

Ted Cunningham

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A LOVE  
THAT  
LAUGHS

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Lighten Up, Cut Loose  
and Enjoy Life Together

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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

*A Love That Laughs: Lighten Up, Cut Loose, and Enjoy Life Together*

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Woodland Hills Family Church is my home. Amy and I can't imagine serving anywhere else. To the congregation, staff, elders, and teaching team, you all serve incredibly well. This allows each one of us to pursue our passions, gifts, and calling.

A LOVE THAT LAUGHS

To my daughter, Corynn Mae, our entire family lives for your laugh. Your laughter is the most contagious in our family. When you lose control, so do we.

To my son, Carson Matthew, you are the last-born comedian of our family. Not a day goes by without a few laughs from your antics, jokes, and quick recalls of famous movie lines.

Amy Cunningham, my goal in life is to make you laugh. You are the reason I do comedy. I know if a punch line, impersonation, or teaching point makes you laugh, then it will work around the world. Our laughs get better with age. My goal is to increase our laughter ratio and score with each passing year.

# Introduction

MY WIFE, AMY, is a foodie. Her favorite restaurants serve small portions over many courses, and you never have to use the same utensil twice. I prefer large portions served all at once, and I'm good with using the same fork for the entire meal. You would think these differences frustrate us, but they don't. We decided a long time ago to find fun in every nook and cranny of our marriage.

Our foodie differences first surfaced at a fancy restaurant in New York City. When we walked in, I knew immediately I would leave hungry. It was the type of restaurant some would call a "four forker."

The friendly host seated us at a table near the front window. We had a welcoming view of the garden terrace, and plenty of privacy. It was cute, cozy, and romantic.

The waiter approached with a thick wood plank and presented us with two mint leaves. My immediate question was, “Is that the salad?” He assured me it was not.

He invited us to each take a leaf and rub it over our lips, under our noses, and around our chins. Amy was all in, but I hesitated. All I did was hold my leaf and stare at the waiter.

“I grew up in Illinois where we grew produce, but we never rubbed it on our faces,” I said in jest. Our waiter didn’t laugh. Come on, shouldn’t rubbing herbs on your face be something a couple does in private? This was certainly the most awkward moment I’ve ever experienced in a restaurant.

The waiter stood there waiting for me to cleanse my palate, so I gave him a show he would not soon forget. I took a bath with that mint leaf, rubbing it all over my body, then discarded the wilted leaf on the plank. He stared in silent rebuke, took our order, and left in a huff.

The waiter wasn’t amused, but Amy sure was. Amy’s belly laugh reassured me she knew how awkward this was for me. She appreciates how I play through the pain. No matter where we are, no matter what we are doing, we try to prioritize fun and laughter.

Amy and I turned our fancy-restaurant, leaf-rubbing date into what is known in comedy circles as a *callback*. Now every time we go to my favorite restaurant, Le Cracker Barrel, getting her to laugh is easy. All I have to do is reach over, grab a piece of broccoli off of her plate, and rub it on my cheek. I sometimes get a smile, but if I add some physical comedy, I can get a chuckle or even a belly laugh.

## The Callback

The callback is one of my favorite comedy skills. Great comedy is about surprising and shocking the brain. When a comedian shares a punch line you didn't anticipate, your mind is shocked into laughter. The callback shocks the brain with two thoughts, "I didn't see that coming," and "I should have seen that coming."

Writing comedy is similar to writing a sermon, speech, or research paper. It takes discipline. The mistake a lot of public speakers make is thinking that comedy is best when spontaneous. Not true. It may look spontaneous, but it is not. Good comedy is written, edited, practiced, and edited some more. Let that be part of your journey as a couple working through this book. Be intentional.

While writing great material takes discipline, the formula for writing comedy is simple: Establish a premise, then deliver the punch line. Skilled comedians establish a single premise, then layer multiple punch lines after it. For example, comedian Jim Gaffigan layers dozens of punch lines behind the premises of cake, bacon, and Hot Pockets. We laugh and subliminally think, *I didn't see that coming, but I should have.*

The callback takes a punch line from earlier in the set and delivers it off of a new premise later. It is a joke for a second time in a different context. For example, my good friend comedian Paul Harris has a bit on bull riding in his set. He talks about his friend Rusty, who talked him into

bull riding for the first time. Paul says, “Ask the fellas in here, they’ll tell you, a good friend can talk you into doing stupid stuff.”

