



## Helping vs Hurting: How to Use Humor with People in *Emotional Pain*

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**H**umor can be a great way to help people in emotional pain. When used effectively, it can help them get some relief, feel supported, and regain a sense of perspective.

But it can also backfire. When people hurt, they're more sensitive, and what would normally be an innocuous joke can be interpreted as an insult or put-down.

There is an old comedy formula that says comedy equals tragedy plus time. In order to laugh about something painful, we need to have some emotional distance. Think of your own life. You may have some hilarious stories about

when you got fired or divorced, but at the time these things happened, you might have been hard-pressed to see the funny side. So when people you know are going through painful life events, it's usually a good idea to hold back on the jokes or good-natured kidding.

I say usually, because it's when people go through these situations that they most need to laugh. However, you may not be the appropriate person to get them laughing. Making jokes with people who are emotionally raw is a high-risk undertaking. And in these circumstances, the closer you are emotionally, the more latitude you have to take risks.

Emotional closeness is based on two factors. First, if you have a trusting friendship with someone, that obviously brings you emotionally closer. Second, if you've been through or are going through what she's been through, you're emotionally close. For example, I've worked with suicide survivors, who when in groups of other suicide survivors make the blackest jokes, even though they hardly know each other. The fact that they've all been through it gives them a kind of unspoken permission to make jokes about this highly sensitive topic, whereas if an outsider made these jokes they'd consider it offensive.

Often when people

trust you, they'll give you permission to use humor by initiating it themselves. In general, even when you're emotionally close to them, it's a good idea to follow their lead rather than go charging ahead full steam.

If you're not close to someone who is emotionally raw, the low-risk choice is to avoid using humor at all. Another choice you have which is slightly higher risk but can be very effective is to go for safe humor areas like:

1. Joking about something totally unrelated to the area of emotional sensitivity, like the weather, local sports team, local politics, etc.

2. Joking about something you and that individual do have in common. So if you work together, making jokes about the workplace (as long as the area of pain isn't work-related) can be a good way of getting a laugh. Or if you both

have kids or share common interests, these can be safe areas to joke about. By doing this you create a bond with this person and help them feel less alone. As Victor Borge said, "Humor is the shortest distance between two people."

3. "Goofy" humor, that involves props, like rubber chickens or Groucho Marx glasses. This sort of clowning around is a great form of distraction.

4. Kindness humor which involves doing something nice but unexpected which creates good feelings. This can include sending an encouraging email or if you work together, leaving a cookie or card on their desk.

Depending on the amount of pain people are in, you'll get different responses to your attempts at humor. I think it's best to be gentle in your efforts, monitoring the other's responses to see if more humor is

warranted or if you need to back off and just let him be. And if you're not sure what to do, always err on the side of caution, or wait for him to initiate.

However, you may be surprised by what you get back. Some people who are going through "stuff" are just dying for the chance to joke about it, and once they sense your willingness to go along, it's open season.

Also, when it comes to humor, there are always situations where breaking the rules can get big laughs. The only problem is, no one can say for sure what those situations are, though many of us have experienced them.

So to stay safe, stick to the guidelines in this article, but if you get a sudden intuition, go for it!

*Counsellor and stand up comic David Granirer leads Stand Up For Mental Health, a program teaching stand up comedy to people*

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