

Humor Medicine

Pop in a Couple Comedies and Call Me in the Morning

By Marc Davis, Special to the [Chicago Tribune](#) (Published December 30, 2001)

Americans are laughing again in the wake of the terrorist atrocities of Sept. 11, and that's healthy, says Ed Dunkelblau, a clinical psychologist and former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

"Since Sept. 11, the public has been traumatized," Dunkelblau said. "One way to work through that experience, to soothe the pain we feel, is to laugh and to laugh without guilt."

Many of us are laughing at darkly humorous, aggressive jokes about terrorists and Osama bin Laden, according to Dunkelblau, and that will speed us on our way back to normality.

"Laughter is a way to regain control of our emotions and to connect with other human beings," Dunkelblau said. "Aggressive humor is a way to strike back at those who have hurt us. When we laugh, we feel more alive and our bodies respond physically by feeling healthier and stronger. It's like a short vacation and a cleansing of the brain."

Dunkelblau left the private practice of psychology about 2 1/2 years ago and is now a consulting psychologist for schools and private industry, with clients that include Accenture, Kraft and some suburban Chicago school districts. He also is director of the Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning, a not-for-profit corporation for the training and development of what Dunkelblau describes as "success skills."

Physiologically, laughter enhances the immune system, starts the brain's natural painkillers flowing and reduces stress, a major contributor to a variety of physical problems, according to Ann Weeks. Weeks, a Louisville-based therapist, is the current president of the association for therapeutic humor and has been using humor to treat physical and emotional pain for 20 years.

"In the first two days after the attacks, [Jay] Leno and [David] Letterman had nothing humorous to say on their late-night television shows," said Weeks, who has a doctorate in nursing science and a master's in education. "But now they're funny again, using dark humor, both reflecting and influencing the mood of the country and helping us to heal."

Weeks, who also publishes a humorous e-mail newsletter, "Weeks of Fun," also noted that, at least for a time, Leno and Letterman seemed to have a hands-off policy regarding President Bush, exempting him from their usual jokes about presidents no matter who's in office.

"They live in the world of irreverence," Dunkelblau said of Leno and Letterman. "So for the first few days after the attack they had nothing to do, they served no purpose for that period of time because nobody valued laughter. ... It wasn't until we put some distance between us and Sept. 11 that we were able to laugh again."

The approximately 500 members of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor hold the same view: that humor and laughter have therapeutic powers. Founded in 1988 as the American Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (the name was changed recently) and headquartered in Phoenix, the organization is composed mainly of medical professionals and health-care providers.

The organization defines therapeutic humor as "any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life's situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social or spiritual."

So how do association members apply therapeutic humor? Do they tell jokes? Do they tell people to read funny books and magazines, watch funny movies or TV comedians and stay away from bad or negative news?

All of the above, Weeks said, "and it works."

Weeks described a patient of hers, a 54-year-old man whom she had been treating before Sept 11 for obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety. He was addicted to tranquilizers, and after the terrorist attacks, the man's condition worsened.

"He became extremely anxious," Weeks said. "He watched too much television news coverage, he was drowning in it. He could barely function on his job. He was afraid to drive."

"The first thing I told him was to restore the balance in his life. I made him turn off the television and imposed a moratorium on any negative news input. Then I prescribed the enjoyment of something funny four times a week. I made him commit to it, just like an exercise program, for at least 20 minutes a week."

Within a few days the patient was feeling better, less anxious, able to function again, and with a more hopeful attitude, according to Weeks. Regular doses of laughter and a news blackout did it, she said.

Dunkelblau said he has been equally successful in using humor as part of his treatment of patients.

"I was called in to a hospital to treat a woman with a physical problem who was also depressed," he said. "As part of my assessment, I asked her when was the last time she laughed. Tears welled up in her eyes and she said, 'I can't remember.'"

Dunkelblau prescribed a funny movie on video every night for his patient and told her to watch it with her husband so they could laugh together as they did before she was stricken. Within days the patient improved and was discharged from the hospital.

The laughter remedy is by no means a cure-all, and sometimes it may not work, Dunkelblau is quick to point out. It can, however, relieve pain, both physical and emotional. But the patient must have a willingness to laugh, a sense of being at play.

"For a few days after Sept. 11 most of us thought we'd never laugh again," Dunkelblau said. "The events were so tragic and frightful it was impossible to access a level of play that would allow us to laugh. We needed to gain some distance from that event. As [someone] once said, 'Humor is tragedy plus time.' It wasn't until we moved some distance from the event that we were able to laugh again."

Laughter in the wake of tragic events may seem inappropriate or even sacrilegious to some, but that's not necessarily so, according to author Steve Lipman. Lipman's book "Laughter in Hell--the Use of Humor During the Holocaust" is a collection of jokes, humorous anecdotes and first-person humorous accounts of that horribly tragic event in human history when the Nazis systematically exterminated Jews. Lipman, one of the few non-medical or health-care professionals who are members of the association, said his research reveals that even during the profoundly sorrowful era when Jews were being killed in gas chambers, concentration camp inmates still found something to laugh about.

"Laughter is a distraction," said Lipman, an Orthodox Jew and a reporter for Jewish Week, a news publication based in New York. "It removes you temporarily from a fearful situation."

In the first weeks after Sept. 11, Broadway was virtually dark, Lipman said. "But one play still brought people in: 'The Producers,' Mel Brooks' musical comedy, which deals humorously with Nazism. The show played to full houses every night. The lesson is: People lived through the Hitler era, and they can still laugh about it." Lipman predicted that a similar body of humor will accumulate around the terrorist phenomenon, and indeed it already has started.

Lipman cautioned, however, that some dark humor is unacceptable.

One rule in the humor business, as Dunkelblau pointed out, is "know your audience. Not everyone will be at the same place you are with permission to laugh.

"In [hospital] emergency rooms, for example, there's a whole body of jokes that people tell each other that outsiders would think are sick. So it's important to have a shared perspective."

Morsels about the dark side

Humor is a means of coping with stress, a way to strike back at people or things that have hurt us and a method to regain emotional control. Here's a small representative sampling of post-Sept. 11 humor.

From Jay Leno's monologue on "The Tonight Show":

"Where does Osama bin Laden sleep?

If I knew that I'd have \$25 million."

"What is the shortest book in Afghanistan?

'Bin Laden--The Post-War Years.' "

Serious about laughter

On Sept. 11, almost immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Ed Dunkelblau went to the Glenbrook Off-Campus High School in Northbrook.

"He showed up on his own and talked with our staff and faculty," said school program director Douglas Strong. "We needed to talk about our worries, fears and to figure out how to approach our students. Ed helped us do that."

Dunkelblau, a consulting psychologist at the school for students challenged with emotional and behavioral disorders, told the group several important things that helped them and their students cope, Strong said.

"One of the most helpful things Ed told us," Strong said, "is that it was OK to laugh, even then, and in the days ahead. It's part of the healing process, he told us, and it'll help all of us get through this."

Dunkelblau's humor picks

Pointing out that humor is subjective, psychologist Ed Dunkelblau listed the comedy that does it for him, in no particular order:

- Joke-telling marathons with friends.
- The movie "Airplane!"
- "Far Side" comics.
- Sports bloopers.
- Frisky puppies.
- Stand-up comics such as Bill Cosby, Elaine Bosler and Emo Phillips.
- "M*A*S*H" reruns.
- Short stories by Woody Allen.
- Marx Brothers and Abbott and Costello movies.
- Improv theater such as The Second City.