



Laugh

LABS

**A European Report on
Humour and Mental Health:
CULTURES AND GENERATIONS**

Authors



**MACEDONIAN ASSOCIATION
OF APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY**

Based in North Macedonia, MAAP promotes mental health and psychological well-being through applied psychology, education, and community projects. It leads research and training on emotional resilience and social inclusion.



ArtéTeka is an Irish organisation that combines art, creativity, and social innovation to promote inclusion and well-being. It develops creative learning tools and projects that connect arts, culture, and wellbeing.



**Idee in
Movimento**

Based in Italy, Idee In Movimento fosters active citizenship and lifelong learning through artistic and cultural initiatives. It helps people and communities use creativity and humour as tools for empowerment and emotional health.



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Introduction

The Laugh Labs project is an Erasmus+ cooperation partnership in adult education that explores how humour can be used to support mental health, build emotional resilience, and reduce stigma across Europe. The project brings together three organisations – the Macedonian Association for Applied Psychology (North Macedonia), ArtéTeka Limited (Ireland), and Idee In Movimento (Italy) – that share a belief in the power of creativity and positive communication to improve people's wellbeing.

Humour is part of every culture, but it can mean different things to different people. What makes one generation laugh might not be the same for another. The Laugh Labs project aims to understand these differences and learn how humour can help people from all backgrounds and ages feel better, connect with others, and talk more openly about mental health.

Goals of the Report

This report – A European Report on Humour and Mental Health – is the first main result of the Laugh Labs project.

Its goals are to:

- Explore the types and meanings of humour and how humour can be expressed through different forms of art and culture.
- Understand how people's views of mental health have changed across generations and how these views shape emotional well-being.
- Compare how stigma around mental health is perceived across cultures and learn how humour can be used to reduce that stigma.
- Identify gaps and opportunities for adult educators and community organisations to use humour as a positive educational tool for emotional resilience.

Methodology

The research was carried out in three European countries – North Macedonia, Ireland, and Italy – and combined several methods to gather information and voices from different generations and cultural backgrounds:

- Desk research on humour, mental health, and stigma across Europe.

- Interviews and surveys with adults from diverse cultural and age groups.
- Comparative analysis of findings across the three partner countries.
- The research also drew from the partners' experience working with seniors, migrants, and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that the results reflect different perspectives and lived experiences.

How the Results Can Be Used

The findings of this report are designed to help a wide range of people and organisations. They can be used by:

- Adult educators, who can integrate humour-based learning activities into their courses to support emotional resilience, teamwork, and stress management.
- Community centres and NGOs, who can apply the insights to create safe and inclusive spaces for discussions on mental health.
- Mental health professionals, who can adapt humour-based approaches in therapy and awareness campaigns.
- Policy makers, who can use the findings to promote positive mental health education and stigma reduction strategies across generations.

By understanding humour not only as entertainment but also as a social and educational tool, the Laugh Labs project aims to inspire new ways to talk about mental health and bring people together through laughter, creativity, and empathy.

2. Understanding Humour Across Europe

2.1 The Meaning and Functions of Humour

Humour is one of the most powerful and universal forms of human communication. Across Europe, it plays a key role in how people connect, cope, and make sense of their experiences. Yet humour is far from being the same everywhere - it changes with language, culture, and generation. According to the desk-based research carried out by the Laugh Labs partners, humour serves three main functions in European societies:

- Social bonding: laughter helps people connect across social groups, generations and backgrounds.
- Cognitive and emotional coping: humour allows individuals to reframe negative experiences, reduce stress, and approach difficulties with optimism.
- Cultural expression: humour reflects social norms, values, and the ability to challenge authority or comment on social issues.

The research found that humour is not only a form of entertainment, but a mechanism for emotional survival - especially in times of crisis. In post-pandemic Europe, humour is increasingly used to rebuild a sense of community, relieve anxiety, and create a shared understanding of change.

