

Tragedy, Laughter and Survival

by Patty Wooten RN and Ed Dunkelblau PhD

On September 11th, Americans lost their will to laugh. Comedy clubs closed their doors. TV comedians were silent. The nation was in shock, horrified by the death and destruction we viewed. Throughout the day, news coverage told stories of heroism. Firefighters, police and healthcare workers were identified as real-life heroes. Victor Frankl, survivor of the concentration camps of WWII stated, "What helps people survive awful circumstances is their ability to detach and get beyond themselves. This is seen in heroism and humor." said, Victor Frankl.

The level of threat and horror experienced during the impact of any disaster will influence a person's psychological adjustment. The people living in NY city and Washington DC were profoundly affected by the shock and devastation of the terrorist attacks. The entire country was witness to the horror. We all feared what the future might bring. Many of us wondered if we might ever laugh again.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOVERY

Our psychological recovery from a crisis is facilitated by the physical, emotional and temporal distance we can attain. The more time and physical distance we have from the proximity of the disaster, the easier it is to begin recovery. Immediately following a disaster, the people closest to the crisis are unable to separate their inner emotional self from the emotional pain of the event. As the emotional overload dissipates over time, people become more receptive to humor. We know that time heals. As each day that passes we begin to feel safer and gain a sense of distance from the experience.

How and when humor returns is also influenced by proximity, emotion and time. Now, almost a month after that traumatic day, we have started to laugh again. Our humor and laughter can help us cope, recover and heal. "Finding humor in a tragic situation is an extremely healthy step" says Peter Weingold MD "Humor is a way of saying 'The tragedy has happened to us, but it does not define us . . .You did not destroy us. We are still here. We are still laughing.' We have life and hope."

- Humor allows us to detach from the trauma for a few moments and gives respite from the emotional chaos.
- Laughter provides an emotional catharsis. Feelings of anger, tension and fear can be neutralized and released with laughter.
- After the laughter we feel strong, resilient and hopeful.
- Laughter invites celebration and reminds us of the joy in life

LAUGHTER FOR SURVIVAL

When people feel shock, horror or disgust, it is difficult to laugh (but not impossible). Prisoner of war Gerald Coffee shares why American soldiers used humor in the Vietnam POW camps. "Laughter sets the spirit free through even the most tragic circumstances. It helps us shake our head clear, get our feet back under us and restores our sense of balance. Humor is integral to our peace of mind and our ability to go beyond survival."

Humor can help us survive even during horrible events like the WTC attack. One survivor reports about a group of office workers who were running down flight after flight of steps, not knowing if they had the strength to make it to the bottom. By the time they'd reached the eleventh floor, they were exhausted and couldn't go on. Then one woman suggested that they pretend it was New Year's Eve. En masse they began a countdown with each flight of stairs and shouted out ". . . 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1." This "game" gave them the distraction and energy they needed. Encouraged by the levity, they all made it to the street and to safety.

LAUGHTER RETURNS

Most of us didn't laugh much during that first week, and when we did, it was usually with our family or trusted friends. Often the laughter was more robust than the funniness of the comment warranted. The need for the release was evident. Clinical psychologist Ed Dunkelblau was busy helping school teachers reassure the children after the attacks. At the end of a very intense week, he advised them to take care of themselves over the weekend. He asked the group for suggestions of how that might be accomplished. The big, burley football coach announced that he'd discovered a bubble bath was very soothing. The entire group burst into laughter. The image of this macho guy in a bubble bath seemed perfectly ridiculous.

COMIC RELIEF

As professional comics returned to the stage and screen, they were careful and cautious. News headlines before September 11, suddenly became material for gags. Comics used opening lines like: "Well, I guess this sure takes the heat off the sharks." Or "Remember the good ol' days of the West Nile virus?" Gradually comedians began to make jokes - not about the event, but rather about our nation's reaction to the event. One comic explained, "When President Bush said that we should resume consumer spending, I immediately went shopping. I'm mean . . . If I didn't, they'd be winning." Jay Leno got great laughs with this line, "America must now protect itself from angry, religious extremists. But enough about Jerry Falwell."

Some humor actually addressed our fears. One cartoon showed a psychiatrist administering the Rorschach test. He held up a card with a drawing of an airplane. "What is the first thing you think of when you see this", asked the psychiatrist. "Go Amtrak" replied the patient.

USING HUMOR EFFECTIVELY

Our ability to laugh is a strong indication of our recovery and healing. To learn more about the healthy benefits of humor and laughter, come to Baltimore, February 1-3, 2002 for the annual conference of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor. (www.AATH.org). Special focus on humor, tragedy and survival. All professionals are invited to attend.

LAUGH MORE

To laugh more and facilitate the recovery of others through laughter, we suggest:

- Know what makes you laugh. Find a laughter buddy.
- Don't feel guilty about your laughter. Its like a vitamin for your soul.
- Know your audience. People may be hesitant to laugh about some subjects.
- Give yourself permission to take an intermission. Take time for laughter

As George Bernard Shaw reminded us, "Life does not cease to be funny when someone dies anymore than it ceases to be serious when someone laughs".

SUGGESTED READING

- Frankl, Viktor . *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Pocket Books,. 1963.
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- Lipman, Steve. *Laughter in Hell*. Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson, 1991.
- Ritz, Sandy "Survivor Humor: The Role of Humor in Coping with Disasters" in Salameh and Fry (eds) *Humor and Wellness in Clinical Intervention*. Westport, Preager, 2001.
- Wooten, Patty. "Humor: An antidote for Stress". *Holistic Nursing Practice*. 1996, 10 (2). pp. 49-56.

HELPFUL WEBSITES

www.AATH.org
www.JestHealth.com
www.HumorMatters.com
www.TeachEQ.com

AUTHOR BIO

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