

Gallows Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Paramedic Mini CAT – Fanshawe College

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Clinical Scenario:

Two paramedics responded code 4 to a 15-year-old female who had been shot at 1200h on a weekday night. On arrival to the scene, the paramedics found the young woman lying on the side of the road and discovered she had been shot in the abdomen. She struggled to tell them her boyfriend had shot her during an argument they had. During their attempts to stabilize her, the patient went unconscious and didn't regain consciousness again while in the care of the paramedics. While cleaning their stretcher at the hospital after transferring the patient, the one looked at the other with a grim smile and said, "that was a severe case of lead poisoning, wasn't it?" This elicited a small chuckle from the latter, and then the two continued the conversation by debating whether to get coffee or not.

PICO (Population – Intervention – Comparison – Outcome) Question:

Is the use of gallows humour an effective and appropriate coping mechanism for individuals in the field of paramedicine?

Search Strategy:

(emergency care OR emergency medical technicians) AND (humor OR wit)

Limits: 2005-2021, English language, full-text, peer-reviewed

Search results: 1140 EBSCOHost , 13456 (OneSearch)

Included for review: 4 articles were chosen for this mini-CAT based on their apparent relevance, and details provided in the abstract.

Title, author, year	Purpose & Approach	Credibility	Validity	Findings	Article Review
<p>An Introduction to black humour as a coping mechanism for student paramedics.</p> <p>Sarah Christopher</p> <p>Dec. 2015</p>	<p>To help student paramedics understand and prepare for the use of gallows humour in their future workplace.</p> <p>Qualitative Literature Review.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paramedic of 20+ years in the UK • Involved in 20+ publications regarding pre-hospital care • Employed by the University of Lincoln • Involved in research in Vocational Education, Pre-hospital Care and Emergency Medicine • First-class honours degree in Pre-Hospital Care • Master’s in Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checked sources were written by credible authors, were peer-reviewed, and not misconstrued • No declared conflict of interest, however, as a paramedic the author may be predisposed to supporting gallows humour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humour is an effective coping method due to tension release • Gallows humour is prominent among emergency service personnel • Gallows humour can be a culture shock to student paramedics • The more experience an individual has the more they employ gallows humour • Newer employees acquire gallows humour from older workers • Humour can also be beneficial to patients 	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No expressed speculation • Points supported by articles • Only one quantitative supporting reference <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses more on the history/use of gallows humour rather than its benefits • Subheadings did not flow well, scattered thought process • Referenced articles are regarding humour in general • Doesn’t address how to incorporate gallows humour into paramedicine curriculum
<p>Gallows Humor in Medicine,</p> <p>Katie Watson</p> <p>Sept. 2011</p>	<p>Discussion of whether medical professionals joking about their patients’ problems is always inappropriate</p> <p>Narrative Review of Topic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate Professor of Medial Social Sciences, Medical Education and Obstetrics and Gynecology • Core Faculty Member of the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Master’s Program at Northwestern • NYU School of Law graduate • Published author and recipient of the George Orwell Award for Distinguished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • References are not all peer-reviewed including fictional novels and New York Times articles • There are notes within the references that point out flaws and issues the author has with those references • Personal stories/narratives demonstrating gallows humour aren’t referenced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jokes can often prove a point better than argumentative logic through “rapid truthing” • Humour is used to provide a sense of control, forge connections, acknowledge difficult situations • Gallows humour doesn’t violate the professional standard of respecting patients • Certain antics are no longer allowed (ex. in school students are being taught to recognize the cadavers as former people) • The demographic of healthcare professionals is straying from straight white males possibly 	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flows very well • Persuasive and interesting; captures readers’ attention <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes personal stories that cannot be proven true due to anonymity • Constant hypothesizing: the use of “maybe,” “I think,” “perhaps,” and other such terms are used consistently • No quantitative references to prove any discussion topics • Opposing opinion not always recognized, nor defended

