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Re-Moralizing Ourselves Through Humor

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"Morale -- the level of individual psychological well-being based on such factors as a sense of purpose and confidence in the future."

It is not surprising that people feel demoralized these days. As our society continues through a social, political, and economic metamorphosis, many folks are caught in the midst of tremendous turmoil wrought by the ongoing changes. It's hard to keep an optimistic outlook on the future when that future threatens to turn your present existence inside out.

It's worthwhile to remember that most situations in life come in one of two forms - those we can control and those we can't. When acting on a situation within our control, we feel competent and in charge. Taking action on a situation out of our control -- such as traffic jams, federal regulations or other peoples' behavior -- often leaves us frustrated and disheartened. A sense of humor is an under-utilized personal resource for us when we feel demoralized. In a very true sense, humor is a "remoralizer." It makes us feel less isolated and more connected to others while helping us see "the big picture." In House of God, Samuel Shem was aware that "one of the few ways to deal with a high-stress situation that you can't control is to make fun of it."

Most of us don't use our sense of humor enough because we take ourselves too seriously. We're afraid to look foolish or silly. Now, I am not saying you should treat your profession- or responsibilities frivolously. It is quite possible, however, to take your work seriously while taking YOURSELF lightly. By getting in touch with the sense of humor we already have and expanding it carefully and conscientiously, the risk associated with humor is greatly diminished.

For many, the mark of a humorous person is the ability to tell jokes. Not true. Humor is much more than proficiency in joke-telling. It is a way of looking at the world, a skill that allows us to see more than one reality at a time because humor operates by manipulating psychological distance and perspective. Sometimes it allows us to feel closer to a person while at other times it allows us to Pull away.

By practicing the skill of humor we develop our innate ability to define any situation in more than one way. The more we exercise this skill, the more ways we have of looking at a situation and the more likely we are to find areas we can master, even within situations seemingly not under our command. For example, a traffic jam is not within our control, so yelling, screaming and getting angry is ineffectual. We can, however, take charge of our emotions and thoughts. By bringing humorous items with us to look at, listen to, or play with, we deflect the emotions, relieve the tension and help redirect our attention to that which we can govern. This is what we can do while we're stuck. Perhaps this is the time for relaxing music, jotting down some notes, or even planning that dinner next week. Since humor deals in shifting points of view and multiple realities, it allows us to ascribe different meanings for events in our lives, thereby rendering them less threatening. The traffic is not a cause for lateness, it's an opportunity for some personal time.

Here are six ways to help get you started: **PERSONAL TOP TEN:** Make a list of 10 stressors in your life. Who/What/When/Where do you feel frustrated, tight, angry? Notice how predictable the pressures are. You know, where they lurk in your life. That's good news because it means you can prepare yourself to deal with them.

Now compile a list of 10 people/places/things that bring a smile to Your heart when you think of them. Examples are: loved ones, a favorite comic strip, your dog, a preferred vacation spot. Collect tangible representations of the things that make you happy and have those around you. Use these joyful items to counteract the stressors. Stress management pioneer Hans Seeyle believed that "nothing erases unpleasant thoughts more effectively than concentration on Pleasant ones."

HUMOR ROLE MODEL: Find and display a picture of yourself smiling or laughing. Use it as a mirror.

PLEASURE HUNT: We all have wonderful things tucked away in closets, photo albums, and brown paper bags. These letters of appreciation, pictures of ourselves and our loved ones at various stages of life, professional achievement awards, and souvenirs of the highlights and adventures of our life are 'catalysts' for remoralization. Much of this 'stuff' is never looked at unless we move. Then we lug it from one place to another, commenting on how "I've got to go through this 'stuff' someday." Now's the time to get reacquainted with the wonderful things from our past.

SEARCH FOR THE HAPPINESS IN OTHERS: Make it your business to know what makes the people in your life happy. Your family, colleagues, office staff, and friends all enjoy something. Knowing what makes them laugh gives you an opportunity to plant seeds of pleasure in their lives. There is no greater morale builder than making others happy.

SET YOUR MENTAL CHANNEL TO THE HUMOR IN YOUR LIFE: Most of the laughter and joy in our life comes from everyday experiences. Slips of the tongue, puns, incongruities, overheard conversations, bureaucratic foul-ups, and silly personal mistakes make us laugh every day. By keeping track of what we find humorous, we can easily see how funny things occur all the time. Because we have not been trained to honor the humor in our lives, we generally allow it to come and go fleetingly. Hang on to it by writing down funny or incongruous incidents, cutting out cartoons and articles which make you laugh, collecting funny videos.

FIND A HUMOR BUDDY: Pick someone who enjoys your sense of humor and whose humor you appreciate. Be in touch with that person on a regular basis such as monthly. Either by phone, mail or computer, share the humorous events of your lives. This is a great opportunity to contact that friend you've lost touch with over the years. Here's a joke to share: President Clinton visits a nursing home in Washington, DC, as part of a tour to Publicize his health-care reform plans. He is eager to talk to people in order to sell his program, but to his dismay no one in the place seems the least bit interested in acknowledging his presence. Feeling slighted and a bit taken aback, he goes up to an elderly man in a wheelchair and says, "Excuse me sir. Do you know who I am?" With a puzzled look the old man looks up at Clinton. "No I don't," he replies, "but if you ask the nurse at the front desk, I'm sure she'll be able to help you."

The end result of all this skill-building will be a greater sense of balance and control in your life. As Thomas Szasz observed, "In the animal kingdom, the rule is eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, it is define or be defined." Through our remoralizing sense of humor we are truly in the position of defining ourselves.