

Drawing upon Humor for Change

TEDTalks

A video talk by Liza Donnelly

You are going to watch a 7-minute video of a woman named Liza Donnelly, who talks about how humor can be used to fight against stereotypes. As you watch the video the first time, your objective should be to understand the general message of the video; don't worry too much about details during this first viewing.

**Video link:**

http://www.ted.com/talks/liza_donnelly_drawing_upon_humor_for_change.html

After watching the video once, you should complete the following series of tasks, which will help you to understand the video in greater detail and to improve your English communication skills.

1. Listening Comprehension: Understanding the TEDTalk

In this talk, Liza Donnelly describes how stereotypes are fostered in our society. Watch the video again and answer the following questions using your own words.

1. What were girls supposed to be like when Liza Donnelly was a child?

2. Did Liza Donnelly's mother impose a stereotype on her?

3. What present did her mother give her, and what influence did that present have on her?

4. According to Liza Donnelly, who are the main carriers of stereotypes?

5. What is her formula to fight against those imposed rules?

These activities were created thanks to collaboration between Ziggurat Language Services, S.L. & Mother Tongue, S.L.

2. Express Yourself

In this talk, Liza Donnelly explains how she felt when she was growing up in relation to the stereotypes about women. How about you? Have you ever felt like you had to follow some stereotypes related to your gender? What does society expect from you as a man or a woman? Do you take those stereotypes into account? Have you ever asked yourself what kind of man or woman you wanted to become? Have you ever taken someone as a model of the type of man / woman that you wanted to be?

3. Language Practice

During the Talk, Liza Donnelly refers to all the things she was expected to do as a woman. She uses modal verbs in order to express notions such as possibility, prohibition or permission. Read the following fragments from the talk and fill in the blanks with the modal verbs from the box.

have to (x2)	can (x2)	can't	could (x3)	be able to	didn't have to (x2)
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1. Since I knew that humor was acceptable in my family, I _____ draw, do what I wanted to do, and not _____ perform, not _____ speak and I _____ still get approval.
2. Now, what if you put together women and humor? I think you _____ get change.
3. I found that I _____ wear high heels, I _____ wear pink, and I _____ feel like I fit in.
4. When I was a little older, in my 20s, I realized there are not many women in cartooning. And I thought, 'Well, maybe I _____ break the little glass ceiling of cartooning.'
5. My perspective is a particularly American perspective. I _____ help it. I live here.
6. I feel blessed to _____ work with them.
7. Because of our tenuous position and our role as tradition-keepers, we _____ have the great potential to be change-agents.

4. Writing

Liza Donnelly claims that women are subject to certain stereotypes and that those preconceived ideas are fostered and passed on mainly by women. Do you agree with Liza Donnelly that stereotypes have an influence on the way that children are brought up? Do you think that stereotypes are as strong nowadays as they used to be decades ago? How have these preconceived ideas evolved over the years? Do you think that society expects the same from men and women now as in the 1950s, for example? Can people rebel against the stereotypes that are imposed on them? How?

Answer Key

1. Listening Comprehension

1. Girls were supposed to be kind, thoughtful, pretty, gentle and soft.
2. No, she didn't. She didn't make her daughter do girly things or try to make her fit into a stereotype.
3. Her mother gave her a book of cartoons. Liza enjoyed that book and she started drawing as a form to express her feelings. Later, she became a cartoonist.
4. She thinks that women are the main carriers of stereotypes because they pass on these rules and conventions from generation to generation.
5. She fights stereotypes by combining women and humor. Humor allows her to change reality, to make fun of it, and she picks women because they are the carriers of traditions. She believes that humor is a valid resort to change those rules.

2. Express Yourself

Sample answer:

As a child, I never had the feeling that my family was pressuring me in order to follow a social stereotype. On the contrary, they always supported me to do whatever I wanted. However, as an adult, I do feel that women are expected to behave in a certain way or do certain things in order to match the roles that society has assigned to them. As a woman of the 21st century, I feel like I'm expected to be a good professional, a good mother, a good partner and a good housewife, and I'm expected to combine all of those facets efficiently. I've always admired the women in my family, so they are an inspiration for the type of woman I want to be.

3. Language Practice

1. Since I knew that humor was acceptable in my family, I **could** draw, do what I wanted to do, and not **have to** perform, not **have to** speak and I **could** still get approval.
2. Now, what if you put together women and humor? I think you **can** get change.
3. I found that I **didn't have to** wear high heels, I **didn't have to** wear pink, and I **could** feel like I fit in.
4. When I was a little older, in my 20s, I realized there are not many women in cartooning. And I thought, 'Well, maybe I **can** break the little glass ceiling of cartooning.'
5. My perspective is a particularly American perspective. I **can't** help it. I live here.
6. I feel blessed to **be able to** work with them.
7. Because of our tenuous position and our role as tradition-keepers, we **can** have the great potential to be change-agents.

4. Writing

Sample answer:

In my opinion, stereotypes and social conventions are not as strong now as they used to be twenty years ago. In general, people are more open to the concept of variety, so being different or doing something that people of your gender don't usually do, is not considered 'wrong'. This has had an influence on the way children are brought up, as boys and girls are not so pushed to do things that were considered 'boyish' or 'girlish'. Nowadays, society allows the individuals a bit more freedom to choose whatever they want to do but social stereotypes still exist. For example, if a woman decides not to have children, it may be respected by some as a personal choice, but others might be quite surprised that a woman doesn't want to become a mother.