Laugh while you learn

Health and humour do mix. Jim Pollard interviews the Comedy Contractor.

“If you can make them laugh, you can make them listen. And if you can make them listen, you can make them learn.”

That sounds like the mantra of a guru, and award-winning comedian John Ryan is a guru of sorts: a guru of good health at work. A regular on the comedy circuit both in the UK and overseas, he also works with the Men’s Health Forum, going into workplaces and using humour as a way to talk about some of the difficult topics in health. The Forum calls him the Comedy Contractor.

“We do an upbeat, funny, inclusive session of half-an-hour to an hour which uses humour to break down barriers and get some messages across,” says John. He stresses the inclusivity. “We laugh together rather than ‘at’ anything or someone. Health and a need to look after ourselves is one thing we all have in common.”

A spoon full of sugar

The focus is on lifestyle areas such as diet, drinking, smoking and exercise. There’s also a healthy dose of mental wellbeing. “If you put sugar and water in your car, no mechanic in the world can fix it,” says John.

The diversity of groups for which John has performed is a testimony to his inclusive approach: the Royal Marines, Islamic centres, lesbian and gay centres, prisons, medical consultants, university lecturers, to name a few. He’s also done the show in a number of different countries. “Masculinity doesn’t seem to change as much as other aspects of culture,” says John. “Regardless of IQ, religion or sexual orientation, being in possession of testicles appears to lead men to disregard their own health. Anywhere that men are, I am willing to make the first step to discuss why that is.”

John comes from a large family of Irish builders, “alpha-males who all died of lifestyle-related cancers”, so it is a topic close to his heart. He also brings a solid professional expertise to the work. He has an MA in health and social policy and worked in community care for ten years. He has won a number of public health awards for his comedy and had a research paper published in the Journal of Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology on the use of humour to raise awareness of health issues.

Get talking

“The key thing is to start people talking,” John says. He tells the story of a session for a group of construction workers. “We were talking about cancer and one bloke said that he had just finished being treated for prostate cancer. I said that it was fantastic that he was able to share it with the group. After the usual awkward silence, another man said that he’d just had a prostate examination with worrying results. He asked if he could talk to the first guy. The first guy said yes. I asked if it would be possible for them to meet up. They both said no problem because they worked together every single day. They’d never spoken before about their prostate problems and wouldn’t have known what they shared if it hadn’t been for our session.”

As well as breaking down the barriers that prevent us talking about our health, the Comedy Contractor sessions can also break down the sort of barriers that can spring up between individuals in workplaces. “I was talking about depression,” said John, “and this guy said that he’d been suffering severely from depression because his son had just been diagnosed with Leukaemia. Quite understandable. Another bloke – and he was a really big chap – got up and walked across the room. He shook the depressed guy by the hand and patted him on the shoulder. He said: ‘I’m sorry, I misjudged you. I just thought that you were a grumpy git.’ He’d realised how, through not talking, he’d jumped to conclusions.”

The sessions don’t always finish when they end. “It’s amazing how many people loiter afterwards,” says John. “They want to talk to you about something they haven’t talked about to anyone else before – certainly not to a doctor. It’s all about encouraging openness and breaking down taboos. I really do think that this approach can change attitudes and save lives.”

A fresh approach

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Men’s Health Forum’s wider @work offer which uses talks, videos and training to put the health back into health and safety. For more information, visit www.menshealthforum.org.uk/john-ryan and www.seriousglee.com