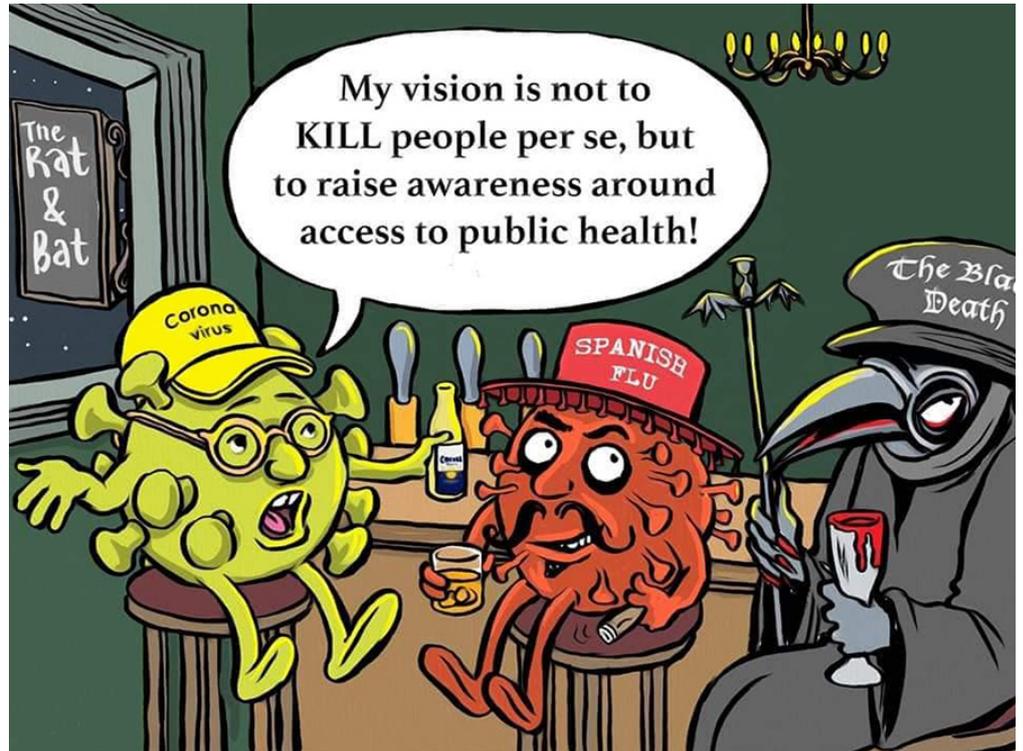


# A man with a cough walks into an empty bar

Is it wrong to make jokes during a crisis? The pandemic – like many tragic and difficult situations throughout the centuries – has brought fear, but also inspired a tidal wave of humour.



**Contagious humour:** In 1962, a Tanzanian school closed when pupils could not stop laughing.

For the British soldiers on the **Western Front**, it had been a miserable day. Their German enemies had been shelling them continually; the weather was cold and wet; the food rations were disgusting, and the trenches were alive with rats.

But down in his **dugout**, with only a weak light to read by, a **Tommy** was engrossed in a makeshift newspaper, and shaking with laughter.

The paper, the **Wipers Times**, took its title from the soldiers' mispronunciation of Ypres, a Belgian town largely demolished in one of WW1's fiercest battles. Produced on an abandoned printing press, it was full of jokes, from spoof advertisements to comic verse, along with an hour-by-hour weather forecast ("5 to 1 Mist; 11 to 2 East Wind or Frost, 8 to 1 **Chlorine**").

A travel advert recommended staying at the "Hotel des **Ramparts**"; a property ad for the "**Salient Estate**" boasted of excellent shooting and "underground residences ready for habitation".

There seems to be no situation, however dire, in which humans cannot find something funny. **Evelyn Waugh** wrote his

hilarious novel **Put Out More Flags** in the middle of World War Two, making fun of civilians' reaction to the crisis. Soldiers sang comic songs, such as **We're Going To Hang Out the Washing, on the Siegfried Line**.

