

WHEN HELL FREEZES OVER - ICE SKATE!

Using humor to help handle adversity.

by

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Several years ago I was a guest on the live Seattle, Washington TV talk show, "Tracy and Co." My topic was humor and stress. Twenty-two minutes after my appearance, the cast and crew were laid off and the show went off the air forever!

Having found out about this a scant 24 hours ahead of time, host Brian Tracy turned to me before we went on the air, and said: "Feel free to say whatever you want, after all, this is live TV. What are they going to do? Cancel us?" Determined to have fun with the situation, he began the program with the announcement that the cancellation date coincided with the sinking of the Titanic. (It did!)

Brian knew that humor does not belittle a serious situation, it helps put it into proportion. We discussed how people under stress often feel "paralyzed" - and how this very paralysis prevents them from effective problem solving and, in turn, increases their stress. We spoke of using humor to get the perspective necessary to handle adverse situations and even to take advantage of them.

My thoughts on the topic of humor and adversity crystallized nine months later when I received a call from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Pittsburgh 2Day Show, on the air for eleven years and at the top of it's time slot, was being canceled -- would I please come and talk on their program!

Between the two events I was RIFed from a department I had worked for for 12 years. (Ok, that's the same as being laid off, but somehow RIF - Reduction In Force - sounds more like the way it feels!) Suddenly the issue took on new urgency!

The phrase, "When Hell Freezes Over - Ice Skate!" came to mind. I developed the word SKATE into an acronym to help explain the process of using humor to move beyond a painful situation. It is an effective model for any sudden loss: a job, a true love, an unfavorable management decision, or even a physical loss. (Five years ago I forgot the most fundamental rule of horsemanship: Keep the horse on the bottom! My horse reared over backward crushing me beneath her. The prognosis was that I would never walk unassisted again.)

Major adversity can be a genuine set back for anyone. I know, I've had it. The truth is, however, that we are not hurt so much by what happens to us, as by our

response to what happens to us - and we are in charge of that response. This is what the SKATE model is about. Here is how it works:

1. S = Scream and Cathart

Bad things do happen - and to good people. While most of us know we will eventually learn to live with the adverse situation, that doesn't preclude feeling badly about it. If feelings of grief, anger, fear or self pity dominate your thoughts, it is difficult to problem solve effectively. Without effective problem solving the crisis is likely to continue or even worsen. Accept the bad feelings, indulge them a bit, so that you can move on. Catharsis is an underrated wellness activity - one that is a lot less expensive than a bleeding ulcer or heart surgery. So go for it!

Here are some ideas:

Yell into your pillow, scream in your car, kick rocks, hit something (preferably soft and unbreakable).

Blame yourself - wallow in your stupidity or incompetence a bit. Mostly, however, blame others - your parents, your spouse, your boss, the president. When you are creative enough to blame total strangers, you know you have arrived!

Go to a bar and host a Pity Party. Cry into your beer, strive to look and act so depressed that the bartender will ask you to leave at Happy Hour.

Indulge in violent exercise like racquet ball, where you can yell and, ideally, name the ball after some villain before you hit it.

Do, however, NOTHING that will have repercussions. You want a catharsis, not to create additional headaches for yourself!

You are hurt, you do feel angry or sorry for yourself. These are legitimate emotions. They must be acknowledged before you can move on. The more cathartic your release, the faster you will reach step two. The folks at Alcohol Anonymous say, "Self pity is like wetting your pants in winter - it gives you a warm feeling - but only for a very short time!"

After you discharge the initial pain you will find yourself introducing a bit of humor, perhaps only as

sarcasm, but even that helps. Humor is nothing more than a sense of proportion and it will lead you to the next step.

2. K = Kiss it off — Keep your perspective

“Kiss it off” means to put some distance between yourself and the difficult situation. You need perspective in order to problem solve effectively. Humor is a marvelous tool for this purpose.

Here are some ways it can be used at this stage:

If there is a “bad guy” involved, write his name on the bottom of your shoe for a few days - that way you will know you are walking on him!

Make a salad - name the vegetables before you cut them up!

Draw a caricature of the evil doer, put it on the wall and play Pin the Blame on the Boss/Ex-Spouse/Whoever.

