

Chapter 3

Discovering Your Role

Five Roles of a Caring Clown

Stars are lights that shine in the darkness. They don't make the darkness go away but they offer hope and encouragement in the midst of darkness.

They inspire a sense of wonder. They lift our gaze upward. They take us out of ourselves.

As a caring clown, you can bring light into the night. With your smile and caring, you can lighten the spirits of all you meet.

But the true "star" of your clown interaction is the person you clown for, be they patient, family or staff. They are the focus of all you do. They get top billing. In your eyes, they are "the star" on whom your light shines.

The star model

Our visual model of a star presents five key roles of the hospital clown. These are five "touch points" where you as a clown may connect with each person as:

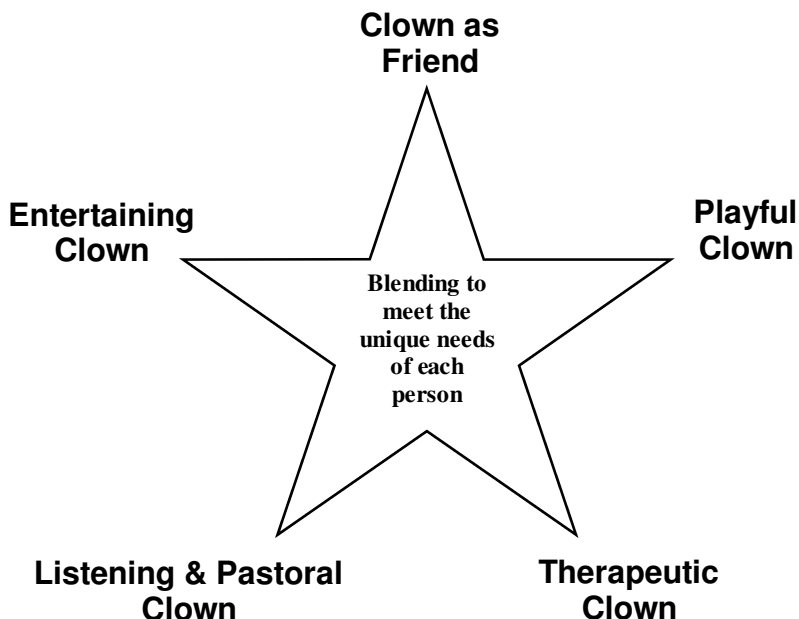


friend
playmate
therapeutic clown
pastoral listener
entertainer

You can combine and blend these roles to meet the unique needs of each person you encounter.

"The star model teaches our students to focus on the various roles of the clown" says Bob "Dr. Bucket" Bleiler (above) of the Bumper "T" Caring Clowns (see p. 60). They use this star model in their classes and mentoring outings to hospitals.

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No Single Prescription

The star model is not meant to imply a prescription for clowning. With the wide diversity of hospital programs and individual clown skills, there is no single prescription or universal standard for hospital clowning today.

But just as ancient mariners charted their paths by looking at the stars, so we offer this star model to help you chart your own clowning emphasis.

These five ways of being and relating are not exclusive or all encompassing. One often leads to another or blends with another. For instance, listening is therapeutic. Play develops friendship. The different roles can be combined in a galaxy of possibilities.

Each illustrates ways of thinking about how the hospital clown can interact with patients, family and staff. Each also emphasizes certain of the “unspoken messages” present in all caring clown efforts and offers examples of real life experiences.

Five Roles of a Caring Clown



The Clown as Friend

In attitude and action, the clown as friend is communicating these unspoken messages:

“I like you.”

“I want to be your friend.”

“I’m here with you.”

Be a silent presence

A clown is invited into the room of an elderly woman in her fourth hospitalization. As the clown is asked to her bedside, the woman holds out her hand.

The clown rests her hand under the woman’s hand while the woman begins to cry. The clown, in silent presence, is the woman’s friend.

(Infection Control Note: This hospital permitted clowns to physically hold a person’s hand and then to wash hands afterwards. Be vigilant in following your hospital’s infection control rules.)

Show simple caring

“If you say ‘hello, I like your outfit, or your shirt,’ you show that someone cares about them, that they have a friend,” says Curt “Doctor ICU” Patty of the St. Louis Clown Docs.

The clown as friend can reach adults as well as children. Notes Shobhana “Shobi Dobi” Schwebke, (shown below), editor of *The Hospital Clown Newsletter*:



“Because we are not asking for anything or administering anything, often we step into that warm and fuzzy place of a trusted friend.