2.2 Types and Styles of Humour

The Laugh Labs desk research identified four major styles of humour that appear consistently in European contexts, based on psychological and sociological studies:

Style of Humour	Definition	Impact on Mental Health
Affiliative humour	Friendly, inclusive humour that builds social connections	Promotes belonging and emotional wellbeing
Self-enhancing humour	Using humour to stay positive and cope with stress	Increases resilience and self-acceptance

Aggressive humour	Making fun of others or using sarcasm	Can harm trust and increase social anxiety
Self-defeating humour	Mocking oneself in a negative way to gain approval	May reduce self-esteem and reinforce stigma

The analysis confirmed that affiliative and self-enhancing humour have the most positive effects on emotional resilience and stress management, while aggressive and self-defeating humour can reinforce negative feelings or social exclusion.

Cultural context also affects how these types are perceived. For example:

- In Ireland, self-deprecating humour is often a way to show humility and create connection.
- In Italy, humour is more expressive and social, often using irony and exaggeration to cope with stress.
- In North Macedonia, humour can act as a form of collective resilience, helping communities manage uncertainty and social change.

2.3 Humour in Different Art Forms

The desk-based research also explored how humour is expressed through creative arts and communication across the partner countries. Art and humour share a natural connection: both allow people to express feelings indirectly and explore difficult emotions in a safe and imaginative way. Visual arts and caricature have long been used to comment on social and political realities in Europe, using humour to make critical messages more acceptable. Theatre and performance use comedy and improvisation to explore identity, mental health and belonging. In community settings, these performances encourage empathy and dialogue between generations. Storytelling, poetry and music often include irony or wordplay that helps audiences reflect on complex emotions like grief or frustration. Digital art and social media have created new forms of humour - such as memes and short reels - which help people to communicate across language barriers and generations. Across these forms, humour acts as both a mirror (reflecting cultural norms) and a bridge (connecting people through shared laughter).

2.4 Humour as a Tool for Connection and Learning

The desk research also showed that humour can be a powerful learning tool, particularly in adult education. When used appropriately, humour improves memory, engagement, and participation. It helps learners feel relaxed and confident, which is essential when discussing sensitive topics such as stress or mental health. Adult educators and facilitators can use humour to:

- Reduce anxiety and create a positive learning environment.
- Encourage openness and trust among learners.
- Support reflection and emotional awareness.
- Make abstract or difficult concepts more accessible.

However, the research also emphasised that humour must be inclusive and culturally sensitive. What is funny to one group may be offensive to another. Educators need to be aware of differences in age, culture, and personal experience when using humour, especially when discussing mental health. When handled with care, humour can promote empathy and connection — helping people see that they are not alone in their struggles. It is, therefore, not only a method of entertainment but also a valuable educational and emotional skill that can be taught, practised, and shared across generations.

3. Humour and Mental Health

3.1 The Role of Humour in Emotional Resilience

Across all three countries involved in the Laugh Labs project – North Macedonia, Ireland, and Italy – the research confirmed that humour is more than a way to make people laugh. It is a form of emotional resilience.

Participants from interviews and surveys described humour as helping them to:

- manage stress and anxiety;
- cope with loneliness or sadness;
- rebuild confidence after difficult experiences;
- and connect more easily with others.

These findings echo the results of the desk-based research, which highlighted that humour activates positive emotions and helps reframe negative situations in a more manageable way. In psychology, this is known as *cognitive reframing* — seeing a stressful situation from a different, often lighter perspective.

In Ireland, several older participants mentioned using humour “to keep the spirit up” and “find something to smile about every day.” In Italy, humour was often described as “a form of survival,” helping people stay optimistic even when facing social or economic uncertainty. In North Macedonia, humour was seen as a collective strength, particularly in community and family settings where laughter is part of how people support each other.

3.2 Humour and Stress Management

The comparative analysis shows that humour can lower tension in moments of stress by creating a short emotional distance between the person and the problem. Research participants across the three countries mentioned that laughing about small daily challenges - such as work pressures, family responsibilities, or health concerns - helps them “not take life too seriously.”

The positive effects of humour on stress management are well documented in existing European and global studies reviewed during the desk research. Laughter releases endorphins,

reduces cortisol (the stress hormone), and improves mood and social connection. These biological and emotional benefits make humour a simple but effective preventive tool for mental health.

