

The Funny Life

An interview with comedian Yakov Smirnoff about humor and well-being.

words DR. KRISTIN KOETTING | photos JOE THOMAS

Yakov Smirnoff and I have something in common. No, I'm not a Russian comedian. No, he's not a shrink. Yes, on the 4th of July both of us will undoubtedly use his famous tagline, "What a Country!" And we share something else: professional ties to the field of positive psychology.

In fact, it was at an international positive psychology conference where we first met years ago. We had a funny exchange...

Yakov said to me, "You're from Kansas and you're not wearing overalls?"

I replied, "They are in my suitcase. These are my special clothes I wear for conferences."

The laughter continued when I recently spent the day with Yakov, undoubtedly one of the funniest guys on the planet. This may seem like an oxymoron, but Yakov Smirnoff is one serious comedian. He takes his craft so seriously that he rose to the ranks of the Ivy League in a pursuit to better understand humor and its benefits to our well-being.

In addition to earning a master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, Yakov is a professor at Missouri State University, an author, actor, researcher, artist, humanitarian, entrepreneur, and international comedic brand.

Yakov Smirnoff is truly the Russian-American Renaissance Man.

In his latest venture, Yakov is partnering with Barry Williams, formerly Greg Brady of "The Brady Bunch," on Barry's new Branson show "Lunch with the Brady Bunch." When I asked Barry about Yakov, he put it brilliantly, "There is much more to Yakov Smirnoff than first meets the joke."

I couldn't agree more. Yakov is down-to-earth, kind, intelligent, and sophisticated, just like his comedy. In my conversation with him and in his Branson show, "Yakov Live!" there is as much to learn about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as there is the opportunity to laugh your "Yakov-off."

Kristin Koetting: You've been a columnist for AARP's publication that has an older demographic. Do you think laughter benefits older people more than younger people?

Yakov Smirnoff: It depends if they have their teeth in or out. I'm just picturing them laughing and losing their teeth. But seriously, I think laughter is important at all stages of life. Everybody benefits from the increases in serotonin and dopamine. Laughter feels good. A child laughs, on average, around 300 times a day, and adults laugh, on average, around five times a day. I think adults want to have more laughter; they want to be more carefree, more playful. I don't think they have the opportunity to. When they come to my show, they are in heaven. All of a sudden they refill the need for playfulness and happiness and joy. It may be that they want it more than kids. Kids kind of create it naturally. It is like hormone therapy: When you are youthful, it is part of what's going on with you. But when you are older, you have to do it on purpose.

KK: You've been a pioneer in the research and dialogue on how relationships benefit from humor. Can you talk about what you've learned?

YS: In my research, I found that laughter is part of the courting process. I've asked more than 4 million people, "Who remembers laughter during the courting time?" They all do. In the beginning, humor is one way a male attracts a female, like a peacock fanning his feathers. When he makes her laugh, he inspires her. Her laughter tells him she is happy. *Her laughter is what he's after.*

KK: So do you think laughter creates love?

YS: I'm trying to figure that out: Which comes first, love or laughter? I'm also trying to figure out how to sustain both. Maybe you can solve the puzzle for me! I think Marty (referring to our mutual friend, Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D.) is right in some ways because laughter does create



love. The problem is that you can't sustain it. After a while, the jokes he used to tell are no longer funny. And she is wondering, "What's your next act?" I think laughter creates love as a hook, a way to attract. But, it isn't sustainable, unless you have love that creates laughter. That hasn't been clearly defined yet.

KK: Do you think laughter is important in other relationships, like friendships?

YS: You're going to hang out with people you laugh with. You're not going to hang out with people you don't laugh with. Laughter is like a litmus test. If it is indeed there, you're in the right place with the right people.

KK: Do you believe laughter has more of an impact on boosting positivity or decreasing negativity?

YS: It is probably where you are at that moment. If you are in a good place to begin with, and I make you laugh it may increase your happiness. But if you are in a bad place and I make you laugh, it could decrease your stress or anxiety. It could be both.

KK: You are famous for many things, including your tagline "What a Country!" Can you imagine what will be your next tagline?

YS: I'm searching for it right now. The audience will pick it; it is not up to me to decide. "What a Country!" wasn't an intentional tagline. It could be "Laughter, what a gift!" or it could be something totally unexpected. ❖



HAPPY 20TH ANNIVERSARY, YAKOV!

This year marks Yakov's 20th year living and performing in Branson and his last full season performing in Branson. Visit yakov.com for tickets to see him before he starts his tour around the United States in 2013.



YAKOV SMIRNOFF'S "AMERICA'S HEART"

A 200-by-136-foot mural painted by Yakov was displayed at the former site of the World Trade Center for more than a year. The painting depicts the landscape changed by the Sept. 11 attacks, with the Statue of Liberty in the foreground, a heart-shaped American flag replacing the towers and the message, "The human spirit is not measured by the size of the act, but by the size of the heart."

Prints are sold at yakov.com and a portion of the proceeds goes to support the Ground Zero Museum in New York.



Kristin "KK" Koetting, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist and wellness/well-being coach. Visit wellnessandwellbeingsolutions.com or e-mail your question or topic for a future column in 435 South magazine to drkk@wellnessandwellbeingsolutions.com