

It's All in Your Head...Sort Of

Part II – Using Humor as a Stress Intervention Tool

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

This is the second of two articles on stress management. In this article, Ron discusses the use of humor to intervene in the stress management process. For copies of the first article, please contact Ron at Ron@RonCulberson.com and request “It's All In Your Head...Sort Of, Part I.”

Previously, I discussed the “process” of how we experience stress which explained that the effects of stress on us are determined by a combination of our interpretation of the stressor, our reaction to it and how we cope with that reaction. This is the formula:

IMPACT OF STRESS = Stressor + Our Interpretation + Our Reaction + How We Cope

Below, I'll show you how humor can intervene at any point along the way.

Fixing The Interpretation with Humor

The majority of stress is caused by our interpretation of the “importance” of a particular stressor. Since interpretation is a mental process and since we can control our mental processes, there is no reason why we can't use humor to positively affect our interpretations – even when we think that the stress is out of our control like the weather, the stock market and our reaction to the idiots who cut us off in traffic. The key to controlling how stress affects us is to allow ourselves the benefit of a split second delay between the stressor and our interpretation so as to care-fully ponder the situation at hand before our auto-pilot reactions kicks in.

Consider the following phrases:

“You always say that”

“It figures”

“Typical”

“I expected as much”

“Don't make me come over there”

These are all examples of pre-programmed reactions to situations in which we expect to be stressed. Wouldn't be great if we could break the cycle and never reach the stress part? Let's practice.

Imagine a situation that usually causes you stress. Break it down into the stressor *and* your interpretation of the stressor. What is your typical interpretation? How can you change *that* interpretation to something funny? Consider these two examples:

Example 1:

Stressor: A driver cuts you off on the highway

Possible Interpretation:

The other driver is inconsiderate, self centered and does not care about anyone but herself. In other words, she does not care about *you*.

Possible change to your interpretation:

The other driver has a pea sized brain and because she was trying the impossible job of multitasking (which is highly challenging for Pea Brains), she spilled Big Mac special sauce on her designer business suit and didn't see you because the more she tried to wipe it off, the more the impenetrable trans fat in the sauce spread itself across the material of her suit.

Example II

Stressor: Every line you stand in takes longer than any other line.

Possible Interpretation:

God, Mother Nature, and the Universe are out to make your life more miserable than anyone else's.

Possible change to your interpretation:

You have magical powers that can make any line you stand in slow down. Instead of complaining, try to use your powers to make your weight gain or your spouse's complaining slow down.

See how this works? It's important to remember that these "new" interpretations are always thought in your head but never said out loud - or else you may experience a greater stress than the original stressor.

Fixing Our Reactions

Once, while in an airport during a weather delay, I noticed a man who stormed to the ticket counter every time the agent announced another delay. Mr. Angry was so worked up, a large vein started to protrude from his head. Normally, I would never add to someone else's stress but this guy was starting to annoy me. So, the next time I called my wife to let her know my latest arrival plans, I said in a voice loud enough for Mr. Angry to hear, "Yeah, they just said we're going to be delayed another hour."

Immediately, Mr. Angry rushed to the ticket counter to express his displeasure. We weren't really delayed; I just wanted to do a bit of social research by being a stressor and watching him react. I had also run out of reading material and was a bit bored.

Nonetheless, it proved my point.

Your *reaction* to any particular stress interpretation can either raise or lower the amount of stress you ultimately experience. If you "wig out," you're more likely to feel

more stress. If you seek a calm “happy place,” you’re more likely to avoid a stress meltdown. May I recommend the latter for avoiding neurotic disasters and myocardial infarctions (Note: I’m not a physician but I do enjoy saying “infarction.”)

Next time you make a stressful interpretation of a situation, consider using humor to calm your reaction down. Once you feel the effects of the stress (rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, double vision, headache, knot in your stomach, temptation to hurt other people, animals, or amusement park characters), do something like the following:

- Think of your favorite jokes until the joke-laughter cycle reduces the effects of the stress.
- If near your computer, go online and look for jokes, humor articles, funny videos, etc. Any article on Paris Hilton or Brittany Spears should also make you feel lucky, well adjusted, and much more comfortable.
- Keep a humorous book with you or easily accessible so that you can read a chapter whenever you experience stress reactions.
- Find a colleague and ask him/her to share a joke, funny story or embarrassing moment with you. Hopefully, they’ll tell you something you can use at a future staff meeting.
- Keep a file of funny emails, photos, cartoons, etc. and refer to it when you’re feeling stress.
- Tell someone about the stress but try to exaggerate your story so that it makes both of you laugh.

By engaging your mind with humor you will not only distract yourself from the stress, your laughter will also help to dissipate the physical feelings of stress.

Coping With Humor

We use coping mechanisms during good times and stressful times. If we practice healthy coping mechanisms when things are going well, we’re more likely to benefit from them when things are not so good. In fact the regular use of healthy stress management techniques may help us avoid stress altogether.

Consider getting into a regular routine of using healthy humor so that you can employ it as stress management technique when things get out of control.

Here are some healthy humor habits:

- Get a daily dose of humor by reading the comics, watching sitcoms, reading books by humorists, reading funny magazines, etc. A laugh a day, gathers no moss (or something like that).
- Look for the humor that’s all around you. Watch people doing funny things. Pay attention to your kids’ humor. Look for funny signs. Read the paper with an eye out for funny or strange headlines.

- Keep a file of funny things that make you laugh. Look through the file on a regular basis.
- Associate with other funny people. The more you're around it, the more it will rub off on you.

There are many ways to manage stress but the vast majority of us are not adept at any of them. If you find it hard to focus on these “standard” stress management techniques, try using humor as a fun way to stay sane. To me, it's like finding out that chocolate cures cancer – it's a fun way to do something valuable.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP is a former hospice social worker, middle manager, and senior manager who helps mission driven organizations tap into the power of combining excellence with humor. Ron is the author of ***Do it Well. Make it Fun., Is Your Glass Laugh Full?***, and ***My Kneecap Seems Too Loose.*** Find out more by visiting www.RonCulberson.com.