

# CONTENTS

Foreword.....	vi
<i>A Special Word about Mass General Hospital for Children.....</i>	viii
Introducing Our Fabulous Clowns! .....	ix
Our Board.....	xi
Big Clown Hugs and Thanks .....	xiii
Introduction .....	
Introducing Hearts & Noses Hospital Clown Troupe .....	xvi
About the Training Process .....	xviii
Purpose of this Program .....	xx
How to Use the Program Materials .....	xxii
Background on Jeannie Lindheim .....	xxii
We Can Train Your Group in Hospital Clowning .....	xxv
Session One	
It's All About Love.....	2
Clown Birth.....	3
Discovering Your Clown.....	4
Key Concept: The Gift of Presence .....	5
Exercise #1 My Name Is... .....	6
Exercise #2 Clown Walk and Centers Theory ►► .....	7
Exercise #3 Improvisation with Centers Theory .....	8
Exercise #4 Status ►► .....	9
Developing Your Clown Walk .....	10
Exercise #5 Sense Energy .....	10
Exercise #6 Marionette Skit ►► .....	11
Exercise #7 Asking Permission to Enter a Room ►► .....	12
Exercise #8 Problem Solving and Clown Logic ►►.....	15
Exercise #9 Lunch Break and Clowning at the Supermarket .....	16

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►► This symbol throughout the book indicates that you can view examples of the topic on the video/DVD.

Hygiene: JLHCT Practices and Policies ..... 17  
 Precaution Signs ..... 18  
 Other JLHCT Practices and Policies ..... 20  
 Clowning at Parties ..... 21  
     Exercise #10 Clown Prom and other Places▶▶ ..... 22  
 Review ..... 23  
 Questions and Answers ..... 24

Session Two

Why Be a Hospital Clown? ..... 30  
 Initial Feedback on Hospital Visits ..... 31  
 Questions and Answers ..... 31  
 Key Concept: Swinging Between the Trees ..... 33  
     Exercise #1 Machine Add-On ▶▶ ..... 34  
     Exercise #2 Working with Props ▶▶ ..... 35  
 Developing Your Clown Voice ..... 36  
     Exercise #3 Using Props to Find Your Clown Voice ..... 37  
     Exercise #4 14 Shticks and Magic Tricks ..... 38  
     Exercise #5 Lunch Break and Clowning at the Deli ..... 43  
 Key Concepts: Review ..... 43  
 Key Concept: Spotlighting ..... 44  
     Exercise #6 Role Playing – Initial ▶▶ ..... 44  
     Exercise #7 Clown Tableau ..... 45  
     Exercise #8 Role Playing – Doing it Wrong ..... 46  
     Exercise #9 Role Playing – Clowning with a Quiet Child ..... 46  
     Exercise #10 Environments ..... 48  
 Questions from the New Clowns to the Spicy Clowns ..... 49

Session Three

Inspiring Quotes ..... 54  
 What We Love About Hospital Clowning ..... 55  
 Key Concept: Wiping Your Feet at the Door ..... 57  
     Exercise #1 Sound and Movement Improv ▶▶ ..... 57  
     Exercise #2 Clown Playground – Using Guided Imagery ▶▶ ..... 58  
     Exercise #3 Improv Magic Tricks ..... 61  
     Exercise #4 White Light Technique ..... 63  
 What Kills Creativity ..... 65  
 The 14 Commandments of Clown Leadership ..... 66  
 Questions and Answers ..... 67

Pop Quiz.....	69
Exercise #5 Float the Judges Away .....	72
Exercise #6 Role Playing .....	74
Exercise #7 Un-Birthday Party .....	77

## Session Four

Key Concept: Be in the Present Moment .....	81
Greatest Challenge? .....	83
Disappointments? .....	84
Clowning in the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unit) .....	85
About the Environment .....	85
About the Children in the PICU .....	86
About the Parents in the PICU .....	87
About the Staff in the PICU .....	88
About Entering the PICU .....	89
About Your General Clown Manner in the PICU .....	89
At the Bedside in the PICU .....	90
About Taking Care of Your Clown Self in the PICU .....	91
About Visiting the PICU .....	91
Exercise #1 PICU Role Play .....	92
Q and A to Dr. Agus about Clowning in the PICU .....	95
A few stray points .....	96
Exercise #2 Improv with Textures .....	96
Exercise #3 Improv as Martians .....	97
Exercise #4 Improv as Animal .....	97
Exercise #5 Improv with Being Thrilled .....	97
Exercise #6 Improv with Curiosity, with a Prop ►► .....	97
Exercise #7 Improv with Curiosity about your Costume .....	98
Exercise #8 Improv with a Towel .....	99
Exercise #9 Psychological Gesture .....	99
Parting Words►► .....	101

