do these little interventions where I would incorporate, you know, a little lighthearted line or instead of having people raise their hands when they hear something particularly insightful, I would hand out cowbells and they would ring a cowbell. You know, something that's just a little bit lighthearted that cues people to think, "OK, we're here to be creative, to have breakthroughs together as a team, but also to, to not take ourselves so seriously."

And so that was my journey when I went to business school as a student at Stanford, which, which led me to meeting Jennifer. And so I had guest lectured in Jennifer's class and we had this de-brief call afterwards, which was supposed to be like 20 minutes, "Hey, how'd it go? What can we improve?"

And three hours later, were, we've had this enormous, you know, soul exposing digression about the power of humor and how it's the most important force in the world, you know, I mean, how it unlocks love and unlocks meaning and how we fundamentally need more of it in our world.

And so that conversation set out, set us on this journey, which took us six years, not a short, not a short journey. And, uh, and here we are today.

Whitney Johnson: You have said in your book that "humor is a competitive advantage in business." Will you tell us more?

Jennifer Aaker: Yeah, absolutely. So, humor works with business people because business people are people.

And one of the things that we found is that, you know, as you previously noted, large, large scale datasets like that collected by Gallup, which asks a very simple question, did you smile or laugh yesterday? And when people answer that question and this data set is 1.4 million people big, collected across 166 countries, people say, "yes," at 16, at 18, at 20, and then around 21, 22, 23, all of a sudden people are silent and you know, the answer becomes "no" right when we start to enter the workforce. And it doesn't become "yes" again until we retire. So, you have to wait till you're about 70ish for it to pick up.

Which is horrifying. Those are 47 way too serious years. So, we know there's something about work. You know, people start to smile and laugh again on weekends, but not weekdays, etc.. But here's the thing that's really remarkable because humor is so underappreciated and so under leveraged. So, you're literally leaving money and health and well-being on the table. One study found that simply adding a mildly funny line to the end of a sales pitch like, you know, "Here, this is my final offer and I'll throw my pet frog" increased customers willingness to pay by 18 percent. Another set of studies found that leaders who have a sense of humor and it wasn't they're funny, it was they just have a sense of humor, any sense of humor, are seen as 27 percent more motivating and admired. And their employees are 15 percent more satisfied in their jobs. So this has significant return on investment. And part of this is that shared laughter accelerates a feeling of closeness and trust. So, when pairs of strangers laugh together for five minutes, as we did right before this interview, and then they're asked to do a self-disclosure exercise, like where do you shop or, you know, what are you drinking right now? Their interactions are rated as 30 percent more intimate than a control condition. So basically, humor is shortening the distance between two people.

A last sort of final study, our, our, our book is chock-full of science that's fun. When you ask couples, you know, just remember a time you laugh together versus remember a time that you had fun together or that you were happy together. The individuals in the first condition later report to be 23 percent more satisfied in their relationships.

So just think about that. You know that we all go to counseling as couples, well some of us, let's say, you know, theoretically, and you invest time, you invest money when all you could be doing potentially is also just cultivating these moments of shared laughter. Even reminiscing about them is significant.

Naomi Bagdonas: I think part of what's [clears throat] sorry...

Jennifer Aaker: This is a turning point, Whitney. She always, she always has to clear her throat before something very profound comes out of it. So, get ready. Hold on to your horses.

Naomi Bagdonas: The more, the more throat clearing, the more you can just brace yourself for what is about to happen.

Oh, I was going to say that it's important to realize that a lot of this is chemical, that laughing has unparalleled effects on our neurochemistry and our behavior.

So we know that it changes the chemistry of our brains to make us more primed for connection, more creative, more resourceful, more resilient to stress.

And this is because when we laugh, our brains release a cocktail of hormones.

