

Forensic Mental Health Insider

Official Membership Publication of the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies (AIAFS)



Humor for Stress Management: Positive effects of dark and self-enhancing humor (or “Should I be laughing at that?”)

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As mental health professionals, we often serve people during their worst moments. It is high stress for us. Our personal investment is high, the control we have over their situation is low, and the mental or emotional strain can create burnout, compassion fatigue, and even secondary post-traumatic responses. We joined the profession because we wanted to be a helper, yet our experiences of helplessness can undo us.

As a result, some of us might use humor as a way of regaining some cognitive control of a situation. We use humor to gain perspective, as a way to look at the situation in a more positive light, or to distance ourselves from the emotional intensity of the event.

We might also use hostile or aggressive humor as a safe expression of our frustration and anger because jokes aren't to be taken seriously. Sometimes we use dark humor or gallows humor. The term may have originated when the convicted murderer William Palmer, before stepping out onto the trapdoor of the gallows at his public execution, asked the hangman, “Are you sure it's safe?” Gallows humor is often used among those who regularly face death and dying, and it is also used as a response to hopeless situations.

Sometimes our humor, as it relates to our work, can feel really dark. For example, a client was expelled from college after attempting to cause her own death by hanging. She looped a pair of nylons around her neck, tied them to the door handle of her dorm room, and then slid to the floor during lunch hour when fellow students would be walking past. When I described it to my colleagues during group supervision, they started brainstorming other inept ways to attempt suicide. We were laughing so hard we were crying. But make no mistake: we were laughing about suicide.

Sliter, Kale & Yuan (2014) surveyed 179 firefighters to analyze the buffering effects of humor to cope with traumatic stressors. They found that the humor of firefighters, which was often dark, was a successful defense against

work trauma, burnout, and PTSD symptoms. If it works for them, it can work for us.

Our coping humor doesn't have to be dark, though. Self-enhancing humor is a humor style that is good-natured and positive. It is often focused on the ability to laugh at yourself, to find humor in the situations around you, and to use humor to look at the bright side of a bad situation.

When a young police officer was assisting in the recovery of a young adult male drowning victim, he tirelessly worked with the recovery team, dragging the water to find the body. They finally located the cadaver and pulled it onto shore. In sudden exhaustion, the young cop flopped down on the grass and instructed the rest of the recovery team, “When the coroner gets here, make sure they take the right body.” Studies show that self-enhancing humor can be quite helpful in coping with stress and trauma (Boerner, Joseph & Murphy, 2017; Evans, Pistrang & Billings, 2013; Williams, 2013).

Self-enhancing humor can certainly be used in therapeutic interventions. In bereavement work, for example, I will ask, “What did you two laugh about?” “How did you play together?” “How did you bring a smile to his face?” I would never tell a client to look at the bright side, but I might invite them to use their own sense of humor to reveal it.

Self-enhancing humor is also useful in mediating our own stressors and secondary trauma. What makes you laugh out loud? Do you like videos of baby goats in pajamas? Stand-up comedy? Internet memes? Playing with your kids? Hanging with funny friends?

Whatever brings you mirth, whether it is dark or self-enhancing humor, I encourage you to find more of it, and strategically implement it as one of your stress management habits. Laughter is the best medicine, but humor is also a fantastic preventative agent.

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