

The Serious Science of Humor

A Coach's Toolkit for Trust, Resilience, and Cognitive Flexibility



Transformation
doesn't always
have to be heavy.

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DISCLAIMER

This presentation is designed to provide helpful information on the subjects discussed, however, void where prohibited by law. Or by local custom. Or by your mom. This presentation may contain a substantial amount of non-active ingredients. Do not submerge speaker in water. Slippery when wet. Contents may settle in shipping. Results may vary. This presentation may cause dizziness, but—thank goodness—will not cause constipation. This disclaimer disclaims the disclamation of its disclaimancy.



Humor is today
where meditation was
20 years ago.

Anna Hatchard,
Founder of the Laughter Lab



You don't have to be funny. Your dignity is safe.



What It Is Not

This is not a comedy class. You are not putting on a performance. You will never be asked to tell a joke.



What It Is

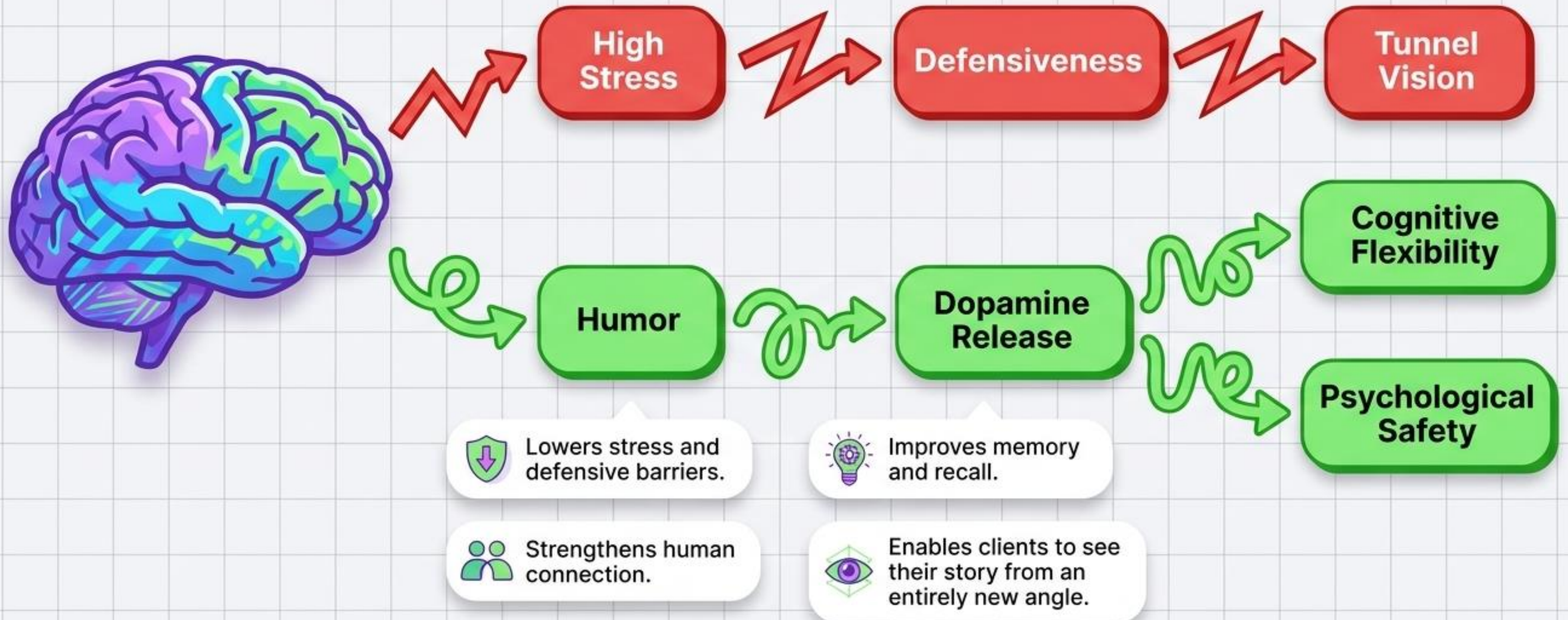
Humor is a skillful use of perspective, warmth, and timing.

“Humor creates enough distance from a problem that we can see it without being swallowed by it.”