You release dopamine, endorphins, oxytocin, we lower our cortisol, and these hormones change not just how we feel, more calm, confident, resourceful, but also how others perceive us, as more influential, more likable and more trustworthy. And so, this is, you know, people think that humor is sort of fun, frivolous, and maybe it changes our psychology, but this is really changing our physiology as well. And it's deeply ingrained in how we interact with each other. By the way, oxytocin is the same hormone that is released... Actually, do you know when, when else oxytocin is released?

Whitney Johnson: Is this a quiz? Because I think...

Naomi Bagdonas: It's a pop quiz.

Whitney Johnson: All right. Well, the pop-up quiz is it's released when you're breastfeeding a baby. It's released, I think when you're holding hands. It's released when you are having sex.

Naomi Bagdonas: Exactly. Beautiful. OK, so what do the following things have in common? Having sex, giving birth, by the way, giving birth as well, breastfeeding and giving birth. Having sex, giving birth and laughing with your colleagues on Zoom.

Whitney Johnson: They make you happy.

Naomi Bagdonas: Everyone's building trust and no one's wearing pants.

Ba-Dum-Cha. I didn't bring my sound effect today.

Jennifer Aaker: Oh that would have been good.

Naomi Bagdonas: Wait...

What do the following things have in common? Having sex, giving birth and laughing with your colleagues on Zoom.

[Drum roll]

Everyone's building trust and no one's wearing pants.

Jennifer Aaker: But can we just, like, reflect for a moment, Naomi, how good is Whitney? I don't think, no one has been this exhaustive at like, "Oh yeah, oxytocin. I got this."

Naomi Bagdonas: I know. It's, that's, it's really it's really lovely to be here.

Whitney Johnson: Goldstar.

All right. So a couple of observations from what you just said. First of all, I'm a teetotaler, but this is the cocktail I can drink.

So, we're going for that.

Jennifer Aaker: Which is way better joke than Naomi's.

Naomi Bagdonas: And this is a cocktail you can drink before noon, at that.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly, for a breakfast even.

And then the second thing that I thought was really compelling for me personally is that we are in a family of workers, like I like to work. My husband grew up on a farm. His idea of fun is going out and planting our strawberries and blackberries and blueberries. I mean, we like to work. And so when you say to someone like us, "Hey, you should have more fun together." We're kind of like, "Oh, what does that even mean?" But when you say, "Laugh together more." We can do that. We can all laugh together more. So, that to me was a very interesting insight as you said, that is, "How do we find ways to laugh together more?"

Naomi Bagdonas: Right. And that is it. It's changing our orientation towards laughter and recognizing that it is actually a really healthy and profoundly powerful thing in our lives. So, this is the, that's going back to the idea of navigating your life on the precipice of a smile, right? What does it look like to go through your day and expect to be delighted rather than disappointed? Expect for things to make you smile or laugh and be more generous with that laughter too.

Whitney Johnson: So I hope that you have this on a banner on your website is that "Live your life on the precipice of a smile and expect to be delighted." Those are just beautiful, lovely phrases.

Naomi Bagdonas: You'll see that on the banner of our website by the end of the day.

Jennifer Aaker: On it.

Whitney Johnson: All right. Well, I was telling my husband this morning that, you know, I made a suggestion to him yesterday that he walk for five minutes when he gets up every morning. And he said he did it, you know, for the last three days. And I said I said, "This is my love language." And he said, "No, listening to your, what you're telling me is that when I listen to your advice, that is your loved language." So there you go.

Naomi Bagdonas: So can I say something on your topic of walking every morning, walking for five minutes every morning?

Whitney Johnson: Yes! Please do.

Naomi Bagdonas: So, similarly, one of the most powerful things, one of the things that we tell our students to do is for one week write down three funny things at the end of each day.

Whitney Johnson: Oh!