Brian Keenan, an academic taken hostage in Beirut during the **Lebanese civil war**, wrote of sharing a cell with the journalist John McCarthy. "We were convinced by the conditions we were kept in and the life we managed to lead that if there was a God, that God was above all a comedian. In humour, sometimes hysterical, sometimes calculated, often childish, life was returning to us."

The coronavirus pandemic has already produced many jokes and memes – even in the world's worst affected country, Italy.

One is a link to a new app which is supposed to work out whether you are allowed to go out today, according to which area of the lockdown you live in – but it always comes up with the same answer: an enormous "NO".

An old song by the American satirist Tom Lehrer about a contagious disease is also proving very popular on social media. "I got it from Agnes," it goes. "She got it from

Jim. We all agree it must have been...Louise who gave it to him..."

Is it wrong to make jokes during a crisis?

## Gallows humour

Some say that joking in a national emergency is unhelpful and in bad taste. Many Italians are making jokes about all the official forms generated by the pandemic, but those forms are vital to their wellbeing. It is our duty to take the situation seriously, and being funny about it undermines that. It is also deeply offensive to people who are anxious and frightened – or have lost loved ones.

Others argue that behaving this way is part of human nature. Our ability to contemplate death, and joke about it, is one of the most remarkable things about us. Speeches at funerals often include funny stories, reflecting the dead person's character – that does not mean that we love them less. If we took crises entirely seriously, we would be so depressed that we would not be able to function.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Are you telling or sharing jokes about the pandemic?
2. "I met a man who was waiting for a head transplant. He's changed his mind now." Is that disgusting or funny?

## Q & A

### Q: What do we know?

A: Some of the greatest writers in history have believed tragedy and comedy to be two sides of the same coin. Shakespeare was one. In *Henry V*, he mixes serious battle scenes with comic discussions between soldiers; in *Macbeth*, he brings on a comic porter immediately after the bloody murder of King Duncan. When Mercutio is fatally wounded in *Romeo and Juliet*, he jokes that tomorrow he will be "a grave man".

### Q: What do we not know?

A: How to measure the effect of humour on mental health. Psychologists recognise that it can be used to relieve stress and make us more optimistic. They include it in a set of qualities they call "transcendence", which help us connect to the world and give meaning to life. Research has also shown that people who laugh when discussing a dead loved one are better able to deal with their grief.

## ACTIVITIES

1. Make your own joke book. Put two sheets of paper together, fold them twice, then cut the edges so that you have 16 pages. Use a piece of cardboard (like from an empty cereal box) to make a cover; hold the pages together with sellotape, staples, or even sew them in. Write a joke on each page and draw a picture to illustrate it. Then, design the cover. Brilliant!
2. Write a five-minute comedy routine about being stuck in a house. Learn it by heart and then perform it for your household one evening.

## WORD WATCH

**Western Front** – The area which experienced most of the fighting in WW1, stretching from the coast of Belgium across northern France.

**Dugout** – Dugouts were created in the sides of the trenches or deeper underground. The size of dugouts varied a great deal and sometimes could house over 10 men.

**Tommy** – A nickname for a British soldier.

**Chlorine** – A chemical which was used in WW1 to make gas.

**Ramparts** – A defensive wall.

**Salient** – A bulge in a line of attack or defence.

**Evelyn Waugh** – An English author (1903-1966) whose best-known novels include *Decline and Fall*, *Scoop*, and *Brideshead Revisited*.

**Siegfried Line** – A German line of defensive fortifications 400 miles long, built in the 1930s. It was named after a mythological hero.

**Lebanese civil war** – A Middle Eastern conflict lasting from 1975 to 1990. Lebanon's capital, Beirut, was the focus of much of the fighting.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"Laughter need not be cut out of anything, since it improves everything."

James Thurber (1894-1961), American humourist

What do you think?

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