Twenty minutes later, Paul shares the story of peeing on his grandpa’s electric fence. As the crowd roars with laughter, he says, “It didn’t feel like Rusty said it would.” Paul’s special, “Y’all Haul,” is available on iTunes and Apple Music. I recommend it. He is a comedy genius who knows how to use the callback.

When I first learned about the callback, I thought to myself, “Every couple needs callbacks.” You know, like inside jokes that only the two of you get. Jokes that resurface in the recurring moments and issues of your marriage. What would married life look like in your home if you turned every nagging frustration, irritation, and conflict into a callback? What if we had inside jokes that changed the way we communicate, date, commit to projects around the house, flirt, eat, watch movies, drive, park, and parent? That’s my plan for your journey through *A Love That Laughs*.

Throughout this book, I hope to share with you how to craft callbacks in all areas of your marriage. With practice, you can turn what used to be frustrating conversations into playful banter. Let’s turn those differences that wear you out into opportunities for mutual laughs.

We often refer to the funny bone, but I think humor is more like a muscle—it requires a workout. It may be painful and uncomfortable at first, but the payoff is worth the work. For that reason, I’ll be encouraging you to recruit a couple of

friends on this journey. Think of them as workout partners, helping you commit to lifelong love and laughs.

I've been traveling the past few years on the Date Night Comedy Tour, combining my passion to help couples thrive with my love for making people laugh. On tour, I invite couples to share their callbacks. One of my all-time favorite callbacks is from a friend we met at Kanakuk Family Kamp in Branson, Missouri. He shared this with a room full of couples and received sustained laughter. Little did he know, I would share this with thousands of couples on tour and get the biggest laugh in my stand-up set.

In this callback, my friend left for work without fixing a running toilet. Like most couples, it's the little things that wear on a marriage. I call that the daily grind. And it doesn't get more daily grind than a running toilet. Call me chivalrous, but I still think the man should do the dirty work. That's not to say a woman can't, but men don't shoot and kill food each day and drag it home like we used to. We must find other ways to be the hero. If fixing a running toilet brings out the cape, then so be it.

My friend's wife called him to report the problem with the toilet, and he talked her through the easy fix.

"Honey, take the lid off of the tank on top of the toilet," he coached her. With the phone pinned between her cheek and shoulder, she proceeded.

He continued, "Okay, if you look at the bottom of the tank, you should see the chain wrapped around the suction ball. Reach down . . ."

“Ewwww! Yuck! I’m not reaching in there. Disgusting!” she interrupted.

“Babe, it’s clean water, like water that comes out of the tap,” he reassured her.

After some convincing, she agreed to do it. Right before her hand hit the water she asked, “Am I going to get electrocuted?”

The husband held back his laughter. Good move. Some things are funny hours, days, or weeks later, but not in the moment. Timing is a key to great comedy. You may need to give it some time.

“Am I going to get electrocuted?” has the potential for a great callback, but that is not the callback this couple now uses in their marriage. Their callback is in how the husband answered that question:

“Whoa, good catch, honey. You’ve got to unplug the toilet first,” he said.

I can hear it now.

“The garage door ain’t working.”

*“Did you unplug it?”*

“The baby won’t go to sleep.”

*“Unplug her.”*

“I’m not feeling all that well.”

*“May be time to pull the plug.”*

The layers of marital comedy are endless on the callback.

In the back of this book we have a Callback Journal for you to record the callbacks in your marriage. As you work through the activities at the end of each chapter, jot down

the ones that really stick, and carry them with you through your married life.

Obviously, *A Love That Laughs* is not competing with *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman, *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas, *Love and Respect* by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, or *The Meaning of Marriage* by Timothy Keller. I revere those marriage classics but I have a completely different mission.

For a change of pace, read this book in between the more serious marriage books and studies. Allow humor and laughter to help you and your spouse lighten up and enjoy life together.