However, the data also showed that not everyone uses humour in a healthy way. Some people, particularly younger adults, mentioned using sarcasm or self-deprecating humour to hide anxiety or discomfort. This kind of humour can sometimes reinforce negative self-image or avoid real conversations about mental health.

Therefore, a key conclusion of the research is that not all humour supports well-being. The impact depends on the intention (to connect or to distance), the context (safe or judgmental), and the relationship between the people involved.

3.3 Humour, Stigma, and Mental Health Awareness

Stigma remains one of the strongest barriers to mental health support in Europe. The Laugh Labs research found that humour can both help to challenge stigma and, if used insensitively, reinforce it.

In all three partner countries, older generations were more likely to see mental health as a “private” or even “shameful” topic. For them, humour offered a safe entry point for discussion. Jokes and storytelling were often used to open up difficult conversations and make people feel more comfortable sharing their emotions.

Younger participants, on the other hand, tended to be more open about mental health, but they were also more exposed to online humour - such as memes - that sometimes make fun of mental illness. While this kind of humour can reduce fear by normalising mental health struggles, it can also trivialise serious experiences if used without care.

Across countries, participants agreed that humour works best to reduce stigma when it is:

- self-reflective rather than mocking;
- based on shared experiences rather than differences;
- used with empathy, not at someone’s expense.

This means humour can become a form of education, allowing people to talk about emotions more freely while learning to respect others’ experiences.

3.4 Balancing Humour and Sensitivity

A recurring theme in both the interviews and desk research was the importance of balance. While humour helps people cope, it must not replace genuine emotional support. Several educators and psychologists involved in the project emphasised that laughter should open the door to conversation, not close it.

Humour is most effective for mental health when it is:

- Inclusive: everyone feels part of the joke, not the target of it.
- Culturally aware: it respects differences in language, gender, background and belief.
- Empathetic: it helps others feel seen, not dismissed.

In learning or community settings, facilitators can use humour to break tension, create trust, and build resilience. However, they also need to be trained to recognise when humour becomes defensive or harmful.

The research therefore recommends that adult educators receive support and training to understand the psychology of humour - how to use it positively, adapt it to different groups, and identify when it becomes exclusionary or insensitive.

3.5 Summary of Key Findings

- Humour is a natural and accessible way to promote emotional resilience and reduce stress.
- The positive impact of humour depends on its style, context, and intent.
- Humour can help reduce stigma around mental health by encouraging open, non-judgemental dialogue.
- Cultural and generational factors shape how humour is expressed and understood.
- Training adult educators to use humour appropriately can help build more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

4. Generational Perspectives

4.1 How Attitudes Toward Mental Health Have Changed Over Time

Across Europe, attitudes toward mental health have changed significantly in recent decades. The Laugh Labs research confirmed that younger and older generations differ not only in how they talk about mental health, but also in how they use humour to deal with emotional stress.

Older participants – particularly in North Macedonia and Italy – tended to see mental health as a private matter. Many reported that in their youth, people rarely spoke about emotions or psychological struggles openly. Mental health problems were often linked with weakness or shame, and humour was sometimes used as a mask to hide distress rather than to express it.

By contrast, younger adults – especially in Ireland – showed greater openness and awareness. They are more likely to talk about anxiety, stress, or therapy in everyday life, and they see humour as a form of honesty and connection. Online platforms, comedy shows, and social media have played a major role in changing how this generation discusses mental health, making it more visible and less taboo.

Across all three countries, there was strong agreement that humour helps bridge the gap between generations, allowing older people to relax around new topics, and younger people to approach mental health conversations in a light, non-judgemental way.

4.2 Generational Differences in the Use and Understanding of Humour

The research found clear generational differences in how humour is used and perceived:

Generation	Typical Humour Style	Purpose	Possible Challenge
Older adults (60+)	Storytelling, situational, self-deprecating	To connect socially and soften serious topics	May avoid deep emotions or use humour to hide pain
Middle-aged adults (35–59)	Observational, family- or work-based humour	To manage daily stress and maintain balance	May use sarcasm that reinforces stress
Young adults (18–34)	Online humour, irony, wordplay, memes	To express identity and normalise vulnerability	Risk of trivialising mental health issues

In Ireland, for example, many seniors spoke about humour as a way of “keeping things light” or “staying cheerful” despite ageing or illness. In Italy, younger participants highlighted humour as “a way to talk about anxiety without making it heavy.”