Humor is Not a Competency. It's an Amplifier.



Your Brain on Humor



The Architecture of Humor

Entertainment

Creates enjoyment
and energy.

The chocolate on
the hotel pillow.
Lovely, but not the
whole room.

Influence

Helps people listen,
learn, remember,
or reconsider.

**Core Coaching
Focus**

Well-being

Supports coping,
perspective, and
emotional regulation.

**Core Coaching
Focus**

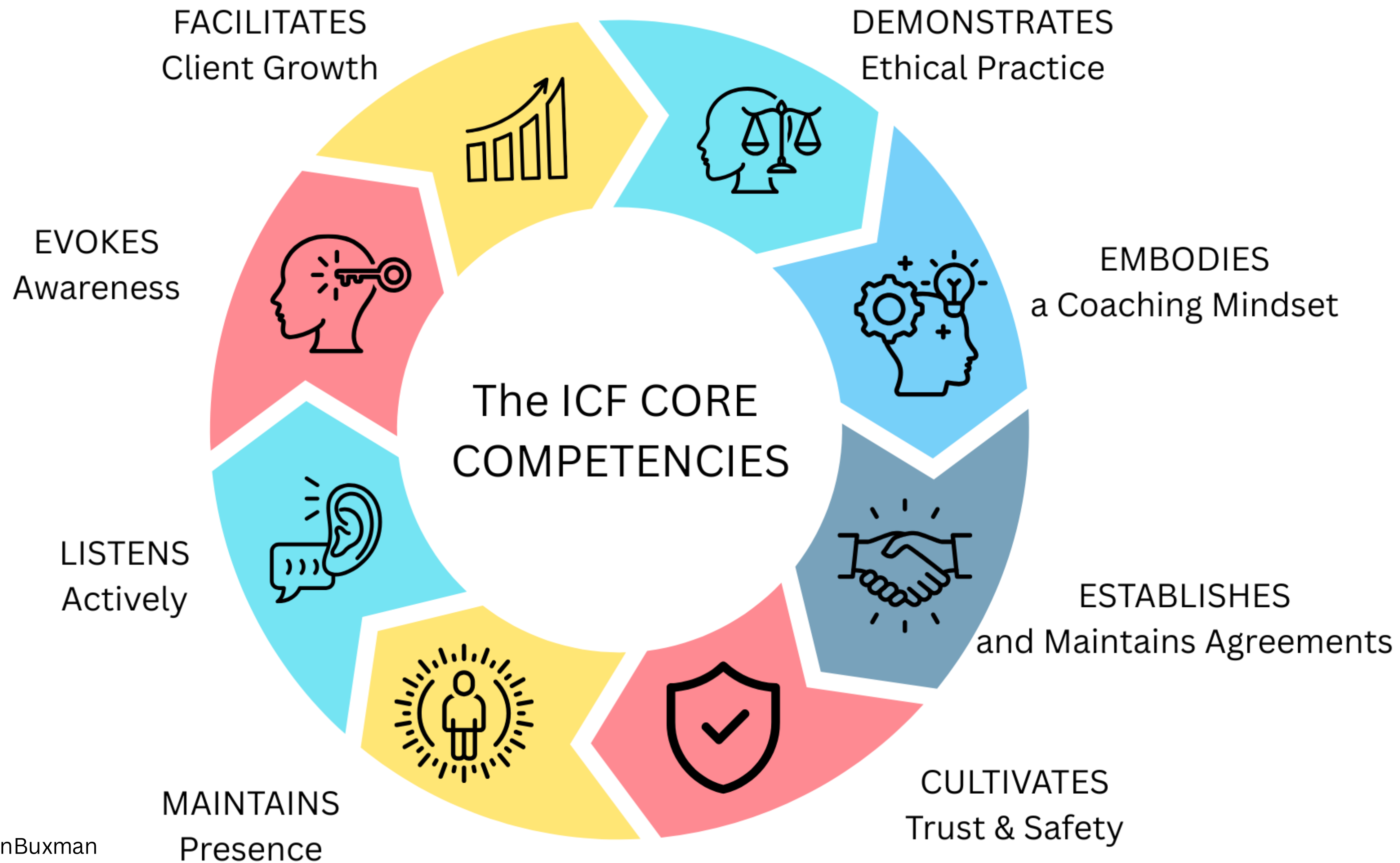
The Humor Safety Matrix

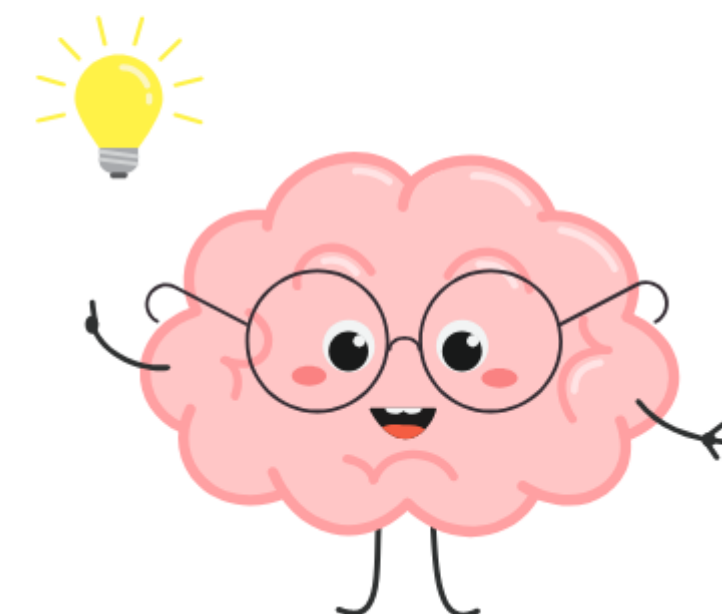
Indicator	Traits	Outcome	Example
