

# How Humor Can Help You Control Your Change Reaction

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Change and adversity are often mentioned in the same breath because many see unexpected, unwanted change as a hardship, a pervasive loss of control. The ancient Chinese indicated their understanding of this concept by constructing a two-part pictogram. However, this two-part pictogram for change appears to imply contradictory thought. The bottom part by itself is the character that means “opportunity.” The top character by itself means “danger.” In other words, to the Chinese, change included part danger and part opportunity, a wise and insightful understanding. Although both danger and opportunity continue to play a role in the lives of people who are experiencing some sort of transition, people often resist change or become immobilized by it because they fear their altered circumstances will bring more danger than opportunity.

There is no one single way to understand and deal with change; however, researchers have given us some useful information for understanding and predicting people’s reactions to it. Researchers have also been able to identify some of the coping behaviors that help us adjust to the stress that upheaval causes in our lives, and humor appears to be a much-needed addition to this coping repertoire.

Change, or transition, can be defined as *the process of moving from here to there*. As the definition implies, change involves *movement*; it is a progression, meaning that it happens in a series of steps. Change is almost never instantaneous; it usually occurs over time and involves a transition from one state to another. The fact that change involves movement and process suggests that we can expect different things to occur in an expected sequence.

Typically, no matter what the change involves, we go through these predictable stages when change takes place in our lives. If we choose to go through the stages in a healthy, purposeful way, we earn the rewards of mastering the challenges of the change. The phases become our stepping-stones to success. We learn to empower ourselves and others so that we can at least remain in control of our reactions to the change, even if we cannot control the change itself.

But just as we can learn to empower ourselves and move toward success, we can also learn to be helpless. We can become victims, and our stages become a process that leads us away from happiness. The choice is ours.

In his work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (The Mysterious, Mystical Union), psychologist Carl Jung explained the path of the hero and offered some insights about how the true hero faces and overcomes adversity:

In myths the hero is the one who conquers the dragon, not the one who is devoured by it. And yet both have to deal with the same dragon. Also, he is no hero who never met the dragon, or who, if he saw it, declared afterwards that he saw nothing. Equally, only one who has risked the fight with the dragon and is not overcome by it wins the hoard, the “treasure hard to attain.” He alone has a genuine claim to self-confidence, for he has faced the dark ground of his self and thereby has gained himself.... He has arrived at an inner certainty which makes him capable of self-reliance, and attained what the alchemists called the *unio mentalis* (the unity of mind).

Notice some of the lessons Jung has for us. First, there is no heroism in not ever having adversity to conquer. On the contrary, we admire most those who have fought the fight and won, not the ones who have never had a fight to fight. Second, Jung points out that the same dragon will devour some people but will be conquered by others. The dragon, or the adversity, remains the same; however, the person opposing the dragon is different. When we develop the necessary coping skills to fight adversity, we maximize the opportunities for emerging victorious. Humor is one of the most powerful forces for disarming the dragons that we face in our lives, a way of taking control of our response, even when we have lost control of something significant.

Using humor to deal with misfortune is not a new concept. The Bible says, “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a brittle spirit drieth the bones.” More recently, psychological research tells us that human beings want power and authority over their futures. We want to feel that we have a say in how things will go for us, so when we perceive that our actions will make an outcome likely, we feel optimistic and secure. When we don’t, we feel insecure. We feel like victims. Sometimes people stay in a victim’s frame of mind after a loss or disappointment. They doubt their capacity to make their lives happen according to their own aspirations, so they wait to be rescued or blessed by good fortune. They start to feel undermined and overwhelmed; and they can become totally immobilized.

However, there are alternatives to these feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Learning to turn challenges into opportunities is one way to do that, but it won’t happen automatically. We need ways to keep our hearts merry or our spirits will become brittle with the perception that we are victims. Humor is a weapon for slaying the dragons and a tool for building cohesion.