*A Love That Laughs* is your guide to pursuing deliberate laughter. Be intentional and laugh together.



CHAPTER I

# Your Laughter Score

*Enjoy life with the wife whom you love.*

ECCLESIASTES 9:9

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*We cannot really love anybody  
with whom we never laugh.*

AGNES REPPLIER

A MARRIAGE THAT LAUGHS LASTS. Couples who use laughter to manage stress and work through difficult conversations not only enjoy higher levels of marital satisfaction, but stay together longer. Laughter bonds us, eases tension, defuses anger, lightens the mood, and makes us more attractive and relatable. Our laughter signals to family, friends, and strangers, “This couple enjoys life together.”

Amy and I have a laugh-to-conflict ratio of about 100:1. Laughter has always been important to us, but some seasons require greater intentionality. I asked Amy on a date one night, “Do you feel we laugh enough?” It was during a

season when the pressures of ministry and family weighed heavy on us.

She said, “I think our laughs outweigh our frustrations about one hundred to one.” Voilà. *Abracadabra*. And just like that our laughter ratio appeared. But we didn’t stop evaluating our laughter quotient there. What if we could measure laughs throughout the day?

Comedians measure the effectiveness of their comedy sets with a laughs-per-minute ratio. Three to five laughs per minute makes for great comedy. The next time you say or do something that prompts spontaneous laughter in your spouse, don’t settle for a single chuckle. Dig deeper. Go for more. I hope this book gives you some ideas and maybe a little more confidence to increase your laughs-per-minute ratio, but that is not the only goal. The goal is to increase your laughs per day. Start by answering these two questions:

How many *laughs per day* do you and your spouse exchange?

What is your *laughs-per-day* goal while reading this book?

I love asking friends and strangers, “On any given day, how many times do you and your spouse laugh together?”

It encourages me when I hear, “We laugh a lot,” “Dozens of times a day,” and “Too many times to count.” It’s the answers of “Rarely,” “Not nearly enough,” and “I can’t remember the last time” that confirm my marriage ministry calling: *To help couples laugh and enjoy life together*.

My personality leans toward humor naturally. It’s always

been a part of my teaching and pastoral ministry. And almost twenty-five years into ministry, I'm leaning into laughter now more than ever. Why? Because I see the medicine that it truly is. It helps husbands receive difficult truths at marriage conferences. Shoot, it even helps wives get their husbands to marriage events. It's part of connecting with the congregation when I teach, visiting folks in the hospital, officiating at weddings, and helping couples through challenging seasons.

I've been accused of using too much humor in sermons and ministry. That's tough, but fair. Charles Spurgeon was accused of the very same thing. His quip to that comment has become mine: "If you only knew how much I hold back."

## Choose Laughter, Fun, and Attention over Hard Work

Have you heard the all-too-common idea about marriage that sounds something like "Marriage is difficult, painful, grueling, and hard"? I hate when that tone pervades and dominates a marriage. This should not be. God didn't give you your spouse to "beat you down and suck the life out of you so you can be more like Jesus." You don't need to choose between a happy life and a happy marriage. You can have both at the same time. One way to enjoy life together is by prioritizing laughter in marriage.

When Amy and I first married, we held hands as we walked everywhere. Sitting in restaurants, movies, and church, we

rested our hands on each other's legs. Lots of touching, gazing, and talking.

As a pastor, I preach often on the joys of marriage. I can still picture members of our congregation rolling their eyes at my gushiness. One deacon of a church approached me after one such impassioned message and said, "Don't worry, Ted, you'll get over it."

You know what? He was wrong. Amy and I have our share of struggles like every couple, but we can say without hesitation that marriage gets better with time and attention. Every year we enjoy our marriage more and more. We proved that deacon wrong.

Instead of saying, "Marriage takes hard work," we say, "Marriage requires our attention." We've given our marriage our undivided attention for the past twenty-three years and it has paid off. We give our marriage attention and fun. Have we had difficult seasons? Of course, but we don't allow the struggles of marriage to become the main emphasis.

While writing this book, I prayed for your marriage. I asked the Lord to help you find the humor in your differences, personalities, communication, commitment, families of origin, and even conflicts.