After you have achieved a little perspective you can begin to take a fresh look at the situation.

3. A = ANALYZE what went wrong and ACCEPT what you have to

What clues did you have? Did you know that your company was ripe for a takeover? Was your true love playing Country & Western cheatin’ songs and you were unsure whether the attraction was to the melody or the lyrics?

When I asked the hosts of the Pittsburgh 2Day show what clues they had had, they looked at each other and said, “You mean like four months ago when they took away the live audience?” I acknowledged that, indeed, that could have been counted as a clue. After all, even the Titanic had a band!

You need to accept the choices you made - even if they were lousy, head-in-the-sand choices. Taking ownership for what happened is a way of getting back into control. Individuals without a sense of control do not trust the options which are available to them. They continue to walk around with a chip on their shoulder, or a drink in their hand, or a snivel on their lips and never progress beyond steps one and two.

Did you choose a profession with a high layoff rate? Or one working with a frustrating bureaucracy? Is it a field like medicine or police work where you are likely to have to cope with tragedy? Did you injure yourself by ignoring a safety rule? For my part, I knew the horse that threw me had a habit of rearing. I was riding her to help correct it. I simply misjudged her.

Part of accepting what happened is accepting what you have to live with. In my case I did not have to accept my initial diagnosis of paraplegia, but I do have to accept a right leg that is slower and not always as easy to control as my left one. (I console myself with the thought that at least I know why I am going in circles!)

Think of accepting your choices as your “Response-Ability”. You don’t do this to blame or judge yourself - you passed that hurdle in step one. You take ownership for your choices because if you can see how you affected the decision, or colluded in the event, you will be able to avoid a repeat. You accept what you can’t change, because that’s the only way you can identify what you can change.

4. T - THINK of all the good things

We all lead valuable lives and it is important not to feel that they have been wasted. If you are struggling with the end of a job or a relationship, think of the things you learned, talent you acquired, people you met, good times you had. One job I had provided me with a chance to develop management and personnel skills, and a boyfriend introduced me to seven people who are still good friends, ten years after he and I painfully went our separate ways .

When I had my riding accident, I was in charge of the University of Washington residence hall program. I was in the hospital for the entire month of September - the busiest, most hectic month of the school year. My staff jokingly accused me of having the accident on purpose! To drive their point home, they brought 100 students on a leadership retreat into my hospital to stand at my door and sing, “The Old Gray Mare, She Ain’t What She Used to Be!”

Thinking of the good things will help you get beyond the feeling of being a victim. Victims have no sense of power and have to wait for someone else to change things for them. You want to empower yourself.

5. E - EXPLORE your options and ENERGIZE yourself to move on

By the time you reach this step you should be ready to put the adverse situation behind you and to move to a point where you know you can cope. You do it first by exploring your options.

Look for the advantages in your situation. Did you get out of a relationship that was as substantial as a toilet paper raincoat? Do you have an opportunity to try a new career? To go back to school? To reassess your life? Spend more time with your family? Some of us don’t make choices until we are forced to, and you may be surprised how many options you have available.

You may also be surprised at the options you don't choose. Many people find that getting out of the rat race and rejoining the human race is so enjoyable that they accept a lower pay, lower stress position.

A friend of mine was fired from his job when he told his boss he had tested positive for HIV, the AIDS virus. Although he knew he probably could win the job back in court, after he worked through his hurt and anger, he decided that the toll of a court battle for a somewhat physically demanding job was not worth it. He went back to college, put the management experience from his job to use and now has an advanced degree and a much more rewarding position. True, he still has the HIV virus, but that was nonnegotiable - he would have had it either way.

Energizing yourself to move on is the last step, and it is a relatively easy one, assuming you have achieved all the others. This does not mean that you will find the new job, the new true love or even the ability to live with the distasteful management decision immediately. In the words of Bill Cosby, "If at first you don't succeed, you're just about like everyone else."

Some things take time - they take forever if you don't start working on them!

Start exploring your options and developing a positive attitude now. Don't wait until Hell freezes over to polish your ice skates!

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Dr. Schwab speaks in the United States, Canada and Europe on the topics of managing change and using humor to enhance the workplace environment. She would enjoy hearing how you use humor to combat stress in your workplace.

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