

# Using Humor to Cope

## Humor in Concentration/POW Camps

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*"I would never have made it if I could not have laughed. Laughing lifted me momentarily . . . out of this horrible situation, just enough to make it livable . . . survivable."*  
(Victor Frankl)

*"Humor, more than anything else in the human makeup, affords an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds."* (Victor Frankl)

Bill Cosby once said, "If you can find humor in anything, you can survive it." Can we really survive anything emotionally if we can keep our sense of humor about it? The ultimate test of this would seem to have been the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. Surely, there was no room for humor in the camps. And yet, psychiatrist Victor Frankl, a prisoner in the camps himself, noted in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that humor was one of the things that helped people survive in the camps. Finding things to laugh at helped maintain a sense of meaning and purpose in life—even as prisoners saw others dying all around them.

Many survived with the thought that they would one day see a loved one again. Others used their imaginations to create humor. Frankl states that he and another prisoner tried to invent at least one funny story or joke every day. For example, in one joke they created, a prisoner points toward a Capo (a prisoner who also acted as a guard) and says, "Imagine! I knew him when he was only the president of a bank!"

In another frequently told story, a prisoner accidentally bumps into a Nazi guard. The guard turns and shouts, "Schwein!" (which means "pig" in German). The prisoner bows and says, "Cohen. Pleased to meet you." The joke clearly demonstrates how humor helps reverse who's in control and who seems to be the superior being. Even in the terrible conditions of the camp, such jokes provided a means of momentarily overcoming extreme adversity.

More recent detainment camp experiences have confirmed Frankl's observations. Numerous hostages were held for long periods of time by terrorist groups in the 1980s. Terry Anderson, held captive in Lebanon for 2,455 days, describes in his book, *Den of Lions*, how a sense of humor helped him and his fellow prisoners cope.

**"Despite everything, it's amazing sometimes how much laughing we do. Irish hostage Brian Keenan's terrible shaggy-dog stories, John McCarthy's imitations, Tom's [Sutherland] awful puns and drinking songs, Frank's [Reed] tales of Boston. Even the idiotic and frustrating things the guards do set us off in giggles. There's**

**often a bitter touch to it. But not always. Just as often, it's just a relief to be able to laugh at something."**

Alan Sharansky overcame his fear of a (threatened) firing squad in the former Soviet Union by joking about it. But he was not successful at it at first. The relief was initially very short-lived, if it occurred at all. But he gradually came to see the power that joking gave him. Real mastery over his fears took 15-20 tries. From that point on, he gained control over his fears and stopped being at their mercy.

Finding humor in the face of death was called "gallows humor" by Freud. His classic example was of a man who was about to be shot by a firing squad, and was asked if he wanted a last cigarette. "No thanks," he said, "I'm trying to quit." Again, the joke helped the doomed man turn the tables and take emotional control in the situation.

A sociologist once pointed out that over the centuries, many cultures have used humor as a means of dealing with death.<sup>1</sup> In India, those doomed to death by fire were expected to laugh while climbing up to their own pyre. Parents in ancient Phoenicia often laughed if their children had been committed to death on the pyre. Elderly parents in Sardinia were expected to laugh when being immolated by their own children. All these practices clearly reflect the belief that laughter can help you master even the fear of death itself.

While you will never face anything like this in your own life, you may encounter sources of stress in your life that feel just as threatening to you. Hearing the words "You have cancer," for example, can often feel like a death sentence being handed down to you. Regardless of the obstacles you have to face, remember that if humor helped Frankl, Anderson, Sharansky and many others in their same circumstances, it also has the power to help you master your own fears and anxieties—about cancer or any other stressors in your life.

*"Laughter sets the spirit free to move 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 and purpose. Humor is integral to our peace of mind and ability to go beyond survival."* (Captain Gerald Coffee, POW in Vietnam)

Many Americans captured during the war in Vietnam were held as prisoners for years. Some are still listed as "missing in action" to this day. Captain Gerald Coffee, who spent seven years in a POW camp in Vietnam, has said that the POWs were generally kept isolated in an attempt to break their spirit. They managed to keep their spirits up, however, by tapping on the wall of fellow prisoners and telling jokes in Morse code. Coffee feels that humor was essential to his survival as a POW.

I interviewed Captain Coffee in 1993, and he said that humor was the one thing that was almost constant throughout his stay in the camps, even if it was sometimes a grim humor. For example, the prisoners were often tortured with ropes. When a new POW would arrive, they would always explain the daily routines and how they went about communicating with each other. Then they'd say, "It's not so bad once you get to know

the ropes." They would look for humor wherever they could find it, including the way they and their captors lived, and even the brutality of the guards.

The POWs often got depressed about their aloneness and feared that they would never get back home. Anything that could break through this anxiety and depression was always welcome. In his book, *Beyond Survival*, Coffee describes an old cell that had been converted to a shower. Someone had scratched onto the wall, "Smile, you're on Candid Camera."

You can imagine the effect discovering this message had on a prisoner standing there with his head down, wondering if he was ever going to get out alive. In Coffee's case, he said, "I laughed out loud, enjoying not only the pure humor and incongruity of the situation, but also appreciating the beautiful guy who had mustered the moxie to rise above his own dejection and frustration and pain and guilt to inscribe a line of encouragement to those who would come after him . . . he deserved a medal for it."<sup>2</sup>

Coffee's stories remind me of an old Shel Silverstein cartoon showing two men being held prisoner in a dungeon. They are clamped to a wall with irons their wrists and ankles. Below them is a pit containing alligators, and it's 30 feet straight up to the top of the dungeon. So they're against the wall like two insects on a pin. One looks at the other and says, "Now here's my plan."

Coffee believes that there was a constant awareness in the POW camps that humor helped keep things in perspective. In spite of how bad things got, it helped them distance themselves from it for a moment and see that things could be worse. If it helped keep their problems in perspective, it can do the same for yours.

One of the most significant things to emerge from my conversation with Captain Coffee was his view that "**having some humor skills before being confronted by the adversity played a very important role**" in being able to use humor in the camps. And that is precisely why my Humor Skills Training Program is designed the way it is. If you want to have access to your sense of humor on your high stress days, you first need to spend some time on each of the preliminary steps. The basic foundation skills discussed in the early steps will gradually become a part of your everyday style of relating to the world. And this is the point at which you can begin to use humor to cope effectively with any kind of stress.

[Adapted from P.E. McGhee *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*, Kendall-Hunt, 1999.]

## References

1. Victoroff, D. (1942). New approaches to the psychology of humor. *Impact of Society on Science*, 47, 709-716.
2. Coffee, G. (1990). *Beyond Survival*. New York: Putnam, pp. 131-132.