You need to choose laughter rather than wait for it. Most of us enjoy spontaneous laughter but struggle with voluntary laughter. Spontaneous laughter waits for something funny to happen. Voluntary laughter chooses the humorous side of things and makes the laughs happen.

Humor is a choice, not just an outcome. You get to decide

your way into laughter. As a couple, you choose whether an activity, outing, date night, or event is fun or frustrating. Where you are and what you are doing are factors in the equation, but they are not the summation of a good time. Stop waiting for humor and start creating it.

For example, have you experienced a day when everything went wrong? Everyone and everything seemed to be working against you to the point that it was stupid funny? You simply shake your head and say in jest, “What else could go wrong?” Every bad thing that happens to you after that question is one more punch line or callback to the day. It gives you and your spouse one more fun story to share.

When fun and laughter is an outcome rather than a choice, the quality of your marriage is determined by the words and actions of others. When fun and laughter is a choice and not an outcome, the quality of your marriage is determined by your attitude and actions.

You may resist this idea of deciding on laughter and think, *Yeah, this is all well and good, but it takes two people to make marriage fun.* I submit to you that it often only takes one spouse to get the ball rolling. Start with you. Decisions have power. Decide for yourself (not your spouse) to loosen up, not take yourself so seriously, and enjoy what life throws at you. You may say, “Is this even biblical?” What did James mean when through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wrote in James 1:2, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds”? Isn’t laughter an expression of joy? I say yes. When trials hit your marriage, take the

first step and invite some lightheartedness into your union. Making marriage fun is up to you.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 (NIV) says, “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.” Life is difficult, challenging, and painful, but you have a spouse to journey with you through it all. Your spouse, not the grind, is your companion. You do not need to choose between life and spouse. Choose both.

British neuroscientist Sophie Scott believes that the origins of laughter are found in social interactions and that is why we are thirty times more likely to laugh with others than by ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Laughter brings us closer together and creates a longing for us to stay close for the long haul. It is for that reason that after a night of laughter with close friends we say something like, “That was so good. I needed that. I can’t wait for us to be together again.” Laughter creates this bond in marriage, too.

We can’t always escape the tough stuff in life, nor should we. Yet laughter can bring a brief pause to a difficult time and give us what we need to make it through. As Milton Berle once said, “Laughter is an instant vacation.” You can take it anytime without asking your boss. It’s free. You don’t need childcare or someone to water the plants.

Your marriage needs a daily break, free from serious conversations about budgeting, parenting, jobs, and household

chores. All it takes is a few minutes of spontaneity to lighten up and inject a little fun into your everyday routines, mishaps, and occasional rubs.

Laughter is found while you're stuck in traffic, standing in line at the DMV, and even eating a holiday meal with crazy relatives. It's up to you. Will you make the choice? Will you turn everyday moments into lighter moments? While standing in line at the DMV, break into a spontaneous dance to a familiar tune. While waiting in traffic, turn on the radio and belt out a song. Better yet, turn the radio off and belt out a classic and invite your spouse to join in. If you can't sing or dance, that's even better. Uncoordinated dancing and out-of-tune singing are guaranteed laughs. Make it your goal to get your spouse to smile, chuckle, or even belly laugh.

## The Sixth Love Language

One of the bestselling marriage books of all time is *The Five Love Languages* by Dr. Gary Chapman. A person's love language refers to how that person likes to receive love from others. A love language can also refer to how we like to show love to others. Dr. Chapman identifies five love languages: physical touch, words of affirmation, gift giving, acts of service, and quality time.

Not to second-guess Dr. Chapman, but I wholeheartedly believe the sixth love language is laughter. Laughing together

is a way to show genuine love and care for each other. My wife shows me love when she laughs with me. I show her love when I make her laugh. If your love language is gift giving, that doesn't excuse you from touching, sharing kind words, serving, or spending time with your spouse.

Some might say food is the sixth love language. A strong case could be made for that. I have plenty of friends and family who are constantly bringing me homemade goodies or inviting me over for a meal. I believe food is my mother-in-law's love language. She not only loves cooking for us, she watches us eat and finds great joy in our responses. I show her love by eating some foods I don't care for, going back for seconds, and requesting certain foods for our next family gathering. She always delivers.

