

Gratitudes & Platitudes

Finding effective coping strategies

By Katelyn Carey, BSN, RN

What is the difference between a silver lining and a platitude?

Easy. A silver lining is a positive perspective on your situation that you come up with. A platitude is one that someone else comes up with.

Ok, maybe this is a simplification. But oftentimes during stress we hear things from people (who are trying to help) say things that do not sound helpful to us. You are diagnosed with cancer, and someone says “at least they caught it early”. That one isn’t too bad. But now let’s say you’re facing a mastectomy and someone comes up with the classic “well, now you don’t have to worry that your breasts will ever sag!”. I’ve heard them. Some words can be almost unbearably hard to hear.

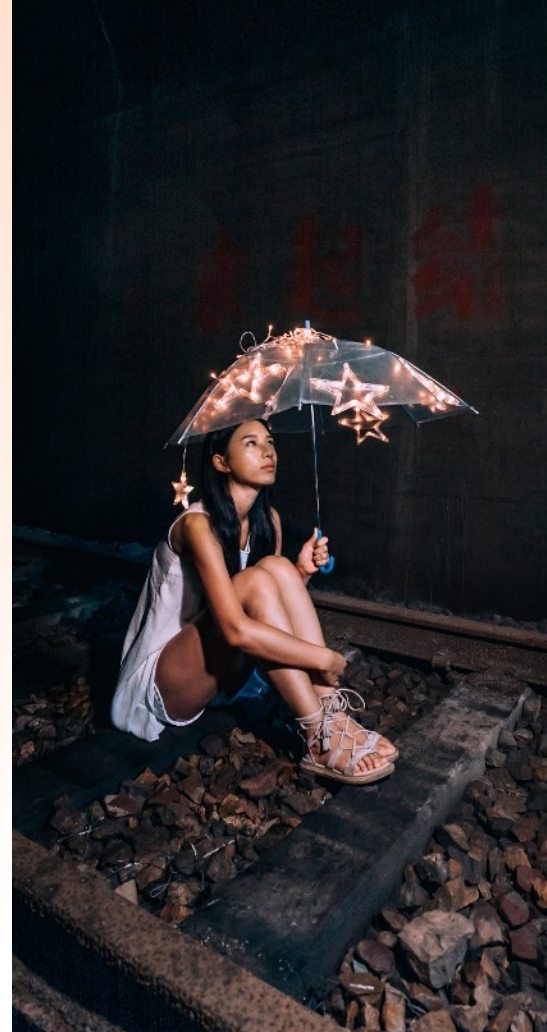
But the funny part is, I’ve also said similar things to myself. *It’s fine if I say it.*

When I say it, I’m being positive. When someone else says it, sometimes it just feels insensitive, even though that other person is undoubtedly

trying to help. And they’re not wrong. Finding a positive side to a stressful situation *is* incredibly helpful. I’m going to share two ways that we can help ourselves find positivity in stressful moments- *gratitude, and irreverence.*

Finding humor in a dark situation is not just about our need to laugh. Have you ever had someone startle you with a statement so badly that your brain just stuttered to a stop and hit replay? Here’s an example: I had a beta fish as an office pet. Smeep was a surprisingly social fish; I was taken aback by how much I adored him. He would always come over to say hi when I sat down. Until...one day. I came into the office and he didn’t swim over to say hi. It took me a minute to find him- a dried out fish corpse on the counter. I felt a mix of horror, guilt, and grief.

I didn’t want to spend the whole day crying, and I knew people wouldn’t totally get the depth of my sadness. *I felt like their awkwardness (or their understanding) over what to say when I told them would make my*



emotions harder to deal with. So I tearfully told everyone that Smeep had committed suicide over the weekend. Weirdly, their double takes gave us all an excuse to both laugh and sympathize as I told them I blamed myself for the flying fish poster I’d put up over his tank that had obviously given him ideas.

Sometimes a bizarrely humorous view of things helps us to process. Sometimes it pushes away the intensity of our emotions in the moment long enough to let us catch our breaths and process from a less traumatized space. I am a huge fan of irreverence- which translates as an intentional lack of respect for things that are normally taken seriously. Sometimes we just need a little space away from the intensity of

seriously. Sometimes we just need a little space away from the intensity of our emotions. Irreverence and humor are acceptable tools to use on occasion, and sometimes they can even help others to respond more comfortably to our feelings.

Finding a way to personalize your struggle with something that makes you smile or that distances you slightly from the more painful parts of things can be a superpower.

Small Coping Strategies

1. Be ok with being irreverent. Humor is a great coping skill
2. Call out the things in your life you are grateful for, this helps to counter the brain's natural inclination towards negativity
3. Make a list of the things that re-fuel you, then take the time to do them
4. Accept help from others, you don't always have to be the strong one

The other tactic I want to talk about is the true heavy hitter as a coping strategy. It's also easy to use. The number one thing you can do to counteract the human brain's natural negativity bias is to *purposefully recognize the things that are going well* in your life; maybe that's your support network, maybe that's your job, maybe that's living in an age where treatment of disease is possible.

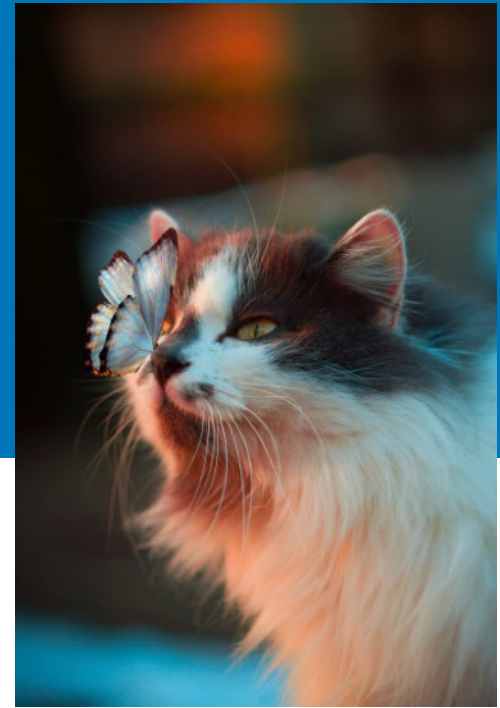
A true heavy-bitter for coping is the simple recognition of the things in your life that are going well...

One simple exercise has been shown incredibly effective over and over again in research studies (including one of the biggest studies, done on doctors by Duke University). That exercise is:

Call out 3 things you are grateful for every day.

That's it. Maybe you say them out loud or to yourself at dinner. Maybe you say them at night before going to bed. Maybe you journal them on a daily basis. But the more you look for positive things, the more you *train your brain to increase the importance of those positive moments*. Your brain will then start to look for those positive moments even without your conscious effort. This helps to even the playing field against our naturally negative tendencies. As an extra bonus, it also helps to boost our immune systems and decrease stress hormones.

Try it. A thousand doctors aren't wrong on this one.



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Writer Katelyn Carey is a nurse educator and author who specializes in trauma-based communication and education. Using cognitive science and 20 years experience in ER, Hospice, and acute care, Katelyn teaches communication strategies and recovery tools that are research based and trauma informed.

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