“How often after doing a goofy magic trick, an adult will just open up to me and a real bond is made...In the same way children share stories and secrets with my puppets and we all become family.”

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Love with your eyes

Clowns as friends communicate with their eyes. The clown as friend is willing to step into another's world and enter into another's loneliness.

"The clowns are remarkable, not only for their ability to bring joy, laughter and happiness, but also for their ability to sit in empathetic silence with a critically or terminally ill patient, sharing the comedy and tragedy of humanity with one another by a tear, a hug, or a gentle touch."

—Barbara Anne McCarty, CCLS, Child Life Specialist,
The Children's Regional Hospital at Cooper Hospital,
New Jersey speaking of the Bumper "T" Caring Clowns

Make a memory

Just as with any friend, your clown's visit may be remembered long after you leave. As Richard "Snowflake Junior" Snowberg has observed:

"Never overlook the significance of your presence to someone you visit.

"Just because you don't know them personally doesn't mean you don't have the same impact as a close personal friend.

"You provide joy and something to talk about after you've gone."



Crayon drawing (at left) by a 5 year-old after an appearance by "Toot" the clown aka Anita Thies.

The Playful Clown



In attitude and action, the playful clown is communicating these unspoken messages:

“I delight in you.”

“I enjoy you.”

“I have fun with you.”

Every clown offers the opportunity of play, but for some, the majority of their service is that of the playful clown.

The playful clown offers patients a time to reconnect to the fun side of living, if only for moments. This can provide mental and emotional relief and a welcomed escape.

Give a “time out” from pain



“Your large cartoon-like character can take them out via your fantasy,” says Richard “Snowflake Junior” Snowberg (*shown at left*)

“You can remove them from their pain for a time as you playfully involve them in your stories, character and props.

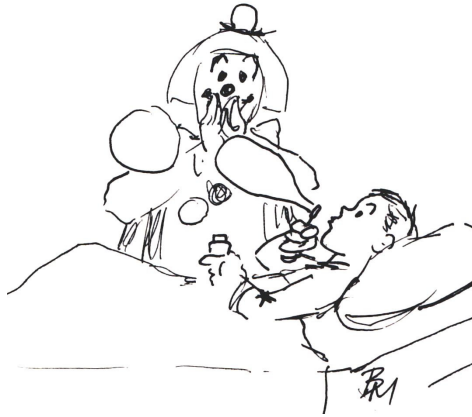
They likely haven’t been experiencing any fun. You can fill that need.”

Take the inner child “out to play”

Whereas the entertaining clown often carries the whole energy of the relationship themselves, the playful clown invites more interaction. In so doing, the playful clown invites the “inner child” out to play.

“The hospital clown today is the experiential playmate. We give the experience of the moment,” says Shobhana Schwebke, aka “Shobi Dobi” the Clown.

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“It is the gift we get and it is our gift to those suffering. It is the gift of play we bring to hospitalized patients and staff and relatives,” says Shobi. “Because right then, with you, they can connect to that inner child and to the moment, to that inner glow, that love, that universal connection.” ⁷

“My kid is back!”

The impact of the playful clown often extends to family members. St. Louis Clown Docs member Curt “Doctor ICU” Patty recalls a time when his wife, Diana “Nurse Sniggles” Patty (*right*) was blowing bubbles for a young girl in intensive care.



At one point the girl reached up and grabbed a bubble and a parent who had been keeping a bedside vigil exclaimed “my kid is back!”

The essence of the playful clown comes from deep within every clown. Once again, “Shobi Dobi” says it best:

Our sense of play makes us fun

“The costume and face may be funny,” says Shobi, “but it is our sense of play that makes us fun. We can’t afford to lose this play, especially in the hospital where we can’t depend on a stage show. It’s one-on-one and heart-to-heart. We have to share our own self.” ⁸

The Therapeutic Clown



In attitude and action, the therapeutic clown is communicating these unspoken messages:

“I support you.”

“I encourage you.”

“I want to help empower you.”

Supporting medical exams

A clown is invited into a treatment room where a 4-year-old girl is being evaluated for a possible concussion. The doctor needs the girl to look up so he can examine the lower part of her eyes with a light. But the girl won't look up. Could the clown help? The clown blows bubbles to the ceiling. The girl follows the bubbles with her eyes and the doctor finishes his exam.

In another instance, a doctor needs to do deep stitches on a teenager's gashed arm. The clown is invited to be a calming presence prior to and after the stitching. The clown does visual magic to divert the teen's attention and afterwards affirms how brave the teen was to tolerate the pain.