The same is true for laughter. If laughter is not your love language, you're not off the hook. Laughter may be your spouse's love language, but not yours. If that's the case, engage in humor as an act of love. Ask for a joke at the end of an exhausting day. Request a funny dance move. Laugh when it wasn't funny. That's the equivalent of going back for seconds of a dish you didn't care for.

You've heard it said, "People don't care what you know until they know that you care." Laughter is a great way to love and care for your spouse. Amy and I use laughter to both connect with each other and to know we're connected. It is a great barometer for our marriage.

Are you ready to get your laugh on? It's time to get serious about laughter.

## Your Laughter Score

Each chapter of this book ends with a section called *Your Laughter Score*. There are two activities to initiate laughter in marriage. Some activities will hit you stronger than others. Some will stretch you. Some may become a regular activity at home. All of them, with valiant effort, will evoke some response from your spouse.

The activities and scoring are meant to be fun. Banter over the quality of the laughter from each activity. That's like a bonus round, laughing over how you laughed. There are four factors to consider with *Your Laughter Score*.

**First, laughter builds from small to big.** There are many different types of laughter. For scoring, you will use the following ten types of laughter, slightly adapted from the *Journal of Nursing Jocularity*. You may need to mark this page so you can refer back to the definitions in forthcoming chapters. Also, if you read this together or your spouse is in the same room, demonstrate each of the following so you have a visual for the laugh activities to come. Here are the ten in order:

1. **Smirk:** Half-smile, slight, often fleeting upturning of the corners of the mouth, completely voluntary and controllable.

2. **Smile:** Silent, voluntary, and controllable, starts to use more facial muscles; begins to release endorphins.
3. **Snicker:** First emergence of sound with facial muscles, but still controllable (if you hold in a snicker, it builds up gas).
4. **Giggle:** Not yet considered laugh out loud, but efforts to suppress it tend to increase its strength.
5. **Chuckle:** Controllable and voluntary, involves chest muscles with deeper pitch.
6. **Cackle:** First involuntary stage; pitch is higher and body begins to rock, spine extends and flexes, with an upturning of head.
7. **Belly Laugh:** Also known as a guffaw, it's a loud and boisterous laugh. Full-body response—feet stomp, arms wave, thighs are slapped, torso rocks, sound is deep and loud; may result in free-flowing tears, increased heart rate, and breathlessness.
8. **Howl:** Volume and pitch rise higher and higher and the body becomes more animated.
9. **Shriek:** Greater intensity than howl; sense of helplessness and vulnerability.
10. **Die Laughing:** Hard time breathing, instance of total helplessness; a brief, physically intense, transcendent experience; having died, we thereafter report

a refreshing moment of breathlessness and exhaustion with colors more vivid and everything sparkling; everything is renewed.<sup>2</sup>

**Second, there are a ton of points to earn.** One of our family's favorite rides at Disneyland is Toy Story Midway Mania! You throw digital rings, darts, and pies at carnival-style games to earn points. With little skill, over 100,000 points is possible. That ride and game is always a shot in the arm for this competitive dad. *Your Laughter Score* gives you the opportunity to earn 250,000 points by the end of the book. Let's go big so no spouse finishes the book feeling like a loser. Even if your laughter score is a mere 100,000 points, others will be impressed. Every spouse will finish the book with a score to brag about.

**Third, there are no points for trying.** If your attempt at humor falls flat, that's zero points. No participation trophies or ribbons here. You must get a response to score points, but you'll be shocked at how fast you get points on the board. With your whole heart into it, I don't believe you'll have many "fell flat" scores.

**Fourth, you and your spouse determine the scores.** You can determine your own score on each activity or decide it together. Again, if the banter over scores leads to a higher score, feel free to use that number instead. Remember, the laughter, not the activity, is the most important factor. Each chapter ends with the following scale for each attempt at laughter:

**My attempt at humor . . .**

Fell flat .....	0 points
Made my spouse smirk.....	1,000 points
Made my spouse smile.....	2,000 points
Made my spouse snicker.....	3,000 points
Made my spouse giggle.....	4,000 points
Made my spouse chuckle.....	5,000 points
Made my spouse cackle .....	6,000 points
Made my spouse belly laugh.....	7,000 points
Made my spouse howl.....	8,000 points
Made my spouse shriek .....	9,000 points
Made my spouse die laughing.....	10,000 points

The final chapter of the book is called “Extra Credit: Ten Fast, Easy, and Free Ways to Make Your Spouse Laugh” for a possible 100,000 extra-credit points. Husbands will thrive on the competitive nature of this book.