Naomi Bagdonas: So, get to the end of each day and write down what are three things that made you smile or laugh that day. And what we find and what we know from, from research as well is that we, you know, the

priming effect in psychology says that we find what we set out to look for. So, on day one, you might get to the end of the day and think, "Gosh, did I even smile? I guess maybe my dog, you know, chewing his bone in a funny way, made me smile." And then by day seven, you're thinking, "Oh, there was that person in the park who was, you know, so obsessed with their text message in a funny way or there was you know, when I walked into the kitchen and my partner was doing this, this and that, it made me laugh." And so, what we know is that these small behavior changes, whether it's walking for five minutes every morning or, you know, writing down three funny things at the end of each day actually have a profound impact on our psychology and behavior. And studies have shown that when people do this exact exercise, when they write down, you know, three funny things at the end of each day, that they report, um, that in the, in this research condition, people then report lower instances of depression, lower stress, and also increase perceptions of control in their lives. So, you can now give your husband two homework assignments to walk and to write down his funny things list.

Whitney Johnson: Right. So, to listen to your wife and write down what's funny.

Naomi Bagdonas: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Now, if you're listening, you can feel a homework assignment coming on, because I'm going to challenge you at the end of this podcast to write down three funny things for seven days straight, which is 21 things. That's a lot.

Jennifer Aaker: Listen to her advice, people.

Whitney Johnson: All right. You talk about four different humor styles. You have a quiz that people can take. First of all, tell us where people can go to take the quiz and then tell us about the different humor styles.

Jennifer Aaker: So you go to humorseriously.com. That's humorseriously.com. And then you can go take this very fun, brief, scientifically-fueled quiz.

Naomi Bagdonas: Jennifer, I feel like we say the name of our website enough that we need a, like a catchy tune for it, you know, like [jingle] or something like that, right, so like people getting caught in their heads

Wow, Whitney, we knew we were going to have a great time recording a podcast with you, but we did not know that we were going to come away with a jingle, a custom jingle and a new banner for our website, so this has really been...

Whitney Johnson: Good!

Naomi Bagdonas: We've accomplished a lot.

Jennifer Aaker: Big win.

Whitney Johnson: Yes. I will look forward to the royalties. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Aaker: First of all, the book and our work is not about being funny or trying to be funny. In fact, it's quite the opposite. It's not about cracking jokes.

It's about, you know, cultivating joy and harnessing humor as this secret weapon in the right way, in the right context, with sort of secrets from comedians built in.

And we might get there, we might not. But it's chapter three.

And so that said, when a lot of people do think of humor, they do think of someone who is funny.

And those are our first category. They are standups. They are bold, natural entertainers who are often seen as "funny." They aren't afraid to cross a line and ruffle feathers for a good laugh. And they often build intimacy through teasing. So we'll often hear stand up, say, "If I'm making fun of you, it's a sign I like you."

And then next is sweethearts. They're more subtle and affiliative. Their humor uplifts others rather than teasing or poking fun. So they tend to be earnest and honest and understand, and they have to listen closely when a sweetheart is in the room. They're sometimes often seen as a fun, but not necessarily strictly funny.

Snipers are edgy, sarcastic and nuanced. They pick their moments carefully and joke more often to make a point than to lift people up or tear them down, so they don't necessarily seek the spotlight, but they won't hesitate to cross the line for a laugh.

And then last are the magnet. They are affiliative and expressive, that big personality who gets everyone laughing in a positive way and they're outgoing and they keep things warm and uplifting. Kind of like Jimmy Fallon in the US. They avoid controversial humor while radiating charisma. So, Whitney, do you want to tell us what you are or should we guess?

Whitney Johnson: Oh, well, you... Oh, I'm now throat clearing. Get ready, Naomi.

Jennifer Aaker: It's profound.

Naomi Bagdonas: Something profound is about to come out.

Whitney Johnson: Why don't you guess? You offered to guess, so let's let's make it a little bit of fun.

Jennifer Aaker: OK.

We guess you are mostly magnet.

Naomi Bagdonas: I totally agree.

Jennifer Aaker: With the side of sweetheart?