## Appendices

A. Glossary of Terms and Concepts .....	104
B. Contents of Video/DVD .....	109
C. J LHCT Health Requirements .....	110
D. <i>J LHCT Infection Control Guidelines</i> by Michael Agus, MD .....	112
E. Clowning with Kids on Precautions .....	117
F. Clowning for Special Children .....	120
G. Responsibilities of J LHCT Clowns .....	122

H. More Shticks and Games and Magic! .....	125
I. <i>Cultivating Gentleness</i> by Shobi Dobi .....	129
J. <i>I'm in Heaven When You Smile</i> by David Langdon.....	132
K. <i>Exploring our Intention in Service</i> , Frank Ostaseski.....	136
L. <i>Clown Principles</i> by Avner Eisenberg and Julie Goell.....	142
M. J LHCT Self-Assessment .....	145
N. Self-Check – Ways in Which We Can Flub Up .....	148
O. More Inspiring Quotes.....	149
P. The Spiritual Side of Clowning.....	151
Q. Resources .....	152
R. Quotes from Children, Parents, and Organizations.....	155
 Reader Feedback .....	 160

Our training entails practicing the core skills of our style of hospital clowning:

- Moving slowly and gently so as not to overwhelm the child.
- Modulating our voices and energy for the hospital environment.
- Creating new material – constantly improvising – as we almost never know who we will meet in each hospital room.
- Adapting our clowning to the needs of each child: the energetic, the drowsy, the bored, the timid, the excitable, the heavily medicated, the toddler, the teenager, etc.
- Working in rooms with Precautions, which requires a sensitivity to special issues and entails wearing masks, gloves, and gowns.
- Working as teammates, coordinating and modulating our silliness to match the energy of the child.
- Spotlighting – giving and taking focus – so the child is not overwhelmed by clown antics.
- Role playing so our clowns can better understand what it is like to be the child in the bed or the parents/caretakers visiting their child.

Parents and hospital staff have said to us *She hasn't smiled like this in days!* or *We usually can't get any reaction from him, and you have him laughing!* Nurses will occasionally call us into a child's room to distract the child from a painful medical procedure. It isn't that we are irresistibly hilarious clowns. It is that we carefully and thoroughly reach out, give love, and make connections with these children as only a hospital clown can.

**Clowning is not about being funny. It is about the gift of presence.**



Throughout our initial and ongoing training, we are focused on:

- / Creating an environment that promotes healing.
- / Alleviating fear, anxiety, and stress in children.
- / Inviting the child and family to enter the magical Clown World where, for a moment, they can forget illness.
- / Encouraging positive and joyful energy in an environment that can be sterile and frightening.
- / Supporting children by promoting joy.

Sprinkled throughout the book are “Magical Moments”, interactions between hospital clowns and patients that make us marvel at the healing power and spiritual magic of clowning. The names and personal attributes of the people described in these Magical Moments have been changed so as to respect confidentiality.

### **Purpose of this Program**

This book and the accompanying video/DVD have been created to support the growth and professionalism of improvisation-based hospital clowning for children. These materials were developed to:

- Serve as a reference for the clowns in our Troupe.
- Provide new concepts for clowns who are already clowning in hospitals, primarily in the areas of:
  - ♦ Empowering the child,
  - ♦ Giving choices,
  - ♦ Using improvisation, and
  - ♦ Developing a clown character.
- Introduce other interested readers to many tools and techniques used in the wonderful world of improvisation-based hospital clowning for children.

### **Description of the Training Presented in this Program**

Throughout the training, we focus on empowering the child, giving the child choices, and asking permission. The technical part of the training is divided into three parts:

- Characterization techniques, in which trainees learn techniques for transforming honestly and organically to a clown. These techniques develop stage presence, free the body to take risks in movement, increase movement vocabulary, and develop the freedom and relaxation needed for characterization.
- Improvisational techniques, in which trainees learn many improvisational tools and techniques to use specifically in a hospital setting with the children and families.
- Role-playing, in which trainees experience being the visiting clown, the child in the bed, and the child's parents, siblings, caretakers, and friends. To be an effective clown, it is important to understand all of these roles.