After each activity and score, there is a place to jot notes on how to improve. This is how you get better at the comedy of marriage. Take notes on your delivery, timing, shortcomings, messed-up words, and surprises that hit you along the way. You’d be shocked to know how many bits that comedians discover in the moment on stage. Unplanned material and the audience’s response to it make for great lessons and future material. Don’t let those moments pass you by. Write them down. If you’re going through this book with other

couples, share not only your scores, but also your lessons learned.

Here's what shocked me the most about these activities. Just mentioning to Amy some of the activities in this book scored me 5,000 points. *What?* Discussion of the activity alone generated a chuckle.

For that reason, Amy insisted that I add conversation starters for spouses who want to laugh but not compete. She says this has more to do with the Enneagram than it does laughter. Due to my wife's passion for the Enneagram, there will be no jokes in this book about the Enneagram. She says I know just enough about it to be dangerous. I say I know just enough about it to be funny.

Nonetheless, each chapter will have conversation starters for a few more laughs. In this section there's no need to keep score. Just roll with them. Laughter may be the one skill you didn't know your marriage was missing.

## Your Laughter Score

For a possible 20,000 points, start with some low-hanging fruit.

- 1. Belt It Out.** Singing at the top of your lungs works for almost everyone. It works best when you don't know the lyrics and you sing off-key. Turn up the radio, make up the words, and belt it out with passion and conviction. Your spouse will

appreciate and maybe even applaud your attempt. A verse or chorus will do. If you really want to step it up, invite your spouse to join you.

**My attempt at humor . . .**

- Fell flat ..... 0 points
- Made my spouse smirk ..... 1,000 points
- Made my spouse smile..... 2,000 points
- Made my spouse snicker..... 3,000 points
- Made my spouse giggle..... 4,000 points
- Made my spouse chuckle..... 5,000 points
- Made my spouse cackle ..... 6,000 points
- Made my spouse belly laugh..... 7,000 points
- Made my spouse howl ..... 8,000 points
- Made my spouse shriek ..... 9,000 points
- Made my spouse die laughing..... 10,000 points

\_\_\_\_\_ Her Score      \_\_\_\_\_ His Score

The next time I attempt this humor, I will

---

**2. Get Jiggy with It.** Uninhibited dancing ties for first place with singing when it comes to making others laugh. This one gets a little more vulnerable, but like singing, the worse you are the greater the laughs. Low risk, but high rewards. Get

YOUR LAUGHTER SCORE

out your phone when your spouse least expects it and play Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" or Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy Breaky Heart" and give the performance of your life.

**My attempt at humor . . .**

Fell flat .....	0 points
Made my spouse smirk .....	1,000 points
Made my spouse smile.....	2,000 points
Made my spouse snicker.....	3,000 points
Made my spouse giggle.....	4,000 points
Made my spouse chuckle.....	5,000 points
Made my spouse cackle .....	6,000 points
Made my spouse belly laugh.....	7,000 points
Made my spouse howl .....	8,000 points
Made my spouse shriek .....	9,000 points
Made my spouse die laughing.....	10,000 points

\_\_\_\_\_ Her Score      \_\_\_\_\_ His Score

The next time I attempt this humor, I will

\_\_\_\_\_

Write your scores on page 205, too.

## Conversation Starters and a Few More Laughs

- What sign best describes you on a bad day? And why?
  - A. Proceed with Caution
  - B. Beware of Dog
  - C. No Trespassing
  - D. Pass with Care
- Name a time laughter really helped when you had a bad day.
- What is the number one barrier to enjoying life together in your marriage?
- Is there an issue or unresolved conflict that you see turning into laughs instead of constant frustration?
- Do you believe you are humorous?