Naomi Bagdonas: Yeah I would. Yeah I would have said strong magnet. Yeah. And then secondary, I would definitely say sweetheart over sniper. So yeah I totally agree with that.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. OK, you would be correct. So magnet is 47 percent, sweetheart is 45 percent, standup is five percent and sniper is four percent.

Jennifer Aaker: Wow. I wouldn't have guessed a little bit more on stand up, but everything else is very, makes a ton of sense.

Naomi Bagdonas: Wow. 47 percent magnet is very high. That's 95th percentile plus, um...

Whitney Johnson: Well, I am an overachiever.

Naomi Bagdonas: ... based on the general population. So that's, yeah, very... I knew that I was being drawn into the screen on this podcast. I was just like..

Jennifer Aaker: Now one thing that's interesting is that each of these styles, they have strength, but they also have risks. They want to know about the risks associated with humor. And one of them really is actually correlated with each of these styles. So, for example, standups and snipers, because they often tease as almost a way of building intimacy means "I like you," they might over index on teasing others or being sort of darker or what potentially could be seen as mean, especially if they're in the room of magnets and, and, and sweethearts.

And so you think about that in the context right now, especially a "me too" and "cancel" culture. And it's, it's, it's interesting to put in light. Also, you know, I'm also a magnet-sweetheart, similar to you, and individuals typically, although now I sort of shift styles and given the context and what I've learned from Naomi in our research, but they tend to over index on self-deprecation, which is fine when you have a lot of status, but when you're lower in status, it can perpetuate that, that lower level status, over self-deprecating. Often it hurts you, especially in the workforce. So it's, it's useful to know both the pros and the cons or risks associated with each of these styles.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, you know, what's interesting about that is I'm thinking about Clayton Christensen. I don't, Jennifer, did you ever know him?

Jennifer Aaker: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: OK, so Clayton, Naomi, was a professor at Harvard Business School, one of my mentors. And I co-founded the Disruptive Innovation Fund with him and his son. And so Clayton is or was six foot eight, brilliant, you know, sort of intimidating on any sort of metric that you can devise. And his humor was over-the-top, self-deprecating. But to your point, Jennifer, is he could do it because he had a lot of social capital that he could expend. So the self-deprecation didn't, didn't sort of pull too much of his social capital and allowed him to connect with people.

Naomi Bagdonas: Yeah, it's so interesting, you're bringing up an important point, which is that humor is so tied to status and the type of humor that's going to land in any situation is really tied to the social dynamics of that moment. Actually, there's this concept in comedy called, that goes, "Never punch down." It's a rule where you basically never want to make the target of your humor someone of lower status or a group of, you know, "lower status." And so, as you rise in status in an organization, or in this case physically to six foot eight, you, you know, you sort of tower in status over other people and, or stature, and, and when you are that high status, everyone seems to be punching down, right? If you're the CEO and you're making fun of a junior analyst, that is punching down. So, um, so, yeah, for people who have really big, bold personalities or in high status positions, that, that particular style can be really powerful. And I think another thing that's important to recognize here is we can shift our style based on the situation and actually we should.

So when I was, um, still relatively junior in my career, I started leading these workshops, these innovation strategy sessions with groups of board members or senior executive teams of Fortune 100 companies. And in that, in that context, I'm standing at the front of the room with a group of people who is, you know, mostly 15 years my senior and significantly more male than me. And, um, and so what I found in that context was, I'm a natural magnet by the way, but sniper humor and standup humor worked really powerfully for me. So if someone, if a, if someone in the room said something that was a little bit flippant or a little dismissive of a, of a content piece that I was talking about or a framework that I was presenting that they were going to work with, um, if I like, really shot back at them in sort of a teasing sniper way, everyone would laugh and it would gain me status and it sort of got people on board. Whereas then when I'm teaching in the business school, I'm technically the most senior person in the room because I'm, you know, the, the, you know, teacher along with Jennifer. And, uh, and so in that context, I really have to lean on my magnet and sweetheart humor because it would feel inappropriate for me to tease a student and it would feel sort of uncomfortable and mean. So again, this is not, we don't necessarily think about our sense of humor this way. We think, "OK, it's something that I just carry with me and I walk in the room and I neither, I bring my sense of humor or not," but really there's, there's much more nuance. And once we understand our style, we can wield it more, more effectively and more strategically.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that's going to be really fun for people who are listening to this and knowing that they want to and sometimes need to adapt their, their style.