## SESSION ONE



**Synopsis:** On this first day of training, the new clowns gather. These baby clowns, wearing their fun clown outfits of wild colors and oversized hats, are about to begin the fabulous journey to discover their own unique clown. Jeannie begins introducing key concepts of hospital clowning, such as *asking permission*. By the end of this first session, the clowns have a better understanding of what it means to be a hospital clown and they acquire tools and techniques to enter that magical place known as Clown World.

**Core concepts:** (1) hospital clowning is about love, (2) becoming a clown is a process of discovery, (3) we give the gift of presence, (4) clown walks, (5) improvisation-based hospital clowning, (6) clown status, (7) sense energy, (8) asking permission, (9) clowns love problems, (10) Troupe practices, and (11) hygiene.

### MORNING SESSION

#### *It's All About Love*

Each clown comes to the training in a clown “costume,” clothes that don’t match. They sit in a circle on the floor or in chairs. Being in a circle is very important. It creates equality and warmth.

*Every moment that you choose love, every second that you allow your heart to open, you transform not only your own life with a sense of joy and purpose, but you bring a great blessing to the planet.*

Hospital clowning is all about love; we are the messengers of love. As Bob Hope advised Tony Bennett: *Show ‘em you love ‘em*. That’s the essence of hospital clowning. The children can see in your eyes that you love them even if you just sit and smile.

## SESSION TWO

**Synopsis:** On this second day of training, the participants gather with a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and gratitude. They are abuzz with their experiences from their first visit to the hospital, which they had done between Session One and Session Two. Their costumes and makeup show a little more coherence as their clown selves begin to emerge.

On this day, Jeannie takes them on new excursions to Clown World and inspires them to discover new things about their emerging clown, including working with status, walks, and voices. The morning includes working with props, shticks, and magic tricks. A good part of the day is also spent in role playing hospital visits.

**Core concepts:** (1) spotlighting, (2) making an entrance, (3) sense energy and keeping an appropriate distance, (4) asking permission, and (5) trusting that something is going to happen.

### MORNING SESSION

#### *Why Be a Hospital Clown?*

Among the many and varied reasons that our new clowns have expressed are:

*It is a magical moment when you walk in and you see a child who is dealing with loneliness, pain, or frustration, and when he sees you, that goes away and you know you have made a difference for a moment.*

*I want to give back to the world in this wonderful way.*

*The essence of my soul is love, and the most efficient way for me to give that is to clown and give sprinkles of love.*

*I have had personal experience with severe illness and I know what a difference this can make. I believe it is very healing work.*

*I'm training to become a therapist and I am interested in learning how to play with kids and also teach adults and new parents how to communicate with their kids through*



*play. This is a very joyful, loving way to bring play into a space that is usually not playful.*

*I clowned in a children's hospital years ago and I have always wanted to get back to it. It's meaningful work that touches my heart and clowning keeps me in touch with my spirit. I am uplifted.*

### ***Initial Feedback on Hospital Visits***

You've all done one hospital visit and some things have come up that I want to cover before we begin today's exercises.

- **I can't say it often enough: Learning to be a hospital clown is a process.** You are learning on the job. Please be patient with yourself. Just as there is no microwave acting, there is no microwave clowning. You are learning to be true clown artists and this process takes time.
- **Processing our clown gigs and giving feedback.** When we process the gigs, please be gentle with each other. This is a very tender process. Clowning with children most of the time tends to bring out our gentleness, not toughness. Use that gentleness when you give feedback to the other clowns, really embrace each other. When you process with each other at the end of a gig, you might begin by saying, *What you did was fabulous!* Then you might want to make a suggestion or a comment. It's important that we all know how to give each other constructive positive feedback.

### ***Questions and Answers***

*Q: What do you do if the child is not looking toward the door?*

You can knock quietly on the door if he is awake. If he is lying flat, you can go in a little bit, peeking around the curtain. Move toward where the child can see you so you can ask permission.

That brings up the notion of rejection. One clown said that sometimes it can feel like you are offering yourself up on a plate: *Do you want me? I really hope you do!* That's very stressful. You have to be aware that you are not offering your whole soul, but a gift that you think is good. Don't take it personally if a child does not want a visit. He is not rejecting you, just a visit from a goofy clown. It is empowering to the child to be able to reject something in this setting, so even if you never enter the room, you have helped that child by giving him a choice.

