"Seriously Funny": The Role of Humor in Illness Narratives

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Objective

- Health communication research argues that sharing narratives about severe illness can provide five functions for narrators and audiences (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003).
- **Surprise liberation theory (SLT)**: humor occurs when people experience a pleasurable deviation from pre-existing expectations (DuPre, 1998), making difficult experiences more palatable
- **RQ**: How is humor used across the five narrative functions in narratives about severe illness?

Methods

- We conducted a thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) of three memoirs written by comedians diagnosed with gynecological cancers:
  - *It's Always Something* (1989) by Gilda Radner
  - *God Said, "Ha!"* (1997) by Julia Sweeney
  - *Cancer Schmancer* (2000) by Fran Drescher
- We classified humorous instances according to the narrative function they demonstrated

Analysis

- **In each memoir, humor was present across all five functions of narrative, seen most frequently in the forms of irony and absurdism**
  - **Irony** helps narrators cope with the loss or rebuilding of their identity
  - **Absurdism** helps narrators make sense of a situation as well as regain agency

Five Functions of Narrative

Sensemaking: "And I was thinking, why twelve? Because...They're eggs?" (Sweeney 142)
Losing and/or Reshaping Identity: "My cancer seemed like an afterthought, an embarrassment, really…I felt like someone complaining about their cough at a funeral" (Sweeney 138)
Regaining Agency: "Finally I said, "Forget it! I'd rather have a fat ass and feel good." (Drescher 191)
Making/Justifying Decisions: "Did he realize my *kishkas* felt like they were about to drop out of me? Come on already, when is enough enough?" (Drescher 172)
Building Community: "When he finished his speech I yelled across the room, "Make that thirty-seven dinner invitations!" (Radner 124).

Humor Types

- **Irony:** "Everything was fuckin' normal but me!" (Drescher 31)
- **Absurdism**: "I felt like I was on an endless ferris wheel with someone's fist up my butt" (Radner 45)

Skill: Critical Thinking

- Closely read, analyzed, and compared three distinct stories
- Found common themes and used existing literature to categorize findings

Conclusions

- Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness often causes major disruptions to one's life; sharing humorous narratives can help narrators sensemake, regain agency, recharacterize identity, make decisions, and gain/critique social support
- Sharing humorous stories about severe illnesses can not only help patients better understand their symptoms but also eliminate stigma
- Humor provides palatable and translatable calls to action for women to take care of their health and continue to advocate for themselves if something feels wrong
- Humor narratives help those with severe illnesses communicate about sensitive topics and define themselves as individuals or within a larger community.

References