OK, so in our work, we've developed this framework. It's an S curve of Learning™ framework as a model for thinking about how we grow and develop. And so at the launch point, everything's new. You're bottom of the S, you're trying to figure things out. It's characterized by overwhelming anxiety. And then you move into the sweet spot where you're just in the groove. All your neurons are firing, you're exhilarated. That's why it's called the sweet spot. And then you get to the high end where you're in mastery. You figured things out, but you're also a little bit bored. And so you've got to do, take on a new challenge and jump to the bottom of a new S curve. And so, um, so

one of the things I wanted to ask you is how, how could you use humor to help dial down the fear when you're doing something new? And often when you're doing something new, it involves you're messing up a lot. So, how can you use humor to diffuse what can often turn into shame very quickly to keep you back in this place of "I'm learning, I'm growing, developing" as opposed to derailing into shame?

Naomi Bagdonas: Yeah, I think there's this meta point about humor that it, it helps us move up that curve because it, it lowers our cortisol. It, you know, it sort of suppresses that fear. Just laughter suppresses that fear.

And it can also be a really powerful way to, to show what some of those vulnerabilities are in a, in a way that that feels safe. So one example is Connor Diemand-Yauman, who's our, our co-lecturer at Stanford, and he's also a serial entrepreneur and a CEO. He had joined as co-CEO of Merit America, which is a large nonprofit in the US, and so he's brand new to this organization. He is, his, his co-CEO is about to go out on maternity leave. So the leader that everyone in this organization knows is about to leave and this brand new guy is coming in to take over. So it's this moment where he doesn't quite know the culture, you know, super well. It's a really hard moment for our country. There's a lot of tension, there's a lot of incredible sadness. And so, in that context, how does he move up that curve and how does he get past his feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed by this new thing that he's taking on? So, it was his first all hands meeting with, with the entire organization. They're on Zoom, of course. And it's sort of the official handoff from the, from Rebecca, his co-CEO, to him. So, you know, he's talking on the Zoom meeting. Everyone's looking at him. He's sharing his screen, you know, showing a deck about what, you know, what he plans to do and, and he hands, you know, the mic back to Rebecca. So it's Rebecca's turn to talk. And what he does is he leaves his screen share on. Now everyone's thinking, "Oh, my gosh, this new CEO accidentally left his screen share on and now he's like navigating to his desktop and he's opening a like a Web browser." You know, everyone's like, "What is this guy doing?" So he opens a Web browser. He types in "Google" and he types in "things inspirational CEOs say during hard times."

Everyone like lost it, right? The whole organization just totally lost it. And it was this way of signaling vulnerability, you know, signaling, "Hey, I'm at a launch point. This is, you know, I've got some anxiety here, not yet in the groove." And there's some vulnerability around that as well. And it's also his way of signaling care and compassion. Right? "I want to be a good leader for you. I'm not exactly sure how and, and I really want to be inspirational." By the way, Connor then told Rebecca that he had a few more things to say because Rebecca actually had a few more things to say. And he starts reading verbatim off the list. You know, everyone's laughing.

So, what's important to recognize is this was an intentional move for him.

Connor has done improv in the past and he deeply knows this research around humor. It was a tactic for him to both have himself be more comfortable, quell his own anxiety, but also have the entire organization recognize that he is human. He's here to lead them, but he's also here to be human and, um, and, you know, and be approachable to them and not take himself too seriously while taking the mission of the of the organization really seriously.

