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A Funny Thing About Humans . . .

Four true stories illustrate what happens when, instead of crying, we choose to laugh.

by David Naster

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“Quite frankly, I didn’t think I dealt her that bad of a hand.”

True Story

Ruth and her cousin Mary loved to play cards. Both women were in their mid-70s, and the two retired schoolteachers would stay up till all hours of the night, talking, playing and laughing. One night the family received a call that Mary had died. As the family gathered, Ruth explained what happened.

“We were playing cards and talking as usual. I dealt Mary her cards. She said she didn’t feel very well, went into the next room, lay down on the couch, and died.”

Ruth added, “Quite frankly, I didn’t think I dealt her that bad of a hand.”

The entire family laughed, and immediately their grief and shock eased.

I’m sharing this story for two reasons: first, to make you laugh; and, second, to prove that humorous thinking helps us deal with tough times. Don’t believe me? These real stories about real people who laughed through their tough times may be the proof you need to let more humor into your life.

The Man in the Audience

After doing a comedy show in a church, I was approached by a man I had randomly selected to come on stage to help me with a routine. He put his hands on my shoulders, his face just inches from mine, and said, “Thank you, sir. Three months ago I lost my baby boy, and this is the first time I have laughed since. Thank you for reminding why you just have to laugh.”

He walked away smiling, wiping tears from his eyes.

That moment ignited my quest to explore how humor and laughter help us get through tough times. One thing I’ve discovered is that there is a clear and proven distinction between the two: Humor helps us emotionally, while laughter helps us physically, according to medical research.

“The stimulation of laughter increases our circulation — benefitting the heart and lowering blood pressure,” wrote Dr. William Fry, a professor of Psychology at Stanford University. “Laughter increases our respiratory exchange. It also increases our metabolism and activity of our muscles.” (Fry, 1994)

The man who laughed three months after losing his son was releasing his pent-up grief. He had felt no joy or happiness for a long time, and the laughing made him feel good. It also stopped his thoughts of sadness, another critical step in the process.

When we think something is funny, we are no longer thinking the thoughts that produced the sadness, much like when Ruth stated, “I didn’t think I dealt her that bad of a hand.” The family’s laughter released their shock and sadness at Mary’s sudden death. Her joke about dealing Mary a bad hand is what stopped any avalanche of sad emotional thinking.

Bill's Story

Eighty-four-year-old Bill Mahoney was sitting in the doctor's office with his wife, waiting to get the results of his recent MRI. The doctor walked in and told Bill he had cancer in every part of his body except his lungs. Bill smiled at the doctor and said, "Well thank God I didn't quit smoking."

When faced with a life-threatening diagnosis, we get scared. When we lose someone we love, we get sad. And why shouldn't we? Those are honest feelings. The problem with such emotions is when they become an avalanche of thinking that can bury us alive in our grief, shock and fear.

The way to stop the barrage of such thinking is through humor. "Funny thinking" not only stops the sad thoughts, it makes us laugh and feel good. This reboot helps us to deal with our situation with greater ease because we feel a little better and are not smothered in emotions.

When we make it a habit to think funny, we develop a great survival skill — the ability to manage our thoughts. Since emotions are produced by our thoughts, being able to manage them has been proven crucial to both our emotional and physical well-being. (Sebastien, 2016)

"Laughter, along with an active sense of humor, may help protect you against a heart

attack," notes Dr. Michael Miller of the Center of Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. (Miller, 2014)

The three people, Mary, the man in the audience, and Bill, all have one thing in common — they made the choice to "think funny." In the moment when they were directly faced with something serious, they chose humor. Any one of them could have cried, gotten scared, even angry. And that would have been OK too, but they didn't. They thought something funny. When they did that, they grabbed hold of the reins, helping them manage any uncontrollable emotions that might have occurred.

In tough times, when we think funny and laugh, the thinking is what helps manage our emotions, while the laughing spurs the physical release of our sadness, fears and anger that needs to come out as well.

I would never suggest we laugh *instead* of cry. We must do both. Denying emotions never works. We only bury them, and they will eventually come out in more painful and more dangerous ways. Denying our feelings might serve to keep the sadness at bay, but it will also prevent joy from fully entering into our lives.

Emma's Teeth

Surely, the ability to think funny begins with finding humor in ourselves. When we laugh at ourselves — at our actions, our gray hair, what we look like, and especially what we think is "wrong" with us — we actively manage our thoughts instead of our thoughts managing us.

Clocked doing 85 mph on a 55 mph highway, Emma was pulled over for speeding. As the officer approached her car, she started rocking rapidly from side to side. He noticed and asked if she was all right. She handed him her driver's license and said, "Officer, I am 82 years old. I have to use the toilet. And women my age can't hold it very easily. I am trying to get to a toilet, fast."

The officer politely said, "I understand ma'am. There is a rest stop a half a mile ahead that has a restroom. Please drive safe. I am sure you will make it."

Emma drove off laughing. She didn't really have to use the toilet; she made it up to prevent

getting a ticket. The more she thought about how she got away with it, the harder she laughed. Emma was laughing so hard she really did have to pee. That made her laugh even more. Finally, she laughed so hard she had to pull the car over; not because she peed, but because she laughed so hard her teeth fell out into her lap.

The toughest critic we'll likely ever face is our own self. Understanding our thoughts and feelings and learning to manage them takes daily work. When we develop the skill of laughing at our perceived flaws or shortcomings something really wonderful happens: We develop a more humorous perspective in general. Finding the lighter side of a heavy situation is a skill that will help us deal with almost any tough time.

When we give ourselves permission to laugh, think funny, and find joy in tough times, we are controlling the serious; the serious is no longer controlling us — and that can be a miracle.

"Well thank God I didn't quit smoking."



Some people think it's wrong, even disrespectful or irreverent, to have a funny thought, appreciate joy, or indulge in a belly laugh after a loved one dies. That simply is not true. It's that kind of thinking that prevents us from moving on. You can choose another approach by thinking any of the following:

1. *The person I lost probably doesn't want me to stay sad.*
2. *I will honor my dearly departed by remembering the joyful times we shared.*
3. *I remember the funny things we did and said together.* ♦

Sources:

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