

Plague Humor Is Good for You

My older sister took great pleasure in telling a younger-me the dark history behind the nursery rhyme, “Ring-around-the-Rosies.” She told me that the cheerful tune was written about the Black Death: the “pocket full of posies,” refers to small bouquets of sweet-smelling herbs the healthy would carry close to their noses in order to protect themselves from foul-smelling and “contaminated” air; the “falling down” represents death, as is parodied by the accompanying action; and the “ashes” sung about are ashes of *that* sort.

Needless to say, this isn’t a pleasant backstory ([nor an accurate one](#)). In high school, however, I witnessed something which made it incredibly believable. During a school camping trip, at the height of the Ebola crisis, I watched a group of grade-schoolers play a game of their own development: Ebola-tag. Much like a version of tag (given many different names, though I called it ‘blob-tag’), any tagged child would “catch Ebola” and also be “it,” linking arms with their infector.

The children playing didn’t see anything wrong with their game. The parents watching didn’t stop them. At a time when every news agency was sharing the most recent and concerning statistic, it was a small relief to see Ebola momentarily sanitized by children’s laughter.

As the current Covid-19 pandemic became such, I wondered if my youngest brother would be playing similar games, even as I prepared to return from college. He’s empathetic and sweet – but also 10. When I got back, he wasn’t conforming to the pattern; and so, I forgot my curiosity.

That curiosity was soon unexpectedly satisfied, however: I learned that a friend’s siblings had begun playing their own coronavirus tag! The game revolved around the etymology of the virus, which was [named for](#) its spiky, crown-like protein

protuberances, and their version of tag was one in which the person who was “it” wore a crown, which they would pass off to those they tagged.

Nor is this phenomenon, which I will simply term the “Ring-around-the-Rosies Phenomenon,” unique to children. Adults are engaging in it too, albeit not necessarily in games or play-acting. Perhaps you’ve heard the [viral remix](#) of Cardi B’s coronavirus rant. Or heard one of the specially compiled quarantine [playlists](#). And it would take a Herculean effort to avoid the countless pandemic [memes](#) and [jokes](#) adults and young adults are making en masse.

Playful responses to this sort of tragedy, aren’t new – there were jokes even in 1918 about the [Spanish Flu](#). This sort of black humor [isn’t unhealthy](#). Many Americans are panicking about the pandemic (as evidenced by [empty toilet paper shelves](#) across the nation) and many, also, are [ignoring](#) it. The cultural saturation furthered by playful coronavirus references threatens the security of deniers, but may also comfort panickers.

In a study published in 2011, Stanford psychologists determined that black humor necessitates a [change in perspective](#) towards the negative reality presented. That is, in order for somebody to be able to really get a dark joke, one first must acknowledge the reality being referenced and then be able to look at that reality in a new or unusual manner. For this reason, allowing oneself to laugh at the pandemic is an acceptable response and, I think, healthy. By adopting a playful approach towards coronavirus, deniers are forced to face the reality of the crisis in an easy-to-swallow manner that may even slip past defenses, and worriers are given a means to regulate their anxiety towards the slew of concerns raised by COVID-19.

In many ways, the current pandemic is concerning and unprecedented – so let’s approach the situation in the age-

old, human way: by laughing. Preferably from inside our homes. Who knows, perhaps my future children will play “Protein-around-the-RNA” and not believe me when I tell them what the story is behind the line that “toilet paper has gone away.”

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This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).


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