Jennifer Aaker: So, what's happening here is that, you know, as you mentioned at the launch point, you're basically you're trying something new, so you're overwhelmed, you know, and feeling anxious. And what happens is that humor is a powerful insulator against feeling overwhelmed and anxious. And it's because laughter suppresses cortisol, the stress hormone that's been linked to these higher levels of anxiety and increased levels of depression. And so by keeping the cortisol levels in check, not just for Connor, but for the whole team, we also actually spotlight a story of Leslie Blodgett, the CEO and founder of Bare Minerals, Bare Escentuals,, who has used humor strategically in the exact same way to really reduce stress and help us cope with distress in, in hard moments.

And she's done that incredibly effectively with her team as has other leaders like Sara Blakely and Dick Costolo, but what's so interesting is that these leaders somehow must be either closet academics or somehow intuitively know that laughter significantly alleviates the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In one study, when people went through an eight week humor skills training, they exhibited less depression, less stress and more perceptions of control after the completion of the course. So it's, it's very powerful. We talk a lot

about the power of humor being much more physiological rather than just psychological. And so the leaders that we work with or study or do case studies on seem to know this intuitively. But what's powerful is that you can learn it as well.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, on the topic of learning, you dissect what makes something funny in your book. Can you tell us more and give us one or two tips on if we're trying to phrase something or be clever in what we're doing? Give us... Open up the book for us, please.

Naomi Bagdonas: Absolutely. So the first two principles of comedy to beware others are, are truth and misdirection. So we, truth, we often think that humor is about inventing the perfect funny thing from thin air. And in reality, it's more often about simply noticing what's true, what sticks out, what's odd or absurd about our, our lives, and naming that true thing. Second, misdirection. So, so surprise and misdirection. We often laugh because we think that someone is going in one direction and they end up going in the other direction.

So I'll give an example.

Imagine that you are at a dinner party and you're partway through the first course and one of your, one of your friends walks in the door, you know, horribly late.

Everyone looks up at them and she says, "Sorry I'm late. I didn't want to come."

Ok, so this potentially gets, you know, gets a laugh. Now, why is this funny? The truth is obvious, right? We've all felt this way. We've all been on the couch or been really heads down in a book or watching a show. And we're thinking, "Oh, I'm just uncomfortable. I don't want to go." And introverts, by the way, can relate to this more. But, you know, there's truth in that. And then the misdirection, Whitney, maybe you can help me with where is the misdirection in that line? "Sorry I'm late. I didn't want to come."

Whitney Johnson: Well, she starts out by apologizing, saying "I'm sorry that I'm late." So you expect, "Oh, something bad happened, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And then she goes a totally different direction.

Naomi Bagdonas: Exactly. So such a fundamental construct of interaction, right? "I'm so sorry I'm late. Fill in the blank with the excuse." Right? Traffic was horrible. The zoom link didn't work, you know, or now we could just say, "It's 2021." We're still living in the ghost of 2020. That's an excuse for everything. So, so that's number one is just recognizing humor doesn't come from thinking up this perfect random one liner. It's actually from just recognizing what's true for you in the moment.

So the first tip that we would give is ask yourself, "What's true?" And make observations about your life. So for example, what do you what do you like more than other people? What do you, what irks you more than other people? What areas of contrast exist in your life where someone from your work life would be surprised that something happens in your home life or vice versa? You know, so these just little unique, you know, what are the unique things about your world is where you'll find humor.

An executive that I work with, he's a, he's a high powered CEO and so he came to me to, to help him create some humor in this talk he was giving. And he said, "OK, so what funny line should I use?" And I said, "Great, forget the speech for a second. Just tell me about your life. What's going on right now? What tension exists in your life right now? What's, what's the dynamic like with your family?" And what we came to was, you know, he gives me all these things and he goes, you know, my kids don't listen to me. I'm like, "OK, that's great. Tell me more." He goes, "I just, it's amazing to me the difference between when I'm at work, it's like everyone hangs on to every word. You know, I say one thing in passing and then two weeks later, I've got a 20 page deck that builds on my idea. It's magic. And then at home, I've got to say something 20 times for it to even resonate. And not only that, but I feel like I'm, I'm the one like catering to my kids."