A humor perspective provides the framework for discovering how to cope with hard times and adjust to change. It can play a critical role in bouncing back from adversity, especially when we are linked to others who will help us laugh. Research tells us that there are four main categories of coping mechanisms: Problem solving, communication, closeness, and flexibility. When we use humor to augment each of these coping behaviors, we create a formidable formula for taking control of our reactions to stress.

### Problem Solving

Problem Solving is the ability to deal directly with the difficult situations we face and make positive changes to resolve them. It involves critical thinking, a global perspective, strategic planning, and the ability to anticipate consequences. When we eagerly probe for understanding, go beyond the obvious, and prioritize effectively, we see the future as open and malleable. We are able to paint a credible picture of opportunities and possibilities and to communicate our enthusiasm for making them happen.

When we use humor to help us solve our problems, we reduce the difficulties and make them more manageable. The saying “You can carry a cow if you start when it’s a calf and carry it a little each day of its life” implies that we can face adversity if we solve problems as they come and aren’t overwhelmed by them. Burdens can be enormous if we wait until they are full grown to try to carry them, but if we have a well-developed sense of humor to aid us in carrying the weight, it becomes more controllable.

### Communication and Closeness

Communication is the ability to share thoughts and feelings with others in order to promote mutual understanding, even during difficult circumstances. Closeness is the degree to which you have developed a supportive social fabric in each area of our lives. When we combine these two coping resources, we have the required tools for building the relationships that will help us stay connected and supported during difficult times, but this connection doesn’t happen automatically. On the contrary, the closeness that engenders effective communication relies on our willingness to listen, our capacity to convey respect for others’ ideas, and a genuine interest in people. When we exhibit these behaviors that make us feel close to others, we have the trust and safety to engage in fun, laughter, and play. A sense of what is funny, or mirth, has its basis in the individual, but the true value of humor manifests itself in interpersonal associations.

Making relationships a priority, building time into our lives for the people who are important to us, laughing together, and playing with each other all create interactions that are characterized by joy and fun. Sharing our feelings and concerns enhances these relationships and encourages more closeness. An upward spiral of cohesion and connection starts to build on itself when we share humor with one another in our attempts to focus on the positive. As a result, we are better able to deal with the stressors in our lives.

### Flexibility

Flexibility is the degree of organization in our lives and the extent to which we feel comfortable with unstructured and unpredictable situations. Life is unpredictable, so our response to the problems it creates needs to be too. Flexibility is one way to make that happen, and a humor perspective is a way to respond to the erratic and fickle nature of our world. Flexibility has another important payoff: It stimulates creativity. Being open to a variety of creative and imaginative alternatives allows us to avoid getting trapped into thinking there is only one resolution. When we avoid rigidity in our thinking, experiment with innovation, and seek the input of others, we become more open to new ways of solving problems.

## Conclusion

Once we quit fighting the currents and learn to flow with them, we can approach decision making with new agility and energy. We can't control change, yet if we're not careful, it will control us. When we are forced to adjust to new, uninvited changes, feeling out of control is a common response. Finding humor in difficult situations is one way of controlling what we can control, even if we can't have power over the events that required us to marshal our coping behaviors in the first place.

Much evidence exists to support the idea that humor is a determinant of resilience. People have learned to rely on it not in spite of crisis but *because* of it. However, although the use of humor is considered an aspect of communication competence, one of the obvious and striking facts about humor is that most people most of the time cannot or will not effectively produce humorous messages. Rather, people are likely to function as receivers rather than as sources in humorous exchanges. Perhaps becoming aware of the value of using humor to expand coping behaviors can increase our understanding of the powerful role humor and laughter can play in helping us bounce back from the hardships that unwanted changes often bring. Then, consciously and actively working to find humor in our daily lives can help us feel better until things get better. When we use humor to tackle problems effectively, build strong relationships, and explore new ideas, we are doing what we can do to turn challenges into opportunities. Humor can give us a modicum of control in situations when we would otherwise feel as though we had no power over our destiny.