



Levity Defies Gravity;

Using Humor to Help Those Experiencing Crisis Situations

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After a hurricane decimated the family home, the children erected a sign on the front lawn of the house. The sign read, "Gone with the Wind!"

Humor is one of the healthiest and most powerful methods to provide perspective and reduce emotional distress present during life's most challenging experiences. It is a mainstay of modern crisis management. However, during a crisis, humor is often experienced, and perceived by individuals immersed in the crisis, as insensitive and even hurtful. How, then, do we differentiate between healthful and harmful humor when an individual, community, or nation is in crisis?

General Factors that Influence Receptivity to Humor

We know that, in general, humor directed toward *situations* is well received. It is directed toward a safe external "object"—the situation. When humor is directed toward a situation, it generally provides perspective and lessens emotional distress activated by that situation.

If humor targeting situations is generally safe, then why, when one is experiencing a crisis situation, is humor directed at the crisis often experienced as toxic? The answer lies in the psychology of the human response to crisis situations.

Factors That Influence Receptivity to Humor During A Crisis

During a crisis, those individuals closest to the situation are likely to integrate the crisis into their internal emotional being. 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" (proximal, emotional/psychological, or temporal) from the crisis are less likely to *experience* this merging of self and crisis. Those who experience distance from the crisis, therefore, may be aided by humor because it reinforces perspective and creates a safe detachment from the crisis. Those immersed in the crisis, experience humor aimed at the crisis as

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directed at themselves and, therefore, may perceive it negatively.

This merging of situation and self can occur at the individual, community, or national level. If the “country” experiences a major crisis (e.g. 911), then humor intended to relieve the distress of the crisis may have the opposite effect as it may be experienced as an effort to discount the serious nature of the crisis.

We use humor in crisis situations to provide perspective and help us manage the emotional turmoil.

As time passes and “distance” (proximal, emotional, and/or temporal) from the crisis grows, those who were once close to the crisis begin to separate from the crisis and therefore, begin to benefit from the perspective humor provides. How many times have we heard the expression, “It wasn’t funny at the time.” It wasn’t funny because the individual (community or country) was too “close” to the crisis situation. Later as distance develops, a humorous perspective can be integrated/received and 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 receive and appreciate humor during the crisis.

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 that is directed at the crisis experience. Using humor aimed at a crisis situation with someone closely experiencing that crisis, must be carefully considered since the humor may be experienced as an attack or as being insensitive to the individual’s plight.

One major factor that influences an individual’s receptivity to humor during a crisis experience is “distance.” In general, the greater the distance between the individual and the crisis, the more likely humor will be experienced as therapeutic and not experienced as insensitive.

As mentioned above distance from crisis experiences develops in three ways—proximal, emotional, or temporal. **Proximal distance** (being in geographic proximity to the crisis) may be measured in linear dimensions such as miles. It may be illustrated by the experience of being on the outer edges of the crisis but not geographically immersed in it. Individuals who are not in the “proximity” of the crisis are more likely to be receptive to crisis humor because they are less likely to be “merged” with the crisis. 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

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inconvenienced, or were physically harmed.

Distance from a crisis can also be measured as emotional distance. **Emotional distance** is the emotional experience embedded in individual's view or the meaning they place 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, permanently damaging, and cannot see a potential recovery in the future will experience greater emotional distress and will be less receptive to humor than the individual who sees the loss as temporary and as an opportunity for change and growth. Identical humor about the crisis might be helpful to one individual and hurtful to another.

Humor helps place a crisis in perspective and therefore, helps to make the emotional distress more manageable.

As an individual gathers new information about the impact on his life, he begins to perceive the crisis with a new perspective. Early thoughts of

devastation are replaced with more "realistic" ones such as "I am getting through this now, and I will continue to get through this." As this process progresses the meaning of the crisis to the individual's life shifts, and therefore, the emotional impact changes. As the emotional impact lessens and emotional distance increases, the individual becomes increasingly receptive to humor that targets the crisis.

Distance from a crisis can also be measured as "temporal" distance. **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 into one's past, and becomes part of one's larger life experiences, its potency is diminished, and the individual separates the emotions connected with the crisis from his inner emotional being.

There are also some additional general factors that influence receptivity to humor including: 1. The nature of the relationship between the sender and the receiver of humor; the closer the relationship the more likely humor will be well received or, if not, it will at least be forgiven; 2. The "sense of humor" of the receiver; the greater the sense of humor of the receiver the more likely the humor will be experienced as positive; 3. The emotional stability of the receiver; the greater the stability and less fragile the individual the more likely he or she can "tolerate" humor that might have a potential negative impact.

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All of these “general” factors impact an individual’s receptivity to humor whether during a crisis situation or an everyday situation. However, there are certain unique factors that are particularly potent when one is experiencing a crisis.

Summary

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 practitioners, we must be sensitive to the inner emotional struggle of the individuals with whom we choose to intentionally and purposely offer our humor.

For those of us outside the crisis, humor helps us to internally say, “I am so fortunate “it” did not happen to me.” At the same time, we must be sensitive to those to whom it did happen. Humor directed at 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. In addition, 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 conclusion, the experience of humor can be a powerful antidote to the emotional distress experienced by those

in crisis. It can also (generally inadvertently) create additional distress. We, as humor practitioners, have the opportunity to use our humor skills to assist those in crisis, while at the same time we have the responsibility to be sensitive to each individual with whom we choose to share our humor. Crises will happen, and we can “lighten” the distress with our empathic and caring humor. After all, we are “Humor Beings.”