	Warm, Client-centered, Gentle, Relevant.	Opens insight; invited or welcomed by client.	Client laughs and says, "I've turned procrastination into an Olympic sport."
	Risky; requires deep rapport; easy to misinterpret.	Coach says, "Well, that was dramatic!" after a client shares a difficult story.	-
	Sarcastic, Shaming, Forced, Minimizes pain.	Used to rescue the coach from their own discomfort or happens too soon.	-

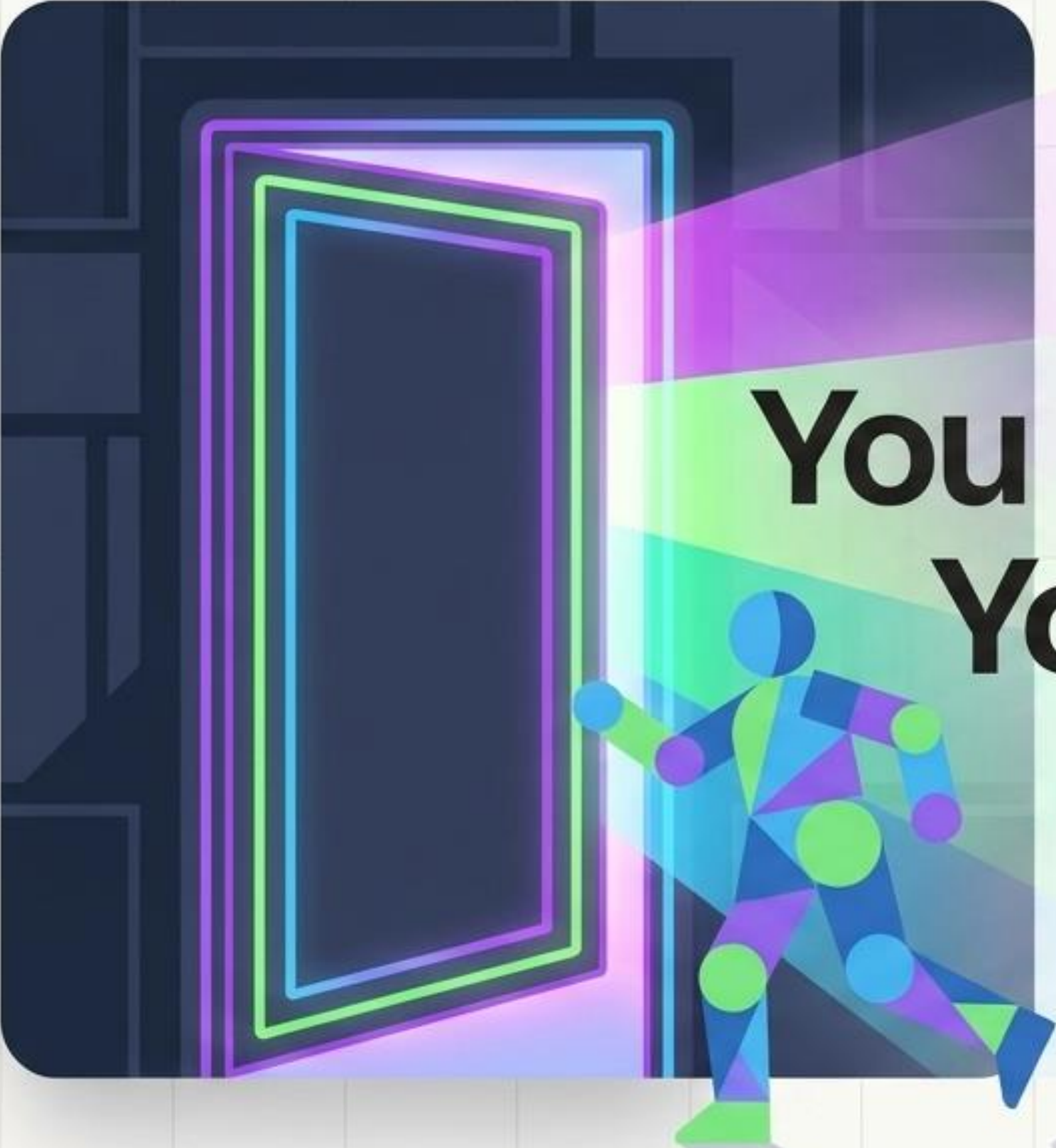
The safest doorway is always following the client's humor, not imposing ours.



