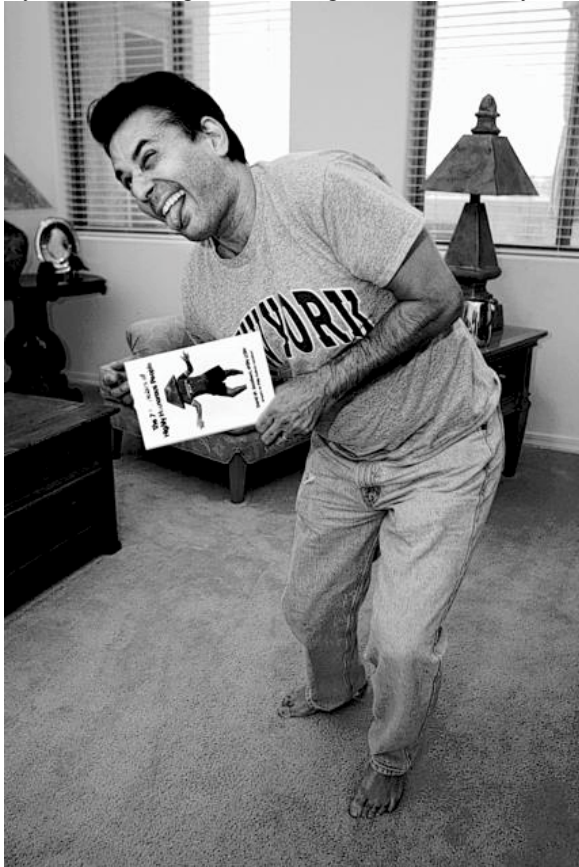


Despite tough life, he wrote the book on humor

By Jeff Commings Tucson Region Arizona Daily Star



David Jacobson shows how he walked when his body was seriously racked by arthritis — a walk that long ago led him and his mother toward an appreciation of the value of humor.
Benjie Sanders / Arizona Daily Star

A bout of rheumatic fever could have ended David Jacobson's reason for living. The illness, contracted while on a visit to Israel, caused his bones and joints to fuse together, resulting in a severe case of arthritis that confined him to a wheelchair at 22 years old, ending a longtime dream of winning Olympic gold in judo. It was on the road to recovery that Jacobson found a gift for humor that would define a future career. Though he was staying at his mother's house, Jacobson was determined

to live an independent life, and it started by taking slow but deliberate steps toward the phone one day.

"I kind of dragged myself to the phone, and she started laughing, and I actually picked up the phone because I distracted her," Jacobson said. "At that moment, I was in a painful body, but I was having fun, and she was having fun, and it was the first laugh we had together."

Jacobson, now 49, is out of the wheelchair, although the arthritis is still evident in a few crooked fingers. He has taken his life lessons on the road as a speaker, and he works at University Medical Center as a social worker.

Twenty-seven years after he took those first funny steps, Jacobson has compiled all the humor advice he's learned over the years into a self-published book: "The 7 1/2 Habits of Highly Humorous People." The 102-page book lists eight ways to use humor to live a more wholesome and fulfilled life. (More on that "half" habit later.)

Although the book is about humor, Jacobson said it's balanced with serious and funny tales.

"It's like laughing and learning at the same time," he said.

Jacobson talked recently about the philosophy behind his book and how humor can be found even in one of the most depressing rooms at UMC.

Q: Why 7 1/2 habits?

A: The half habit is probably the most important one. It's about changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts. No one can do that 100 percent of the time. It's impossible, so the premise is if you can change half your negative thoughts to positive, you'll be twice as healthy and twice as happy. Humor can be powerful and life-transforming, and the way that happens is by changing your view and humor.

Q: Basically, it's just about going through life thinking positively.

A: Exactly. If you have to go through life with any kind of pain — and if you're a human being, you're going to, whether it's emotional, physical, whatever — you might as well make the best of it and improve the quality of life while we're doing it.

Q: How did you come up with seven habits?

A: I had to think about what I do on a daily basis and think about the habits that may be different from others that are average normal things that anyone can do but most people don't do. Like the idea of making humor a necessity rather than a luxury. Most people hear a funny joke and chuckle, but you don't seek it out.

Q: Habit six uses the word "humorgy." What does that mean?

A: Humorgy is using what I call the humor force. You know about "Star Wars" and the Force? I think there's a humor force, too. When people are laughing and smiling, there's a connection between them. Think about your friends. They're not people you're bored with all the time. You have fun with those people, and that's why you're connected. That's humorgy.

Q: On a given day, how many of these habits do you think you use?

A: I've used humor as a necessity today. In terms of the half habit, I could have been stressed-out about you not showing up today. That would be a negative thought. A positive thought is knowing you'll be here, so I'll just sit down and wait for you to show up.

With self-effacing humor, I poke fun at myself a lot about the arthritis.

I do keep my eyes open for humorous situations, or I create them, but I haven't done that yet today.

In terms of using the power of humor and its influence on myself and others, I stopped by the front desk (at UMC to talk to the receptionist), and we just laughed a little bit and talked.

I haven't used my humorous imagination to improve my communication, but humor is a great communication tool.

I've already explained about using your humor spirit, which is what I do. And finally, acting like a highly humorous person. The more you act at something, the more it becomes a habit. The final habit is reinforcing the other six habits.

Q: Are people who have various physical ailments more humorous than "normal" people?

A: There are some people who, no matter what they get, they're going to be a jerk. So you can be a jerk with arthritis or cancer or any other disease. But what it (humor) has

done for many people is change their lives. If someone's experienced a more traumatic life, they're able to appreciate humor more. Whether they choose to appreciate it or not is a different story.

Q: What do you do at UMC?

A: I'm an emergency room social worker, and that involves being there when the doctors tell someone that their child didn't survive. I also handle domestic violence and rape cases, all the non-fun stuff, and not usually the times you use humor. But there's a lot of humor in the air for those non-traumatic ones. There's only maybe 10, 20 percent of the cases that are serious, and the other 80 percent are in the ER for a different reason that you can joke and laugh with, to try to make the experience a little lighter for them.