

VARIETY

Working through grief? A 'certified humor professional' is here to help

A grief expert and certified humor professional learns how to laugh through the tears.

By **Kevyn Burger** Special to the Star Tribune | AUGUST 28, 2019 — 2:33PM

Melissa Baartman Mork has devoted most of her career to studying grief.

She chose grief as the subject of her graduate school thesis, then researched it as a psychology professor and counseled clients working through profound losses as a clinical psychologist.

On the first day of September in 2017, her knowledge was put to the test.

That was the day her husband, Scott, father of her daughter and son, died at 53, four months after being diagnosed with an aggressive cancer.

“We lost our hero,” she said. “I knew I had to manage my own grief and parent my teenagers through theirs.”

In the midst of their anguish, Mork grabbed for the life raft that she believes is keeping her and her children afloat through the turbulence of loss: humor.

“The night we got home after we said our goodbyes, we were exhausted and terrified. We were wondering, ‘What will life be like now?’ I held them while we sobbed,” said Mork.

“Then, out of the blue, my daughter said something funny. My kids looked at me like, ‘Too soon?’ But I laughed. Pretty soon we were all three howling through our tears. In that moment, we knew we were going to be OK. We were going to come through this.”

This summer, Mork is teaching a class aimed at sharing her secret weapon with the heartsick. The chair of the psychology department at the University of Northwestern in Roseville, Mork designed an online course on navigating grief with humor. She also wrote a textbook to accompany the curriculum.

“Humor is more than being hilarious, it’s facing our losses with optimism, gratitude, hope, even joy,” Mork said. “It’s the umbrella for approaching the tasks of grief with bravery and zest.”

A year before her husband’s diagnosis, Mork became a certified humor professional after completing a three-year program through the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH).

In doing so, she joined a diverse group of educators, health care professionals, social workers, business executives and others who are studying how to intentionally and strategically apply humor in their work.

“Humor has been discounted because it is so readily available. But research is snowballing; science is starting to take the effects of humor on our brains and physiology seriously,” said Karyn Buxman, a neurohumorist and co-founder of the Humor Academy offered through AATH.

“We keep one foot immersed in the research while we look at how we can apply the knowledge for positive change,” said Buxman. “Humor is a perspective, both a magnet and a lubricant between people. We can all learn to leverage the benefits of humor for our well-being. You don’t have to be funny to see funny.”

Laughter and learning



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Becoming a widow was not the first time Mork was blindsided by bereavement. Both of her parents died during her junior year of college. Her mother was killed in a car accident; months later her father suffered a fatal heart attack.

"I was tired of people saying, 'I know how you feel.' I had to dig in and study for myself," she said.

And study, she did. On a midcareer sabbatical, she researched the role of humor in healing after loss. She began giving presentations on humor, stress management and trauma to health care organizations and law enforcement agencies.

She also developed innovative ways to use humor in the college courses she taught.

"If you get students to laugh, there's a shift in the classroom dynamic," she said. "There are studies that prove that laughter enhances learning. If I can work in a witty story related to academic content, it locks it in the memory."

Mork's popularity on campus prompted Northwestern's leaders to look for a way to extend her academic expertise.

Tanya Grosz, former dean of graduate, online and adult learning at the University of Northwestern, suggested that the college develop Mork's grief studies into its own course.

"We were looking for a compelling subject with wide appeal. Melissa is a presence in this burgeoning field of the psychology of humor and is courageous enough to share her experience," Grosz said. "Her knowledge will promote healing for others and probably be cathartic to her, too."

Mork's class is a massive open online course or MOOC, a model that colleges and universities use to deliver free academic content via the web. The self-directed approach has spread to include institutions of higher learning worldwide.

MOOCs began in 2011 when some professors at elite universities made their courses available online to anyone who wanted to take them.

Judy Hougen, 58, of Lauderdale enrolled in Mork's MOOC after hearing one of her lectures on the Northwestern campus.

"I heard her say that grief and humor can coexist without it being disrespectful. That message spoke to me on my journey," said Hougen, who is mourning the death of her mother.

"Mom was a lighthearted extrovert, quick with a quip. I want to learn how to honor the love we shared by remembering the funny times, without wallowing or turning bitter."

Beyond closure

As for her own loss, Mork is still adjusting to her status as widow.

"Everything that I had learned academically became real in a way I couldn't have imagined," said Mork. "It's still a huge shock. Sometimes I wake up and say, 'Scott, what happened?'"

Most days, however, what she has learned about loss and laughter serves her well.

"We live with this myth we are supposed to find closure, but the task of grief is to find a new way to have a relationship with the person who is no longer present. In grief work we find a way to do that, to feel connected," she said. "The use of humor is valuable in that process."

When she reminisces about Scott with her children, she often recalls funny stories. She also uses the filter of humor to color her reflections.

"Scott and I had a great marriage, but it wasn't perfect. If I dwell on the times we argued, I'm going to feel remorseful and farther away from him," she said. "When I remember how we laughed together, how he teased me, I feel connected to him and it brings back

the levity of our relationship.

“That’s my grief work in action.”

Kevyn Burger is a Minneapolis-based freelance broadcaster and writer.