In North Macedonia, generational gaps were more visible - while younger people are beginning to talk more openly about emotions, older generations often see humour as a way to “stay strong” and “avoid complaining.”

These differences are important for educators and mental health professionals. They show that humour can act as a bridge - but only when the context, tone, and audience are understood.

4.3 Intergenerational Learning Through Humour

One of the most promising findings from the Laugh Labs project is that intergenerational spaces (where young and older adults learn or create together) can use humour to build mutual understanding.

When generations laugh together, it reduces tension, breaks stereotypes, and allows empathy to grow. For instance:

- Older adults can rediscover playfulness and new ways to express emotions.
- Younger people can learn resilience and perspective from elders who have used humour to overcome hardship.

The research highlighted that humour works best as a shared experience, not as a performance. Joking together encourages listening, curiosity, and respect across ages.

Several participants said that “laughter helps us see we’re not so different,” suggesting that humour could be a valuable method in intergenerational education and community dialogue.

In future Laugh Labs, these findings will guide the creation of activities that mix generations — such as storytelling circles, creative workshops, and comedy-based exercises — to build emotional resilience collectively.

4.4 Voices from Different Age Groups

To bring these insights to life, here are some key reflections collected during interviews across the three partner countries:

“In my generation, you didn’t talk about stress – you joked about it. Laughing was the only way to survive.”

— *Senior participant, North Macedonia*

“I use humour online to talk about my anxiety. When people laugh, it’s like we all understand each other.”

— *Young participant, Ireland*

“Humour makes difficult conversations easier. It’s how I open up to my family.”

— *Middle-aged participant, Italy*

These voices show that humour has always played a role in emotional survival - but the intention and awareness behind it are evolving. While older people use humour to protect themselves, younger generations use it to connect and express. Both approaches have value, and bringing them together creates a more complete and compassionate understanding of mental health.

4.5 Summary of Key Findings

- Attitudes toward mental health have become more open, especially among younger generations.
- Humour remains a preferred way to cope with emotional stress across all age groups.
- Each generation has distinct humour styles shaped by their social experiences.
- Intergenerational learning through humour can improve empathy and reduce stigma.
- Facilitated laughter-based activities can create safe spaces for dialogue between generations.

5. Cultural Perspectives

5.1 Cultural Meanings of Humour in North Macedonia, Ireland and Italy

Culture shapes not only what people find funny but also how they express emotions and talk about mental health. The Laugh Labs research found that while laughter is universal, its meanings and social functions differ across countries.

- North Macedonia: humour is often collective and community-based. It helps people manage uncertainty and daily stress by finding joy in shared experiences. Jokes and laughter are used to strengthen family and social ties, often during gatherings and celebrations. However, mental health is still seen by many as a private issue, and humour is sometimes used to deflect or minimise emotional pain rather than to explore it.
- Ireland: humour is deeply rooted in storytelling and self-deprecation. It often reflects resilience and optimism in the face of hardship. Many Irish participants described laughter as “a way of life” and “a tool to stay human.” Humour makes difficult topics, including mental health, easier to approach. It is also strongly connected with language play, irony, and social critique. However, there can still be hesitation to show vulnerability, especially among older men.
- Italy: humour is often expressive, social, and emotional. It plays a big role in daily interactions and helps people manage life’s pressures. Italian participants described humour as “a shared energy” and a way to release tension. Yet, discussions about mental health can still carry stigma, especially in rural areas. Humour is sometimes used to lighten serious topics, making them less intimidating but occasionally preventing deeper conversations.

Across all three countries, humour acts as both a mirror of culture and a bridge across differences. It reflects national identities, but also provides a common language of connection and care.

5.2 Humour and Stigma Around Mental Health in Different Cultures

Cultural beliefs strongly influence how people perceive and talk about mental health. The Laugh Labs desk research revealed that stigma remains a challenge in all three partner countries, though it takes different forms.

