

Humor Helps the Medicine Go Down

Humor doesn't just help the medicine go down; it can often be the medicine! Have you ever found yourself in a really sad situation yet you are laughing so hard you are almost crying? And maybe you thought to yourself, "Why am I laughing when my world seems to be falling down around my ears?" Well, you were actually giving yourself a dose of a much needed "medicine."

The cliché "Laughter is the best medicine" is indeed supported by research as a health benefit. Humor has the ability to decrease stress, improve health, lessen pain, improve communication and overall create more effective home and work environments. Humor can be a powerful tool in your arsenal of coping strategies. It has numerous health benefits and it's free. It is readily available to anyone, at anytime and anywhere to enrich the quality of living and you get immediate results.

Families strive for normalcy during traumatic events including natural disasters like hurricanes Katrina and Rita, manmade trauma like the events of Sept. 11, and technological crises like the Louisiana coastal oil spill. Humor can be very helpful in stress management. Take for example the comments from "Mark" (not his real name) after Hurricane Katrina had blown his house apart. He chuckled wryly as he talked to researchers outside his temporary quarters, a tiny Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer, "My wife had been nagging me to replace the cabinets in the kitchen. I guess she'll get her wish now!" Mark's use of sarcasm aimed at himself was helpful to him in turning a bad situation into a "silver lining."

The words "Let's roll," had become a simple catchphrase in our society used for something as simple and perhaps comical as "I'm ready to go shopping." After Todd Beamer, a passenger on the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93, used that phrase during 9/11 as he gave the signal to others on board to attack the hijackers, that phrase has become a signal of patriotic pride and self-sacrifice. It helped many Americans move emotionally from hopelessness to hopefulness.

Humor has been credited with survival during extreme duress. Viktor Frankl, an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, attributes his continued existence to agreeing to a mutual promise between himself and that of a fellow inmate of a Nazi concentration camp to tell each other an amusing story every other day. The challenge served to occupy their minds on something other than the devastating times they were experiencing.

Some tips when using humor as a coping strategy:

- Let it happen. It's difficult to contrive humor.
- Avoid ridiculing another person as a means to make a joke.
- Use caution in employing humor with an individual who appears emotionally fragile. It could backfire.
- If you're a relief worker, allow the person experiencing the crisis to be the one to initiate the humor.
- It's OK to laugh at yourself.
- Avoid sarcasm unless it is aimed at yourself.
- Focus on situations rather than focusing on people and characteristics they cannot control.
- Read comic strips.
- During TV time, watch a comedy instead of the news.
- Try to turn each negative thought into something positive.
- Allow yourself to laugh; don't feel guilty about laughing about a bad situation.
- Give yourself a dose of humor about once every hour, if possible.



References

- Bizi, S., Keinan, G., & Beit-Hallahmi, B. (1988). Humor and coping with stress: A test under real-life conditions. *Personal and Individual Difference, 9*(6), 951-956.
- Bonanno, G.A., Galea, S., Bucciarelli, A., & Vlahov, D. (2006). Psychological resilience after disaster: New York City in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attack. *Psychological Science, 17*, 181-186.
- Frankl, V. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Garrison, M. E. B., & Sasser, D. D. (2009). Families and disasters: Making meaning out of adversity. In K. Cherry (Ed.), *Lifespan Perspectives on Natural Disasters: Coping with Katrina, Rita and other Storms* (Pp. 113-132). New York: Springer.
- Knowles, R., Sasser, D. D., & Garrison, M. E. B. (2010). Family resilience and resiliency following Hurricane Katrina. In R. P. Kilmer, V. Gil-Rivas, R. G. Tedeschi, & L. G. Calhoun (Eds.) *Meeting the Needs of Children, Families, and Communities Post-Disaster: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Walsh, F. (2007). Traumatic loss and major disasters: Strengthening family and community resilience. *Family Process, 46*, 207-227.
- Wanzer, M., Booth-Butterfield, M., & Booth-Butterfield, S. (2005). If we didn't use humor, we'd cry: Humorous coping communication in health care settings. *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives, 10*(2), 105-125.

Adapted by

Diane D. Sasser, Ph.D., Professor/Specialist, Family and Child Studies

Visit our website: www.lsuagcenter.com

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center

William B. Richardson, Chancellor

Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station

David J. Boethel, Vice Chancellor and Director

Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

Paul D. Coreil, Vice Chancellor and Director

Pub 3157-N 6/10

The LSU AgCenter provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

This material is based upon work supported by the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) under Award No. 2010-41210-21185. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USDA NIFA.