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HUMOR'S ROLE IN TRAGEDY

by

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You're sick! How can you laugh at that?

The next time someone says that to you, tell them humor is part of your healing process. You will be right!

Humor is a natural response to a tragedy or setback, and it develops in a predictable way. The process is the same whether the initial setback is a horrible accident, a layoff, a broken heart or a national tragedy. To some extent you can even monitor an individual or group's recovery from disaster by the stage of humor to which they respond.

What happens to us in a disaster? First there is a set back - a death, an injury, an important loss of some sort - and nothing is funny. In fact it is horribly inappropriate to laugh. What is most needed emotionally at this stage is a catharsis such as crying, cursing, expressions of grief, irrational promises, sweeping condemnations, physical outbursts or all of the above. Without this release of tension, it's difficult for the individual to move on. This cathartic time varies from person to person, and with the degree of disaster, i.e. recovering from the loss of a fingernail generally takes less time than recovering from the loss of a limb!

After the initial pain is discharged, humor often emerges as a way of coping with the event. Laughing at a problem gives us a sense of power and control over it. As quadriplegic cartoonist John Callahan says : "*Self pity is like wetting your pants in winter - It gives you a warm feeling - but for a very short time!*" Humor lets us rise above the issue at hand and get on with what needs to be done. The humor that emerges generally follows in 4 stages:

1. Morbid, or Sick Humor is usually the first to emerge. It includes sarcasm and cheap shots at oneself and even the victim - particularly if the victim has done something stupid. Many EMTs are familiar with the Darwin awards, supposedly given to individuals who have gotten killed in extraordinarily stupid ways and, in so doing, improved the human race by eliminating themselves from the gene pool. Examples of past award winners include the two 30-year-old men who died in a head-on collision, thus earning a tie in the game of chicken they were playing with their snowmobiles, and the Texan who died from a snake bite received while playing catch with a rattler!

Morbid humor carries no obligation to be fair, just, or rational. It frequently includes vicious jokes about the event or person seen as the cause the disaster. After the 9/11 terrorist acts jokes ranged from creating a parking lot out of the Middle East to kicking Afghan puppies. One joke related rumors that a large retail store was moving to Afghanistan: Target!

It is natural to think of tragedies in terms of how they affect us. "Why do 911 calls always come in the middle of a close game?" "I spent all weekend working on that report and now I find out my boss died in an accident Sunday! Bummer!" In morbid humor we are so internally focused that it is easy to be socially inappropriate.

Although this stage of humor is predominantly bitter and self centered, it allows us to distance ourselves from the tragedy and start to process what happened.

2. Distractive Humor is usually provided by someone less affected by the setback. It is gentle humor that takes our thinking on a tangent and, in so doing, helps us mentally escape the situation. Laughing at the antics of children or pets, escaping to a humorous movie or even reading the funny paper can have sudden appeal after a tragedy. The friend who says something in an attempt to cheer us up is often trying to offer help via distractive humor. In the early stages of resolving a tragedy, emotions are often too strong to allow for analytical decision making. Distractive humor gives us a break, if only for a short while.

Examples of distractive humor include the radio announcer who, after a particularly bad hurricane, opened his program with the line: "Good evening out there all of you who still have batteries!" or the sign by a bombed out, roofless store during the London Blitz: "More open for business than usual." In the latter example, the sign might have represented morbid humor on the part of the store's owner, but was a humorous distraction to passersby.

The purpose of distractive humor is to reassure us that life goes on, and often to buy time until things settle down and can be more dispassionately analyzed.

3. Power Humor evolves next as we struggle to get psychologically on top of the situation by putting the issue or enemy down, and, by extension, raising us above. Stand-up humor is usually power humor. Comedians even say "I killed 'em!" or "I died out there!" Jokes have PUNCH lines!

