



Levity Defies Gravity; Using Humor in Crisis Situations

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A cartoon depicts a man—talking to the desk sergeant at a police station, describing how his house was caught in a storm, washed off its foundation, slid down the hill, crossed the main highway, and ended up in the ocean floating away. The desk sergeant replied, “Okay buddy, I’ll just put, *No fixed address.*”

Humor is one of the healthiest and most powerful methods to help provide perspective on life’s difficult experiences, and it is frequently shared during periods of crisis. However, during a crisis, humor is often experienced and perceived by individuals immersed in the crisis as insensitive and even hurtful. What, then, differentiates healthful and harmful humor in a crisis?

We know that, in general, humor aimed at *oneself* is well received by others. When we are the target of our own humor, others share our humor and are not threatened or injured by it. Humor aimed at *situations* is also generally appreciated by others since it is directed toward an external objective and helps provide perspective and lessen distress. Humor aimed at *other individuals or groups* may be harmful and not well received as it often is used to put down, insult, or degrade another.

If humor aimed at *situations* is generally safe, then what is it that causes some humor in *crisis*

situations to be experienced negatively by those in the crisis? The answer lies in the psychology of the human response to crisis.

Psychologically, during a crisis, those individuals closest to the situation are likely to integrate the crisis into their internal emotional being. That is to say, psychologically, they merge the crisis experience with their own inner emotional state. Essentially, they are unable to separate their inner emotional self from the emotional experience of the crisis. On the other hand, individuals with some distance from the crisis are less likely to experience this merging of self and crisis. Those with some distance, therefore, may be aided by humor because it reinforces perspective and creates a safe distance from the crisis. Those immersed in the crisis experience humor aimed at the crisis as directed at themselves and, therefore, may perceive it negatively.

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As time passes and distance from the crisis grows, those who were once close to the crisis may then benefit from the use of humor. How many times have we heard the expression, “It

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wasn't funny at the time." It wasn't funny because the individual was "too close" to the difficult situation. Later as distance develops, a humorous perspective can be accepted and even appreciated.

We use humor in crisis situations to provide perspective and help us deal with the emotional turmoil. An individual who is immersed in the crisis is emotionally unable to differentiate feelings about the crisis from internal feelings of personal identity. The individual is aware, *cognitively*, that he is distinct from the crisis, but *emotionally* feels blended with it. It is this emotional blending that can inhibit the individual's ability to appreciate humor in the crisis situation. Individuals experiencing this level of crisis are unaware of the emotional blending of their inner emotional state (their individuality) with their emotional state related to the crisis (the situation). They are likely to be unaware of their heightened vulnerability to humor which is directed at the crisis situation. Using humor aimed at a crisis situation with someone closely experiencing that crisis, therefore, must be carefully considered since the humor may be experienced as an attack or insensitive to the individual's plight.

One factor that influences an individual's receptivity to humor about a crisis situation is "distance." As a rule of thumb, the greater the distance between the individual and the crisis the more likely humor will be therapeutic and not experienced as insensitive.

Distance from the crisis experience may be proximal, emotional, or temporal. **Proximal distance** may be illustrated by the experience of being on the outer edges of the crisis but not immersed in it. Individuals who are not in the "proximity" of the crisis are more likely to be receptive to crisis humor. For example, people

who felt an earthquake but did not sustain damage to self or property or who were not inconvenienced by the subsequent damage, will be more receptive to humor about the earthquake than individuals who lost property, were greatly inconvenienced, or were physically harmed.

Emotional distance may be embedded in how individuals view or place meaning on the crisis situation. The emotional reaction to any situation will be influenced more by the meaning an individual places on the situation than on the situation itself. All those in a crisis are likely to feel pain. Some, however, will also suffer excessively based on the meaning they place on the crisis. For example, two individuals who lost their homes in a flood may each respond differently to this catastrophe based on the meaning they place on their loss. Both individuals are likely to view their situation as difficult and painful. However, the individual who perceives the loss as devastating and permanently damaging will be less receptive to humor than the individual who sees the loss as temporary and as an opportunity for change and growth.

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When using humor in crisis situations, it is important to note that individuals sharing the same crisis (e.g., a natural disaster) are likely to react differently depending on meaning each one places on the experience. Identical humor about the crisis might be helpful to one individual and harmful to another.

As an individual gathers new information about the impact on her life, she begins to perceive the

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crisis with a new perspective. Early thoughts of devastation are replaced with more “realistic” ones. As this process progresses the meaning of the crisis to the individual’s life changes, and therefore, the emotional impact changes. As the emotional impact lessens the individual becomes more receptive to humor about the crisis.

Temporal distance is illustrated by the passage of time. We all know that crisis situations become less potent as they are distanced from us by the passing of time. The expression, “time heals all wounds” illustrates this point. As the crisis fades more into one’s past, its potency is diminished, and the individual separates the emotions connected with the crisis from her inner emotional being.

Humor helps place crisis in perspective and helps to make the crisis more manageable. However, the timing of humor for those who are immersed in the crisis must be chosen carefully. As humor promoters, we must be sensitive to the inner emotional struggle of the individual with whom we choose to share our humor. For those of us outside the crisis, humor helps us to internally say, “Thank goodness it didn’t happen to me.”

At the same time we must be sensitive to those to whom it did happen. Humor about the crisis, for those in the crisis, can be a welcome diversion and stress reducer, or it can alienate, antagonize, and hurt the individual. As we choose to share humor, we must be sensitive and attempt to use it when we believe the individual is receptive to our interventions. On the other hand, when our humor is received negatively, it is our responsibility to sensitively “repair” the interpersonal damage that may result. One way to repair the damage is to listen

carefully to the upsets and pain of the person in crisis, and demonstrate to that person that we, do indeed, understand his or her pain.

In summary, humor can be both a healthful or harmful benefit when offered to those in crisis situations. As “humor distributors,” we must be sensitive to this. We must also be prepared to repair any emotional damage that may result from our attempts to relieve another’s pain through the use of humor.