- In North Macedonia, traditional values often associate emotional difficulties with personal weakness. As a result, humour is sometimes used to hide vulnerability. People may joke about stress or sadness to avoid being seen as “fragile.”
- In Italy, stigma has decreased among younger generations, but older adults and migrants still experience shame in seeking mental health support. Humour, however, has proven effective in community settings to start gentle discussions and normalise emotional conversations.
- In Ireland, there is growing awareness and openness thanks to national campaigns and education programmes. Still, humour is sometimes used defensively to “laugh off” pain rather than process it - particularly among men who feel pressure to appear strong.

Participants across all countries noted that humour works best against stigma when it encourages empathy and self-reflection rather than mockery. For example, community comedy events and storytelling nights in Ireland and Italy have helped normalise conversations about anxiety, loneliness, and ageing. Similarly, group activities in North Macedonia used humour as a safe starting point for mental health education.

5.3 Inclusive Humour: Respecting Diversity and Avoiding Stereotypes

The Laugh Labs comparative analysis emphasised that humour can be both inclusive and exclusive, depending on how it is used. When humour relies on stereotypes about culture, gender, or disability, it can reinforce stigma and exclusion. However, when used with sensitivity, humour becomes a tool for inclusion - a way for people from different backgrounds to connect and share experiences.

In multicultural groups, such as those involving migrants in Italy or seniors from diverse backgrounds in Ireland, humour helped people break language barriers and feel part of the

community. Laughter became a shared emotional language even when words were not fully understood.

In these settings, facilitators learned that humour should:

- Avoid jokes that target personal or cultural identity.
- Focus on shared human experiences (e.g. mistakes, family life, daily routines).
- Encourage participation from everyone, regardless of background or ability.

This inclusive approach aligns with the Erasmus+ value of inclusion and diversity and shows that humour can contribute to building more understanding and welcoming communities.

5.4 Case Studies from the Three Countries

North Macedonia – Humour as Emotional Protection

Workshops run by the Macedonian Association for Applied Psychology found that adults from low-income backgrounds often use humour to manage financial stress. One participant said, *“We laugh because if we don’t, we’ll cry.”* This shows humour’s role as a protective emotional shield, but also highlights the need for spaces where people can safely discuss the feelings behind the jokes.

Ireland – Storytelling and Shared Laughter Among Seniors

In Ireland, humour emerged as a source of social connection. Seniors described laughter as a way to stay young at heart. Facilitators noted that shared laughter built trust, reduced anxiety, and encouraged participants to open up about loneliness and ageing.

Italy – Humour and Migration

In Italy, Idee in Movimento worked with migrants who often faced stress from displacement and social isolation. In creative workshops, participants used visual arts and improvisation to express humour from their own cultures. This allowed them to share experiences of adaptation and identity in a positive, inclusive way.

These examples demonstrate how humour’s cultural expressions may differ, but its emotional impact is universal: it connects people, strengthens resilience, and opens new paths to understanding mental health.

5.5 Summary of Key Findings

- Humour reflects cultural identity and shared values while promoting emotional well-being.
- In all three partner countries, humour helps reduce stigma but must be applied with cultural sensitivity.
- Collective and self-deprecating humour are common across Europe and can strengthen community bonds.
- Humour is most effective when it encourages empathy, not when it reinforces stereotypes.
- Intercultural and creative approaches using humour can support inclusion, especially among migrants and vulnerable groups.

6. Findings and Comparative Analysis

6.1 Key Similarities Across Countries

Despite differences in language, tradition, and cultural expression, the Laugh Labs research revealed strong shared patterns across North Macedonia, Ireland, and Italy.

1. Humour is a universal coping tool.
In all three countries, humour was described as a natural and accessible way to deal with stress, sadness, and social pressure. Participants used laughter to stay positive, connect with others, and bring relief in difficult times.
2. Stigma around mental health is reducing - but not gone.
All countries reported progress in mental health awareness, especially among younger generations. However, older adults still felt hesitant to discuss emotions openly. Humour often acted as a safe “entry point” for these conversations.
3. Social connection is central to emotional well-being.
Whether through storytelling in Ireland, community gatherings in North Macedonia, or family humour in Italy, laughter was seen as a way to feel part of something bigger. Shared laughter builds belonging - a protective factor for mental health.
4. Positive humour supports resilience.
Across countries, affiliative (friendly) and self-enhancing humour (seeing the funny side of one’s problems) were linked to higher emotional resilience. In contrast, aggressive or self-defeating humour was associated with tension or lower self-esteem.
5. Art and creativity strengthen the impact of humour.
In every partner country, humour expressed through art - theatre, visual art, or storytelling - made difficult emotions more approachable and supported inclusion across generations and cultures.