And so, you know, so he ended up in this presentation talking about how "here I'm the CEO, but when I go home, I'm the executive assistant to an 11 year old daughter and I take that job very seriously." Right? And so he shares some details about that. So, that would be, you know, tip number one is just make observations about your

life. And once you have those observations, you can apply these simple techniques to construct it in a way that will get laughs. And in particular, think about constructing your humor in a way that will up the misdirection.

So, a really easy way to up misdirection is to use what's called the rule of three, where you essentially create a short list, where the third thing is a little bit unexpected.

So, um, so you might say, you know, "We as humans have some really predictable ways of showing status, right? We, we maintain strong eye contact or we stand very straight up with our shoulders back or of course, most powerful of all, we clear our throats aggressively to signal that we're going to say something really important, right?"

So this is like it's a callback to something we said earlier. Or you could say, "You know, I miss so many things about in person work life, right? I miss the supportive eye contact, the spontaneous coffee chats, wearing pants. Right? So, again, this sort of, this misdirection.

Whitney Johnson: OK, those are fantastic.

Naomi Bagdonas: By the way, the second technique is use callbacks. So, a callback is where you simply reference something that was said earlier that already got a laugh. And this does two things. One, it gets another laugh, right? We reference clearing our throats because we laughed about it earlier, but it also does the second thing, which is it makes us now feel like we're an "in group." It creates connections between us because we now have an inside joke. So those are two really tactical or three tips, I suppose. Number one, observe. Number two, use the rule of three. And number three, look for callbacks.

Whitney Johnson: Fantastic. So what are some exercises or things that we can do to, to practice being funny?

Jennifer Aaker: One of the things we have our students do at the end of the class is what we call a levity refrain. It was kind of born from this, um, you know, basic research that shows that stories really define our lives. In fact, you could argue that our life is only our remembered stories. And so, but what's interesting is that most people think of the most important stories that define their lives as these very meaningful ones, very oftentimes hard, you know, dramatic ones. And so, what we have the students do in just like six words form is like write down, you know, just in two minutes all of the stories that really define their life so far, all of these meaningful stories that have a level of gravitas. So, it's tied to a theme that you really care about. It is likely related to your career or personal aspirations, like a turning point in your life or a challenge you overcame. And then right after that, we have them pick one or two of them and then we have them convert them to be comedies. So instead of dramas or, you know, love stories or tragedies, they become comedies.

And the key is that they really share the story as a comedy. And it is amazing. For basically three hours, on the last day of class, we have these one minute comedies. The whole class is laughing for three hours. You know, these are stories about, you know, getting cancer or, or coming out or, you know, losing a loved one. These things that are so powerful and potent and, and yet they're able to see because these things are so truthful and defining the humor that comes through it, you know, writing down what was true about that experience and then looking for opportunities to either misdirect or infuse a second of levity into it or end on the rule of three, where you simply just, you know, end a description of an event with a third funny thing. So, that, that actual activity is incredibly profound.

Part of this is just about, you know, understanding yourself, not to mention others, and shifting your style and presence. In humor or comedy, you have to be fully present. You're listening for those moments of callback, you're waiting for a moment to join in on laughter.

And, and, and you reveal hidden truths in, in each conversation and allows you to define your, your life in ways that allow you to savor more. And last is love. And we have Michael Lewis, who ends our, ends our book with his afterword. It's a conversation with Naomi and I. And, you know, when people say, "I wish I had the chance to say I love you one more time," which is so incredibly profound, he argues that when you have humor in your life and work, that love is not far behind. So we, we find that humor is actually a secret weapon, not just in business with

very clear ROI's at a moment in time where we need to be able to elevate humor, to illuminate our humanity, but also in life.

Whitney Johnson: That's so good. OK, another one of your great Twitter quotes, "Where there is laughter, love is not far behind."

