

Why We Laugh

How laughter can help build resilience

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Being able to joke about a traumatic loss usually requires the healing distance of time, however. Losing a limb, for example, may make us suicidal when it first occurs, but with the passage of time we adapt to the loss and eventually may even find ourselves able to joke about it. What magic does the passage of time work on us that permits us to laugh at what once made us cry? Perhaps definitive proof that the alarm our loss raised when it first occurred was, in fact, "false." After all, we survived it and became happy again.

Being able to face an old trauma with humor may very well then be considered a reliable signal of psychological recovery. Perhaps also, by extension, being able to laugh at a trauma at the moment it occurs, or soon after, signals both to ourselves and others that we believe in our ability to endure it (which is perhaps what makes laughter such a universally pleasurable experience: it makes us feel that everything will be all right).

In light of the above, perhaps laughter could be most properly considered as a weapon against suffering and despair. If we can joke about a disappointing or traumatic event, we'll often find ourselves feeling that what's happened to us isn't so bad and that we'll be able to get through it. This expectation serves two vitally important functions:

1. It diminishes or even eliminates the moment-by-moment suffering we might otherwise experience as a result of a traumatic loss, which
2. Actually makes it more likely we *will* make it through a trauma unmarred and flourish once again

...When faced with adversity, some people exhibit a great ability for turning to laughter as a soothing balm, while others remain less able to do so. While this may be a result of differences in upbringing or genetics, I often wonder if it's equally as much a matter of intent. Perhaps many of us simply don't think to try to laugh, either because we're too overwhelmed by suffering or because we think laughter in the face of suffering is inappropriate.

I'm suggesting here that it's not. That in fact laughter is a powerful means by which we can encourage ourselves. That when confronted with setbacks, adversity, trauma, or terrible news, even if it may seem socially inappropriate, we should reach toward humor. We should try to find a way to make light of whatever circumstances make us afraid. Because if instead of focusing on the negative impact of an adverse event or experience we focus on simply laughing about it, actively and consciously pursuing a perspective that makes it funny, we just may be able to activate the most under recognized but powerful weapon we have against suffering.

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