Risk, revenge and ridicule are common components of power humor, but unlike its morbid cousin, power humor is clever. It cuts to the heart of the matter and must connect with an audience. (One reason Letterman and Leno were leery about returning to the air after 9/11 was that it was so difficult to know what the mindset of their audience would be.) In its search for the laugh, power humor looks critically at all aspects of an event and in so doing often serves an important role in defining the problem. It thrives on finding a villain to berate and can run the risk that an incredibly clever line will identify the wrong bad guy or strike too sensitive a nerve in its audience.

A superb example of power humor was provided by *The Onion*, a little known, on-line satire magazine. It is generally credited with setting the post 9/11 humor standard. On Sept. 26, 2001, they published a series of articles that whipped around the country, brought The Onion into prominence, and literally moved the nation to the power humor level. Two of their most popular articles were: "God Angrily Clarifies 'Don't Kill' Rule." and "Highjackers Surprised to Find Selves in Hell -- Insist they were promised eternal paradise and 67 virgins!"

The biggest gift of power humor is that it does what its name suggests, it helps us feel powerful again. This is such a good feeling that many people never get beyond it to experience a sense of connection to the bigger picture.

4. Connective Humor is the highest level of humor. It is the most self confident and compassionate form. Like power humor, it is most effective when it hits directly on the underlying issue, and does so with imagination and cleverness. Unlike power humor, its purpose is to connect people to each other while reminding them that they are bigger than the event. After all, if you can laugh at something it can't be so overwhelming.

An example of 9/11 related connective humor was found eight months after the event in another on-line humor magazine, *Satire Wire*. Under a headline reading, "RELIGIOUS MERGER CREATES 900 MILLION HINJEWS" an article detailed as follows: "Hinjew leaders today conceded the merger of Hinduism and Judaism has not worked out as planned. Instead of forming a super-religion to fight off the common Islamic enemy, they have created a race of 900 million people who, no matter how many times they are reincarnated, can never please their mothers."

Connective humor brings in other viewpoints, perspectives and values. Its complexity and its demand that all involved think flexibly, makes it not just the ideal humor to resolve a crisis but the best kind of humor to precede a strategy or problem solving session. While each form of humor serves a purpose, there is a hierarchy and connective humor, with its emphasis on caring and collaboration, is at the top.

Within this hierarchy of humor, emergency and disaster relief staff frequently move from a setback to morbid humor faster than the general population. For this reason it is often difficult for outsiders to understand the humor of EMTs, firefighters, police, or medical staff. Firefighters have been known to refer to people burned in a fire as "crispy critters." The label "frequent flier" is often attached to folks who habitually call 911. Nearly everyone in emergency health care has at some time heard, "You're sick! How can you laugh at that?" Emergency medical personnel leap to morbid humor so quickly because:

1. They have seen it before. They aren't necessarily hardened, they're just over the first shock.
2. They are not usually acquainted with the victims and hence, are saved that level of emotional involvement.
3. They have to process disaster fast because they can't allow themselves to be immobilized by the event.

The individuals who thrive in this stressful field do so because they learned not just to use morbid humor, but to move through this stage of humor to the next and ultimately to connective humor.

A few years ago I was asked to give a presentation on "Humor in the Workplace" to the Harborview Medical Center Emergency Room staff in Seattle, Washington. My talk immediately followed an hour and a half lecture on "Domestic Violence and How to Recognize It in the ER."

This is not the ideal placement for a humor program! I asked the ER manager, Judy Wishman, why on earth would she schedule a talk like mine after so serious a presentation?

I'll never forget her answer. She said, "This is when we need you. Laughter provides the catharsis that lets us keep on caring."

That is what humor's role in a tragedy is all about. We need the laughter both to remind us that we will ultimately triumph over our adversity, and to help clear our head for successful problem solving.

Dr. Patt Schwab, CSP, is a Certified Speaking Professional who speaks in the United States, Canada and Europe on the topics of managing change and using humor to enhance the workplace environment. She may be reached at Patt@FUNDamentallyspeaking.com