Brain Break







You Don't Need Jokes. You Need Moves.

Five structured techniques to introduce lightness safely, respectfully, and entirely guided by the client. Keep them gentle. Keep them client-led.



01. The Gentle Reframe

The Concept:

Shifting the label to neutralize the emotional weight of a situation.

In Practice:



Client

I failed again.

Coach

What would change if we called this data instead of failure?





02. Naming the Pattern

The Concept:

Externalizing the behavior so the client can observe it objectively rather than feeling entirely consumed by it.

In Practice:



Client

I keep saying yes to absolutely everything.

Coach

If this pattern had an official job title, what would it be?





03. Comic Distance

The Concept:

Zooming out by placing the heavy scenario inside the confines of a fictional medium.

In Practice:

Coach

Imagine this situation as a scene in a movie. What would the title of this movie be?



04. Playful Scaling

The Concept: Using absurd extremes to help clients accurately size their anxiety and gain proportion.

Size 1



Size 10



In Practice:

Coach: "On a scale from mildly annoying mosquito to full raccoon loose in the kitchen, how big does this problem actually feel today?"



05. Inner Character Work

The Concept:

Personifying the inner critic to strip away its intimidation factor and hidden power.

In Practice:



Client

My inner critic has apparently taken a full-time job.

Coach

If your inner critic had a name, a ridiculous costume, and a catchphrase... what would they be?





