

When life deals a poor hand, laugh  
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You wouldn't think Tucsonan David Jacobson has a lot to laugh about.

He was nearly crippled by arthritis at age 22, has spent the nearly three decades since then in varying levels of physical pain and works as a social worker in an emergency room.

But Jacobson, 49, doesn't waste his energy whimpering. He works hard at the serious endeavor of seeing the funny side of life. He has self-published the book "The 7 1/2 Habits of Highly Humorous People."

"I think everybody has problems with living, and whether it's emotional or physical pain that we're dealing with, we all need ways to cope with it. . . . I'm saying, 'Here's how I cope with it and you can use this coping mechanism, too,' " Jacobson said. The book is being sold through online book dealers, including Amazon.com. Jacobson has received orders from around the world, including a request for 200 copies from a Nigerian bookstore. (I just hope it's not run by a Nigerian prince. That never turns out well.)

Jacobson learned about the healing power of laughter early in life, which led him to his first habit of treating humor as a necessity, not a luxury. His father died when Jacobson was 8. All the students in Jacobson's third-grade class wrote sympathy cards that Jacobson's family read together, he recalled in his book. One child wrote, "Don't be sad. I would be sad too if my fat dad died."

Jacobson wrote that it was the first laugh the family had together since his father's death.

Throughout his teens, Jacobson was an exceptional wrestler. As a young adult, he earned a second-degree brown belt in judo and thought he might have an Olympic career in his future.

Instead, he was stricken with rheumatic fever at age 22, followed by a diagnosis of psoriatic arthritis, which affects both skin and joints. The arthritis did most of its damage in the first year, fusing or swelling joints in Jacobson's spine, knees and ankles. Lacking even the strength to eat, he dropped from 136 to 112 pounds.

He went home to his mother in a wheelchair but he was determined not to stay in one.

As he started to try to walk again, Jacobson retained his sense of humor.

He'd "race" his mother to answer the telephone, "dragging myself like Igor, the knuckles of my right hand touching the floor, drooling, tongue out and hobbling toward the phone."

The silliness helped keep both their spirits high during one of the most difficult periods of his life. Jacobson believes his attitude is what keeps him working as a productive member of society instead of at home in bed.

Over the years, Jacobson has discovered if he can giggle for a good 10 minutes, perhaps while watching a funny movie or reading a Dave Barry book, he can get two hours of pain-free sleep.

As a social worker at University Medical Center, Jacobson's job has many bleak moments. He may be there to help tell someone their loved one has died. He's there for psychiatric patients and sexual assault and child abuse cases.

Those are obvious situations in which humor is inappropriate, he said. But at all other times, it's his favorite prescription.

One day, a 90-year-old patient asked Jacobson if he could send in a social worker with large breasts instead. Jacobson left the room and returned minutes later with cloth stuffed in his shirt to give him a bodacious chest. "This is the best I can do," he told the patient.

Jacobson said the most important of the habits is the "half-habit" of changing negative thoughts to positive ones. It's only a half-habit, because nobody can be positive all the time, he explained.

Examples of the conversion include, for example, changing the thought, "My body looks gross" to, "Compared to what I'll look like in 40 years, I don't look too bad."

Or if you think, "Nobody likes me," replace that sentiment with, "I haven't met everyone yet. There's still hope."

OK, I know this is about as controversial as saying I like babies or apple pie, but I'm with Jacobson on this one.

It seems to me that Americans spend too much energy criticizing people with whom they disagree, putting people down for their human foibles and complaining about the ways of the world.

Frankly, that's a job for professionals such as me. I get paid to do it. The rest of you with real jobs should lighten up and laugh a little more. [Back to media page](#) [Mainpage](#)