## *Review of What We Did Today*

- Swinging between the trees
- Creating Clown Machines
- Working with high/low status (review)
- Sense energy
- Making an entrance (review)
- Using props
- Starting to develop our clown voice, using voices with props
- Learning magic tricks, games, and shticks – *the setup is everything*
- Working on sense energy and asking permission during the lunch break
- Role playing hospital visits – with attention to:
  - ♦ Entering the room
  - ♦ Focusing on the child, including asking permission
  - ♦ Giving control to the child
  - ♦ Engaging with love
  - ♦ Keeping it simple
  - ♦ Finding obstacles to overcome
  - ♦ Spotlighting
  - ♦ Creating environments

Clown hug.

*Magical Moment:* Then there was an adult man, maybe in his thirties, who loved my bumbling card trick so much, that even when I showed him the secret that all the cards were the same, he still wanted me to do it again, and then again. It was so sweet, because it really felt like he was enjoying the delivery more than the so-called magic, and as any good volunteer improvisational hospital clown can tell you, that's the whole point of magic anyway — the connection. ~ from Sweet Bones at the Spcieal Olympic

*If an actor can find his personal rhythm in a character, he's home free.*

-- Dustin Hoffman

## ***What We Love About Hospital Clowning***

Some clowns share what they love about hospital or party clowning.

*Eliza: I once made a connection with one child across a crowd of children. I waved to her, she wasn't sure I did, and I pointed to her and mouthed, "I'm waving to you." And she broke into a big smile. I was so happy that we had just connected.*

*Peter: I was doing a gig and there was a little girl at a table in her father's arms, probably three years old. She was crying. I spotted her as I was going around to the tables. I caught her eye and began goofing and juggling, and her face completely changed into a big smile. It was a great moment, and captures why I am here.*



Star

*Judy: In the hospital, a couple of us went in and began clowning with a little girl who seemed to feel pretty well and was smiling and having fun. Then we became a clown car, others kept coming in until we had six or eight clowns in the room, and she just ate it up! The energy was so high! The thing I love the most is that there is no wrong way.*

*Ellen: At a Halloween party, I just started blowing bubbles and there was one little girl who was totally enchanted. I was so surprised that I didn't have to do much to bring this child into such a happy state.*

*Shelly: I was at the hospital working on a floor, as a medical specialist, and you all came in and you made **me** so happy. One little girl was a giggler and you all understood that so well and played to that. When a child responds so strongly, it does touch something in us that makes us want to give more, doesn't it? You were all so energetic.*

*Charlie: I do this for all sorts of reasons. Certainly Shobi Dobi's words strike a chord. There is something about being in that selfless, flowing, relaxed space of*

*being in touch with my heart that means that even if I don't see any results, and even if I am not doing the right thing to connect with them, it doesn't matter. I just get so much back just being in that space, even being with you in this training and accessing that space of being compassionate and not trying to make anybody laugh. That consciousness really brings me to a satisfying place.*

*Cheryl: I could take the whole training time to tell you how wonderful each experience of being with kids is. Sometimes you go in and a child is really sick or has really changed; something has happened that takes their childhood away. And there is a moment that you connect, and you see through or past what has happened to them and you see the child. We clown to a child who has been terribly burned. In that moment you see beyond the burns and see that light in the child. The other thing I wanted to say is that when we started the trainings, I wondered how I would ever love the new clowns the way I love the seasoned clowns. Now I do.*

*Peter W: I didn't know that clowning is not supposed to be for us! I have clowned at the hospital once and then the Halloween party. In both settings, I love just being able to let it all flow. I do this in my life as much as I can, but as a clown I can do it totally and fully. I love it. I can be with people and feel my heart and my connection with people so much more fully.*

*Janet: The Halloween gig was just fantastic. I had a couple of things that happened. There was a little fellow who was in a carriage most of the time. Then they took him out of the carriage. The mother and grandmother came over and asked if I would take a picture with him. I did and felt very flattered. They told me that I should hold him. I have been a nurse so I wasn't taken aback, but he had more tubes and hardware under his little costume so that, if you were not expecting that, you might have been shocked. I wanted to share that so people could think about that. Finally, just when we were leaving, there was a girl about sixteen years old sitting alone at the table, a beautiful girl, who looked so sad. I went to her and asked her how she liked my nails, because I had done them. I asked if she wanted a clown manicure. She barely nodded. So I did her nails, and when I got up, I got a smile that will keep me going for a long, long time.*

*Linda: I remember, as a child, the moments when adults looked at me and concentrated on me. I seemed to have their full attention, even for just a moment. Especially if they smiled, it was memorable. I was reminded of the Christmas in the City party last year, when a thousand homeless children came. They entered on a red carpet, and the entertainers and the chefs and everyone stood along the edge of*