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		Contribution to Honesty and Clarity in Public Language		causing a decrease in gallows humour • Gallows humour is not directed at the patient but the situation,	
Expression of humour by emergency personnel involved in sudden deathwork Tricia Scott Nov. 2007	To analyze the use of humour as a primary coping mechanism by emergency personnel in sudden death work. Qualitative Literature Review.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD in Social Research from University of Durham • PhD focused on a medical sociology of sudden deathwork among emergency personnel • Research Fellow in Emergency Nursing • Registered Nurse • Registered Nurse Teacher • Involved in 35+ publications • Consultant at the Royal College of Nursing Institute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checked sources were written by credible authors, were peer-reviewed, and not misconstrued • Experience in the healthcare field may lead to some bias when discussing the use of gallows humour by medical professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gallows humour helps defuse situations, and forge solidarity and camaraderie • Delivery and audience are extremely important in determining the benefits to gallows humour • There are different types of humour in emergency personnel; censoring hilarity, cadaver rhetoric, ironic expression, vulture mentality, moral to the story, twist-in0the-tale, and quick-witted quips • Quick-witted quips are the most widely used form of gallows humour in emergency care 	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of humour types are provided and referenced • The benefits of general humour are described and backed up by multiple references • Future studies regarding humour and deathwork/tragedy are discussed in length • Attempts to answer why humour can be found and is necessary in deathwork are provided <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstract mentions a study done on 9 focus groups, however, the only reference to this is identifying the different types of humour in emergency personnel • Description of humour theories and constructs seem irrelevant to following discussion • Description of humour types are short and do not provide an explanation of their benefits
Whatever Gets You Through	To provide a review of the theoretical	Rowe: • Involved in one publication	• References include a collection of short	• Dark humor is used to vent feelings and increase tolerance at an emotional level	<p>Strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizes quantitative research to drive home points regarding

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<p>Today: An Examination of Cynical Humor Among Emergency Service Professionals</p> <p>Alison Rowe & Cheryl Regehr</p> <p>Sept. 2010</p>	<p>and research literature on black humor in emergency personnel, and to prove it is vital to the profession.</p> <p>Qualitative Literature Review.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Toronto Graduate • Co-president of the Faculty of Social Work Graduate Students' Association <p>Regehr:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vice-President and Provost for the University of Toronto • 20+ years of experience in emergency mental health • Former director of the Crisis Response Team at Pearson International Airport • Has published 6 books and 150+ scholarly articles 	<p>stories, a satirical novel, and an essay</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very few references relate directly to paramedics but rather are firefighters, police, or patients • Eight references are (co)written by Regehr • Most references are regarding humour opposed to gallows humour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark humor is used to elicit social support by promoting cohesion • Dark humor is used to emotionally distance oneself from a situation • Dark humour should not be used outside of emergency professions • Uncontained black humour should be considered professional misconduct • Black humour should be explained to young professionals but not encouraged 	<p>stress in emergency personnel occupations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breaks down dark humour benefits into four clear and well explained subheadings • References used add to the strength of arguments and are useful in tying them together <p>Weaknesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not present the “naysayer” side of the argument • Does not discuss alternative coping mechanisms • Very few examples of dark humor

Comments:

There is little to no quantitative research on the effectiveness of gallows humour as a coping method in the field of paramedicine. In fact, it is difficult to find any quantitative research done on the use of gallows humour in any high-stress occupation. Studies regarding gallows humour are qualitative in nature due to the difficulty of accurately measuring both the use of humour and how efficient that use is. The articles chosen were the best representation of the use of gallows humour by healthcare professionals in stressful situations.

Considerations:

When utilizing information outlined in the review, readers should note that some of the articles date as far back as 2005. The reason for their inclusion is that the information contained is still relevant and applicable to the field of paramedicine today as gallows humour remains prevalent. Another consideration is that the articles are not limited to only examining the use of gallows humour by paramedics in Canada but also humour in general across emergency services and healthcare workers globally. It should be noted that all these articles had the same consensus that gallows humor is an effective coping mechanism among individuals in high stress occupations as it can help lessen anxiety felt by individuals, allow them to regain some sense of control, develop social connections, and to maintain an aspect of humanity where there may appear to be none. There is a time and place, however, gallows humor should only be used among colleagues and outside of that group it can be considered unprofessional or disrespectful.

Clinical bottom line:

Gallows humour has existed for centuries among individuals facing extremely traumatic situations. Research thus far appears to indicate that its use is not for the objective dismissal of situations but rather subjectively diminishing them to the point that the event is no longer emotionally overwhelming. There is a need for research to be done more specifically on the use of gallows humor only in paramedicine to eliminate any potential discrepancies from different occupations. Finally, further quantitative studies are required to numerically prove these findings as well as detail to what extent gallows humour is effective as a coping mechanism.

References

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