6.2 Key Differences Across Generations and Cultures

The comparative analysis also revealed clear cultural and generational contrasts that shape how humour is used and understood.

Aspect	North Macedonia	Ireland	Italy
Cultural Expression of Humour	Collective, family-based, often situational	Storytelling and self-deprecating	Expressive, social, theatrical
Approach to Mental Health	More private and cautious	Increasingly open and discussed	Improving awareness, varies by region
Generational Attitudes	Older adults use humour to hide emotions	Younger generations use humour to express feelings	Intergenerational differences but growing openness
Role of Humour in Reducing Stigma	Used to deflect stigma, sometimes avoidant	Used to start gentle, open conversations	Used to lighten sensitive topics, but risk of trivialisation
Use in Adult Education	Emerging area, mostly informal	Increasingly accepted as part of wellbeing education	Integrated in creative and social projects

While each country has its own humour traditions, there is a shared understanding of laughter as healing.

The main difference lies in how far humour is consciously used as a learning or wellbeing strategy - Ireland leading slightly ahead, with Italy and North Macedonia showing growing interest in structured approaches.

6.3 Gaps and Opportunities Identified

The Laugh Labs comparative research identified several gaps in practice and understanding that future initiatives can address:

- Limited awareness of humour as an educational tool:
Although humour is widely valued, few adult educators consciously use it to support mental health or learning.
- Need for training in sensitive humour use:
Facilitators require guidance on how to adapt humour for diverse audiences (e.g. across cultures, ages, or abilities).
- Risk of humour reinforcing stereotypes:
Some jokes unintentionally reflected cultural, gender, or social bias. Inclusive humour training could help prevent this.
- Lack of formal integration into mental health programmes:
Humour is often used informally, but there are few structured models for using it as a wellbeing or resilience tool.

Opportunities include:

- Creating humour-based educational modules for adult learners on emotional resilience and communication.
- Developing cross-generational workshops where young and older adults exchange humour and life experiences.
- Using artistic approaches - theatre, storytelling, and visual arts - to explore humour's healing role.
- Promoting international exchanges where learners share humour across cultures to build empathy and social understanding.

6.4 Lessons Learned

From the research and fieldwork, several key lessons emerged that will guide future phases of the Laugh Labs project:

1. Humour connects people more effectively than information alone.
Laughter builds trust and opens conversations that traditional awareness campaigns often struggle to start.
2. Humour can be taught, modelled, and practised.
Educators and facilitators can learn how to use humour purposefully - to energise, include, and heal.

3. Cultural and generational awareness is essential.
What is funny in one setting may not be in another. Sensitivity and empathy are key to ensuring humour supports rather than harms.
4. Humour works best when linked with creativity.
Artistic forms like storytelling, theatre, and drawing provide safe, engaging ways to explore emotions and identity.
5. Humour supports lifelong learning and wellbeing.
By encouraging reflection, resilience, and connection, humour helps adults learn not only skills but also healthier ways to live and relate to others.

6.5 Summary Table of Insights

Theme	Shared Finding	Implication for Practice
Emotional resilience	Humour supports coping and optimism	Include humour exercises in wellbeing training
Generations	Different humour styles across ages	Use humour to bridge communication gaps
Cultures	Humour reflects social norms and identity	Apply culturally sensitive approaches
Stigma	Humour reduces fear but needs empathy	Train facilitators in positive, inclusive humour
Education	Humour enhances learning and engagement	Develop humour-based adult education tools

6.6 Overall Conclusion

The comparative findings confirm that humour is a valuable but underused tool for emotional resilience, inclusion, and learning. Across Europe, people already use laughter intuitively to cope with challenges, but structured educational and community approaches can make its impact even stronger.