*the carpet and applauded them. It's wonderful! I did my best to catch the eye of every single child. I am remembering the little building blocks of self-esteem that happen at moments like that for children, when they feel thoroughly important to us for a minute.*

*Mark: For me, it's the conduit, the connection to the universal Clown World that I bring to a room or to a person. When we bring the clown universe with us, it's not a cold hospital room anymore. It becomes Clown World. Imagination takes over, and brings beauty and warmth. The ability to do that is the special moment.*

*Jeannie: I think that giving voice to people's experience is so important. It really grounds it. My moment is that connection, like Eliza said. I went into the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit this week where there was a sixteen-year-old girl. I'm sometimes concerned whether the older kids will like the clowning. But I just did dumb things, and she was smiling and eating it all up. That's seeing the light behind their eyes, which is my mantra. It gets me up in the morning!*

### **Key Concept: Wiping Your Feet at the Door**

There is a concept that is crucial to our work: *wiping your feet at the door*. This means that if you have stuff happening before a gig that is really awful, you must leave it outside the door. If you are down, upset, or sad, it will influence the others with whom you clown. That's not fair to the children, to the other clowns, or to you. It's really important that you leave your baggage outside the door, no matter what is happening. This is a conscious learning, and it's not easy. You can use your costume as a way of doing that. Getting dressed is part of the ritual of letting those things go.



## EXERCISES

### **Exercise 1: Sound and Movement Improv** **▶▶**

#### **Part 1: Transforming sound and movement phrases**

- Divide into two lines of four, facing each other.
- The first person (A) in this line starts a sound and movement. Everyone mirrors the sound and movement.

*When a child has a GI problem, you get them a gastroenterologist. When someone has seizures, you get a neurologist. When someone needs a laugh, a dose of joy, they get a clown. I think of you guys as part of the team, the emotional consultants.*

-- Michael Agus, MD, Boston Children's Hospital,  
Medical Director, Hearts & Noses Hospital  
Clown Troupe

## *Clowning in the PICU*

### **About the environment**

- The PICU environment can be jarring because of the complexity of modern care and all of the machines. Some of the children just have tons and tons of stuff attached to them. These could be machines that support the child's heart, lungs, kidneys, etc., but they can be a very intimidating sight.
- The PICU at MassGeneral is a large common room, with six beds in the main area, plus two other beds in glass rooms to allow for patients who require isolation for one reason or another. A ninth bed in a separate room off to the side is used to provide sedation for outpatient procedures. All the patients can be seen and heard from the central station.
- Having a common room is the unique positive and negative aspect of the unit. The families share things with each other, even when they don't want to. When one family experiences a terrible event, especially a death, everybody knows it and experiences it. On the other hand, when people stay there for more than a few days and become a long-stay family, then they become more familiar with each other and occasionally become supports for each other.
- You will never really be clowning for just one patient. You may be interacting with one patient or one family primarily, but everybody else is going to be watching.

- ▶▶ See video clip, *Curiosity*.

### ***Exercise 7: Improv with Curiosity about Your Costume***

- Find something to be totally fascinated with on your own person. You are amazed that you never noticed this about yourself. It is something that works that you didn't know worked.
- See what it does. Say out loud what you are thinking.
- Maybe you never saw before that your button has different colors. Or that it comes in and out of a hole, and you have never seen this before either.
- This is another shtick that is great for the PICU because it is solo clowning, plus it can be very quiet.

### **Processing the Improv exercises.**

Clown World is filled with so much joy, wonderful energy, and amazement! Everything is a game. And you could easily use this in the PICU. What did you learn?

*Jan: I got to a place where I didn't know what to do, so I tried things until something worked.*

That's a fabulous place to be! I don't know what to do! You can say that out loud in the PICU or on the floors. The fun is seeing you figure it out. You don't have to make sense. You can practice this at home, by just walking around the house talking to yourself. Talking to stuffed animals and making up voices for them is very helpful, too.

*Marie: It was interesting to make something exciting from nothing.*

How true that is! Remember, clowns are curious about absolutely everything, and you don't have a clue about anything. You don't have to know how anything works or what anything does.

*Q: Is it all right to do clowning about the machinery around a child? For example, the IV pole?*

If a machine makes a sound, you might play off that sound, but don't make fun of machinery. And what you do must be tasteful and appropriate to the situation.