The Golden Rule of Risk

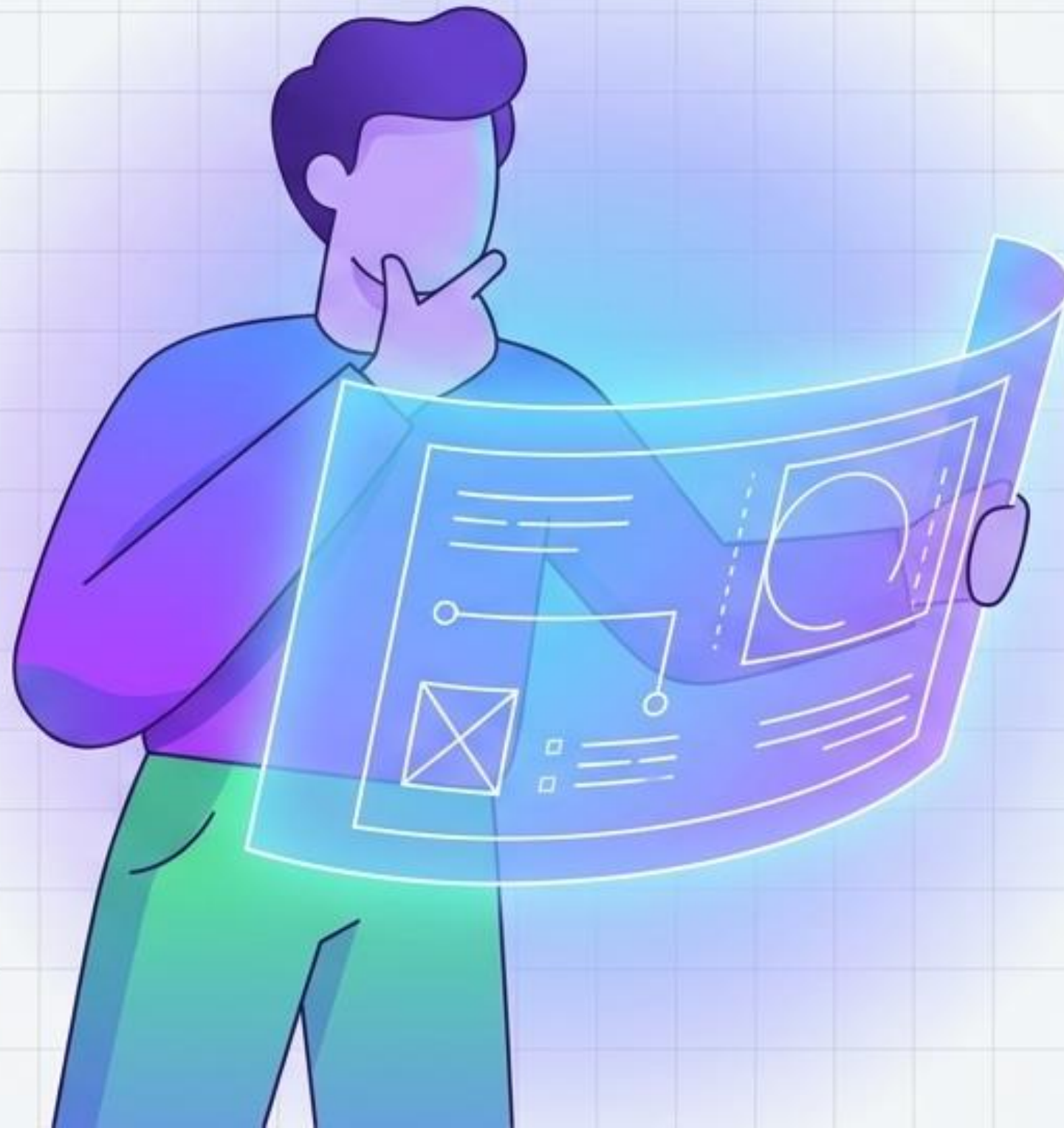
The 'When to Abandon' Checklist

- ✓ Humor works best when it is:
 - ✓ - In service of the client.
 - ✓ - Matched to the relationship depth.
 - ✓ - Grounded in compassion.
 - ✓ - **Easy to abandon if it does not land.**

“ The most important humor skill is not the punchline. It's the recovery.

Draft Your Humor Intention

In my coaching, I will use humor more intentionally by...



- ☐ Listening closely for the client's own humor.
- ☐ Asking lighter reframe questions for low-stakes issues (e.g., email avoidance, calendar allergies).
- ☐ Using playful metaphors to name heavy patterns.
- ☐ Actively noticing when humor is being used as an avoidance tactic.

The Human Advantage



Use humor not to distract from what matters, but to help people approach what matters with more courage, flexibility, and connection.

Sometimes, insight enters through the side door wearing funny shoes.

Humor and Coaching Study 2021/2022

- 306 Coaches—mixed levels of experience and niches
- 147 Surveys completed
- 10 Questions: 4 Quantitative and 6 Qualitative
- 15 interviews

Humor can alter the conversation and open avenues for communication that would otherwise remain closed.

After several sessions, my coachee started responding to my humor with her own humor. And in turn she says that her staff is using more humor, as well. She's become their role model.

I use humor a LOT. One story I tell is about why humans fear speaking so much. It's about biology and the lizard brain, but the way I tell it is entertaining, and it gives them a sense of relief.

