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HUMOR'S ROLE IN TRAGEDY©

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The cartoon showed a woman holding two shopping bags overflowing with American flags. "We need to return to normal routines," she's telling her husband. "So I went shopping." That cartoon, appearing in late September, 2001, was a sign of the country returning to normal. (A cynic might also describe it as the beginning of today's problems, but that isn't what it served at the time.)

It may seem incongruous to talk about humor's role in tragedy. But in any tragedy, whether it's a national crisis or a broken heart, humor plays a vital role in helping us keep our sanity and regain our perspective. Humor helps us process painful events, while giving us back our sense of power and control. Here's how it works:

Anxiety and negative emotions set off chemical reactions in our body that weaken our immune system. When we're in that "fight or flight" mode, we don't think clearly, our perspective is narrowed, we forget easily, and we may be angry and irritable. In short, we are not at our problem-solving best.

Laughter helps our body return to its normal, healthy chemical balance and clears our mind so we can more effectively analyze the situation and determine what needs to be done.

Humor after a setback or tragedy develops in a predictable way. The process is the same whether the initial setback is a layoff, a lost opportunity, or a national tragedy. We go through stages of humor.

Immediately after the initial setback, nothing is funny. In fact it seems horribly inappropriate to laugh. What we need most is a catharsis. Expressions of grief, crying, cursing, irrational promises, sweeping condemnations, and physical outbursts are examples of common behaviors. It's important to spend time indulging in our emotions, but it is equally important not to stay in this place. The purpose of acknowledging our feelings is to psychologically resolve the tragedy and move beyond it.

After the initial pain is discharged, humor often emerges as a way of coping with stress, in part because laughing at a problem gives us a sense of power and control. It lets us rise above the issue at hand and approach it more

analytically. The humor that emerges generally follows in four stages:

1. Morbid Humor[®], often called “Sick Humor,” is usually the first to emerge. It can include sarcasm, cheap shots at oneself and frequently vicious jokes about the event or person seen as the cause of the disaster. There is no obligation to be fair, or just, or rational.

After the 9/11 terrorist acts there were jokes about everything from creating a parking lot out of the Middle East to kicking Afghan puppies. One joke told of rumors that a large retail store was moving to Afghanistan: Target!

Similarly, the current financial crisis has inspired cartoons like the one of the two natives standing on top of a bubbling volcano. One says to the other, “I don’t know how the gods feel, but sacrificing financial advisers makes me feel happy.”

Although Morbid humor is predominantly bitter and self centered, it carries the seeds of objectivity and triumph and it prepares us for the second level of post tragedy humor.

2. Distractive Humor[®] helps us mentally escape the situation, if only momentarily. It is almost always provided by someone less affected by the situation. Examples are the friend who lifts our spirits with a funny observation, or the laughter we can’t deny watching the antics of children or pets.

Examples of distractive humor during a disaster 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.

More recently a satirical headline in *The Onion* blared: *Nation Ready to be Lied to About the Economy Again*. The accompanying story told how Americans were tired of hearing the depressing truth about their economic future and just wanted to hear happy lies.

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[®] helps us get psychologically on top of the situation by putting the issue or enemy down, and, by extension, raising us above.

Standup 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 guess what mindset their audience would be in.) 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*, shortly after 9/11. At the time, *The Onion* was a little known, on-line satire magazine, yet it is generally credited with setting the post 9/11 humor standard. On September 26, 2001, they published a series of articles that whipped around the country and literally moved the nation to the Power Humor level. Two of the most popular of their 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 most self confident and compassionate form of humor. 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, it’s purpose is to connect people to each other and to the tragedy, 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.

Humor is individual, and everyone moves through these stages of humor at a different speed. Some people need more time to process an event than others. These differences can cause conflicts in the workplace or family when one person takes offense at another's humor. It's important to remember that all four stages of humor are crucial and that they build on one another.

Occasionally people get stuck. You can't force an individual to move forward, but you can nudge them a bit. People who never get to humor, or who are stuck in Morbid Humor, may need to evaluate how well they're processing the tragedy. Have they allowed themselves to feel their grief and anger? Talking with friends, writing feelings in a journal, putting up memorials, lighting candles, expressing oneself artistically or, in a financial crises, doing volunteer work or simply giving blood— all these can help.

Managers can encourage employees to move past more negative forms of humor by promoting Distractive or Connective humor. It may be time to take down that Bernie Madoff dart board and put up cartoons more directly related to the workplace, the weather, or local issues.

If you need a little more humor in your life, revisit the places where you've found it before. Rent a funny movie, play charades with your children, read a humorous book, watch the chickadees at your bird feeder.

Emotionally upset people are lousy problem solvers. We need humor— both to remind us that we will ultimately triumph over our adversity, and to help clear our heads for successful problem solving.

Go ahead, laugh! It's good for the country — and cheaper than shopping. In fact, had we done it in the first place, we might have saved ourselves a financial crisis!

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