A spoonful of clowning helps the medicine go down



Korey Thompson, (*left*), Artistic Director of the Clowns for Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, recalls situations when clowns are utilized as potential anti-emetics.

Sometimes patients can be distracted from the upchuck mode at the sight of a clown and at the invitation to play. In one instance, medical staff waited to administer medications that could cause stomach upset until the clown was present. The patient and clown played together for half an hour and the medications didn't inauspiciously reappear.

"For clowns to be used that way, medical staff must have both a trust and understanding of what a clown might potentially offer to the situation," says Korey.

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The Listening / Pastoral Clown

In attitude and action, the listening clown is communicating these unspoken messages:

"I hear you."

"I value you."

"I respect you."

"Can you listen to my feelings?"

A clown who is also a trained hospice volunteer stops by the room of an elderly man. His daughter follows the clown into the hallway and says, "they tell us my father will die tonight. I need someone to listen to my feelings right now. Can you?" After clearing it with the nursing staff, the clown leads the woman to a quiet corner to listen.

The clown takes off her clown hat and ping pong ball "nose" and shifts gears into the role of compassionate, reflective listener.

Afterwards the clown gives the woman's daughter some clown stickers and handouts which the woman later says provided relief for her daughter during the roller coaster evening the family experienced. Several days later, the clown—this time in street clothes-- attends the memorial service as a follow up act of caring with the family.

Give an "ear" to another

The role of the listening clown is to literally "give an ear" to receive another's story. The willingness to let someone unburden the heaviness in their heart can be a first step for release.



"I have found many children and adults who are afraid of surgery, patients who were facing serious decisions, patients who were facing the shadow of death," says Desi "Dizzy" Payne, (*left*), who clowns at the Ottumwa (Iowa) Regional Health Center.

Five Roles of a Caring Clown



One does not need formal training to be a good listener. Nor do you need to “step out” of clown makeup to listen. Sometimes a family member or patient just wants to talk or share a story with the clown at hand.

Such was the case with a World War II veteran visited by “Americlown,” a clown character created by Chris Montross after September 11. Chris, a recreation therapist at St. Luke’s Hospital in Cedar Rapids Iowa, recalls:

“I gave this proud veteran a small American flag and he said ‘I haven’t had a flag of my own for 50 years.’

“He then vented some deep seated memories that weighed heavy on his heart. He allowed himself to cry and helped put some of his feelings into proper perspective.

“A unit nurse later told me that this experience was a dose of much needed medicine for this gentleman.”

Make the most of the moment

To listen well, one needs to be open to the moment.

“We don’t enter a room with any pre-conceived ‘schtick’ to do,” says Esther “DR Curly Bubbe” Gushner, (*right*), of the Bumper “T” Caring Clowns.

“We know we can’t change the diagnosis or the prognosis of the patient. All we have is the moment and in that moment we have the unique opportunity to enhance the hospital environment one person at a time, one smile at a time.”



The Entertaining Clown



In attitude and action, the entertaining clown is communicating these unspoken messages:

"I'm here to give to you."

"Escape with me."

"May I entertain you?"

Provide a new focus

A clown is asked to visit a severely injured young man whose father was killed in the same traffic accident that hospitalized him. His mother and sister sit at his bedside. The clown does several brief magic tricks and quietly plays a song on kazoo as requested by his mother. As the clown entertains, the man opens his eyes and smiles for the first time since being hospitalized.

In this instance, the clown carries the entire energy level and focus through entertainment. This is the entertaining clown and there are many ways to be one.

Take them away

With voice, mime or music, the entertaining clown uses all their senses and skills in storytelling, magic, puppets or whatever their specialty to help focus the patient's attention away from their illness and situation.



*"In this world of make-believe
Mime and magic, fantasy,
A clown is a friend
you can hold in your heart
A friendship forever
that will never part."*

From the song "Clowns are
God's Children Too"
by Christine Montross

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Give them a fantasy experience

As Richard Snowberg notes:

“The word ‘entertain’ means to focus attention.

“The caring clown is one that helps the audience of one or one hundred focus their attention...

*“Their focusing on your foolishness,
humor and stories
can release them,
even perhaps but for a short time,
from the pain they are suffering.*

*“You are the entertainment.
You are the escape artist,
offering the opportunity to a bed ridden patient
to share in your fantasy experience.”⁹*

The smiles evoked by an entertaining clown can lift the entire emotional mood in a room.

As Phyllis Diller quipped, (and as artist Amanda Maser of State College, PA models for us in picture at right):

**A smile is a *curve*
that sets everything straight!**



The Entertaining Clown