

Help in Tragic Times

Guidelines for Taking Care of Yourself and One Another in Tragic Times of Crisis

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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 the real-life heroes. Concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl said, "What helps people survive awful circumstances is their ability to detach and get beyond themselves. This is seen in heroism and humor."

The level of threat and horror experienced during the impact of any disaster will influence a person's psychological adjustment. The people living in New York 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 after a disaster, the people closest to the crisis are unable to separate their inner emotional selves 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 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, more than a month after that traumatic day, we have started to laugh again. Our humor and laughter can help us cope, recover, and heal. According to the experts, the use of humor in tragic situations is a step toward health and healing.

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 heads clear, get our feet back under us and restore 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 World Trade Center (WTC) attack. One survivor reports 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 had reached the 11th 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 families 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 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 on how that might be accomplished. The big, burly 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 that appeared 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 ole 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 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.

Irony was captured in this popular joke in the form of a memo from President Bush to Al Gore: "We just found a few more votes. You won. When do you want to come and take over the job?"

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. It's 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 any more than it ceases to be serious when someone laughs."

Suggested Reading

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