It's beautiful.

All right, so, Jennifer, I understand we have some fun goodies and suggestions for people who want to learn more about what you're doing.

What are they?

Jennifer Aaker: Yes. So we have three gifts for you and your listeners. One is just come to humorseriously.com and take the quiz. It will be the most fun quiz ever. You will get an A and so you'll also leave feeling like, you know, yourself better. You can know, I also make my entire family do the quiz so that I can understand them. Our family relationship is fantastic now because we all understand each other's sense of humor, which is illuminating. Not to mention your teams in your organization. The second is that we have a boot camp. It's a three week boot camp and it's you get basically texts to your phone every morning just for two or three moments. What we find is that when people understand these secrets from comedians and start to test them out, they still need these like sort of small coaching moments.

So, um, please come to the website and learn more about the 21 day boot camp. It's very fun. Basically the best excuse to listen to, you know, comedic clips and to really dissect what makes people laugh.

And then the third is that when you buy a hardcover of the book today, we are able to give you a free special digital version immediately.

And all you have to do is come to our website or email hello@humorseriously.com to get it. So, so that's that. And we also wanted to end with a thank you for you. So, Whitney, we wanted to give a thousand dollars of books to your favorite charity. So, we so appreciate the work that you do, the impact that you've had in, in business and in our lives. And so we will take this offline. But we just wanted to say thank you, Whitney.

Whitney Johnson: That is the most wonderful gift. Thank you. I will receive that with great gratitude and appreciation. And so I will think about what I'm going to do, but thank you so much.

Naomi Bagdonas: Thanks so much.

If laughter helps you disrupt, then I disrupted myself a lot during this episode and I hope you did too. Here are some of what I learned.

First, humor is an S curve. Like everything else, you may be at the bottom of the S, but that doesn't mean you can't scale it if you want to. A good way to start is to look for those three funny things a day. As Naomi said, you find what you look for. I committed to look for humor for one week and I am in fact finding it three times a day, at least. And wasn't that amazing, that quote of "Live Your Life on the precipice of a smile?" Oh, I just love that.

Second, for those of you who get our weekly newsletter, which we will include a link for in the show notes, sign up she says, and were wondering, let me just close the loop, yes, I crafted my vacation out of office messages while reading their book, which reads, "My family thinks I can't unplug while on vacation. If you've got a message for me before January 13th, they day will be correct." I did unplug, but given the fact that I read this while on vacation would suggest that we were both correct.

Third, and jumping around a bit, it was so generous of them to donate books. I promised to tell you who I'm having them sent to. So here's who it is. Her name is Sloane Davidson. She runs a nonprofit out of Pittsburgh called Hello Neighbor, where they partner refugee families with families already in the community. So talk about disruption. When you are a refugee, you leave all that you know and love to live in a new country. One of the biggest disruptions there is. You can listen to Sloane in podcast episode 62. She is a lovely human being and doing good work.

Fourth, not only did I find the humor style quiz interesting, again we'll include a link in the show notes to the quiz, the bootcamp, the videos, and the book giveaway. I was also really intrigued by the idea of depending on the situation, you're going to want to employ different styles. I may tend to gravitate to magnet and sweetheart, but I can think of a time this past year on an interview when I needed to pivot to sniper and there have been times on stage like when the mic is falling down, my dress on to the floor where a little stand up is required.

So, that's something for you to think about. What's your humor style and what other styles may you want or need to employ to deploy depending on the situation?

Fifth, and I'll end where I started with the neuroscience. Laughter triggers the release of oxytocin, creating emotional bonds, chasing fear from the situation, when we feel safe, we're less stressed. When we're less stressed, we can learn. We can scale our curb.

Laughter helps you disrupt yourself.

Thank you again to Jennifer and Naomi for making us laugh. Thank you to our team, Emily Cottrell, Steve Ludwig, Dan Rutty, Melissa Rutty, and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson and this Disrupt Yourself.