

A LINE ON LIFE

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"What's So Funny?"

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All of us have laughed, but we don't all laugh at the same things. What makes things seem funny to us? Why do some people see some things as funny, but others get upset about them?



First, one factor that affects our perception of what is humorous is **incongruity**. The more incongruous something is — the more "out of place" it is for a particular situation — the more likely we are to laugh at it. Here are some examples from "elephant jokes" that used to be popular over a decade ago.

Q. "Why
don't we see

many elephants in college?"

A. "So few of them graduate from high school."

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Q. "How can you tell that there is an elephant in the bathtub with you?"

A. "You can smell the peanuts on his breath."

The major component in these jokes is incongruity. If something is completely unexpected in a particular situation, it prompts laughter. This is why we laugh when someone takes a prat-fall, even though we may be concerned that the person might have been hurt. (Haven't you ever tried to restrain your laughter when someone has some type of minor accident — and then apologized to them for laughing?)

In contrast, **Sigmund Freud** thought that laughter is caused when there is a buildup of anxiety — and then this anxiety is *suddenly released*. According to Freud, the anxiety is caused by forbidden feelings. Usually these feelings are related to such things as anger toward authority figures — parents, police, God — along with the fear of retaliation for this anger. The anxiety could also be generated by the expression of forbidden wishes — usually sexual. During the joke, the anxiety builds. If this anxiety is suddenly released by the punch line, you laugh at the joke. Here are some examples.

A little boy is rushing to Sunday school, worried that he might be late. As he is crossing the street, he looks up and pleads, "God, please don't let me be late."

Immediately after this statement, he trips over the curb. Looking up again, he complains, "Well, you didn't have to push!"

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A little, old, retired man is vacationing for the first time in Florida. He is relaxing on the beach in the sunshine. Along comes an attractive young woman in a skimpy bikini. She says to him, "I'm selling. Are you buying?" He decides to buy. Several weeks later, back

in his home town, he finds out that he has contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STD). He seeks medical help and is cured.

The following year, he takes another vacation in Florida, and he finds himself relaxing on the same beach. Oddly enough, the same girl happens to walk by and ask him the same question, *"I'm selling. Are you buying?"* To this, the old man replies, *"What are you selling this time — cancer?"*

In both cases, some anxiety is generated, but — if you found the jokes humorous — the anxiety was quickly released by the punch line. However, in some people, the anxiety might not be released. These people might be offended by these jokes. In fact, this was much more likely to be true of what used to be called **"sick jokes."**

A little boy is repeatedly asking his mother, *"Kin I play with Grandpa today? Kin I play with Grandpa today?"* His mother repeatedly refuses to let him play with his grandfather. Finally, the boy asks, *"Why can't I play with Grandpa?"* His mother answers, *"Because it will be the third time we've dug him up this week."*

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A group of children outside of Johnny's house call for him to come out and play baseball with them. Finally, Johnny's mother comes to the door and says, *"You know Johnny can't play baseball. He has no arms or legs."* To this, one of the group replies, *"That's okay. We just want him to play third base."*

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A young child repeatedly asks her father, *"Dad, are vampires real? Are they, huh?"* After ignoring her questions for a time, the father finally blurts out, *"Just shut up and drink your blood!"*

"Sick jokes" are given that name, because they seem to treat dreaded topics like death and disability very lightly. Because of the obvious incongruity, many of us still might laugh at these jokes. Even so, we may feel a little guilty for laughing about such serious topics. Some people — especially those closely affected by death or disability — may not have their anxiety reduced. They will not find these jokes funny. In fact, they will be very upset by these jokes. Even the Sunday school joke might not be funny to those who are strongly concerned about their religious beliefs. The STD joke is likely to seem tasteless and depressing to someone who deals closely with AIDS.

You are more likely to appreciate the humor, if the joke is not *"on you."*

People are especially upset, if they are the *"butt"* of the joke. The *"Polish jokes"* that used to be popular were very funny — except if you were Polish. Laughter can be very positive, if nobody thinks that *"the joke is on them."* For example, here is a joke about academic degrees.

Most of us know what *"BS"* signifies. The *"MS"* degree stands for *"More of the Same,"* and *"Ph.D."* is short for *"Piled Higher and Deeper."*

(What's so funny about that?)
