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Issue

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Issue

Page

GO

Volume 14, Issue 1

ISSUES

☐ VOLUME 31 (2018)

Issue 2 (May 2018) , pp. 167-449
Special Issue: Festsch...

Issue 1 (Feb 2018) , pp. 1-165

☐ VOLUME 30 (2017)

Issue 4 (Oct 2017) , pp. 359-470

Issue 3 (Aug 2017) , pp. 261-357

Issue 2 (May 2017) , pp. 147-260

Issue 1 (Feb 2017) , pp. 1-146

☐ VOLUME 29 (2016)

Issue 4 (Oct 2016) , pp. 483-645

Issue 3 (Aug 2016) , pp. 337-481

Issue 2 (May 2016) , pp. 153-336
Special Issue: Comedy ...

Issue 1 (Feb 2016) , pp. 1-151

[< Previous Article](#) [Next Article >](#)

Humor as a coping mechanism: Lessons from POWs

Linda D Henman

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Abstract

The repatriated Vietnam prisoners of war are suffering almost no mental illness, and the

effective use of humor seems to be one of the reasons for their health. The literature by and about prisoners of war from several recent wars indicates prisoners often found humor to be an effective coping mechanism, a way of fighting back and taking control. By defining humor as an element of communication and by thinking of resilience as a communication phenomenon, the links between humor and resilience become more apparent. This was a qualitative study that consisted of interviewing approximately 50 Vietnam POWs in unstructured interviews and 12 Vietnam POWs in a structured, topical format. Chronicling the subjective accounts of these men and framing them as communication allowed an examination of the results. Knowing that human connection contributed to the survival and resilience of these men implies that resilience is contagious, as humor seems to be. Through the creation of humor in a well-defined system of social support, these fiercely independent men learned to rely on their own power and to draw a sense of mastery from each other.

About the article

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