

Psychologists find that jokes help us cope with horrifying images

August 2 2011, By Max McClure

The key is to not think of death as an end, but as more of a very effective way to cut down on your expenses. – Woody Allen

You may not want Woody Allen to have your life in his hands, but in terms of watching his own psychological health, the comedian has it right. Two new studies from the Stanford Psychophysiology Laboratory demonstrate that, in the face of stressful imagery, comedy is a more effective coping strategy than solemnity – and positive, optimistic humor is more effective than cynicism.

In a standard emotion-regulation study, researchers show subjects a series of images from the International Affective Picture System (IAPS) – a database of photographs that have been categorized by their emotional content. After viewing negative imagery ranging from car accidents and corpses to aggressive animals and dental exams, the subject rates the intensity of positive and negative emotions.

Tweaking this format in a paper published last week in *Cognition & Emotion*, Stanford postdoc Andrea Samson and psychology Professor James Gross asked subjects to improvise [jokes](#) – either positive or negative – reinterpreting the photos before reporting their emotions. The researchers found that subjects who made any kind of quip benefited, reporting both increases in positive emotions and decreases in negative emotions. But those who were instructed to use positive humor saw the most effect.

"If you are able to teach people to be more playful, to look at the absurdities of life as humorous, you see some increase in wellbeing," said Samson.

There are multiple ways to reinterpret a single image, the most obvious being "serious" cognitive reappraisal – seeing an IAPS photo featuring a man bloodily disemboweling a fish at a seafood processing plant, for instance, and reinterpreting it as a celebration of safe, unionized labor. But the picture can also be viewed through the lens of comedy, illustrated by two actual responses: either "positive," non-hostile humor ("He always wanted to work with animals"), or "negative," aggressive, disparaging humor ("Ideal workplace for people with body odor").

"It sounds difficult," said Samson, "but most often, the participants did surprisingly well."

The findings support the idea that humor exerts its psychological effect by forcing a change of perspective. And, based on the greater efficacy of positive humor, the researchers suggest that positive humor facilitates real reappraisal, while negative humor works by half measures, distancing the subject from the upsetting picture without creating a new mental scenario.

A similar head-to-head comparison of positive humor with typical, serious reappraisal was conducted by Stanford master's degree student Alana Glassco with Samson and Gross. The result, presented at the 2011 Society for Personality and Social Psychology Humor Preconference, again found optimistic joking to be the more powerful emotional regulator. By demonstrating that subjects who had been asked to use humor also exhibited an increase in verbal fluency after the trial (measured with a standard psychological test that asks subjects to say as many words as possible from a given category), the research may have bolstered the theory that humor changes cognitive processing.

The increase in fluency, explained Glassco, may suggest "the use of humorous reappraisal led individuals to experience higher levels of creativity and cognitive flexibility."

But seriousness and negative jokes are by no means useless, even if positivity works slightly better. There are many situations where a sober cast would be more appropriate, and the researchers point out that studies of hostile joking in disempowered groups such as POWs have revealed dramatic benefits, giving the humorists a sense of control and agency. Anyway, as Woody Allen puts it, "There are worse things in life than death. Have you ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?"

Provided by Stanford University

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