The Role of Memes in Teen Culture

Memes can provide an opening for parents to talk to adolescents about serious issues like coronavirus or the possibility of war.

Stuart Bradford

By Jennifer L.W. Fink

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How do you prepare for the coronavirus?

By cutting up a few limes.

That's the message conveyed by a popular internet meme that shows a pair of hands slicing limes. The image and caption — "Me, preparing for the coronavirus" — are a bit subversive: While public health officials worldwide are scrambling to determine how to best treat and contain the virus that has killed hundreds, the meme plays on the name of the beer brand Corona, and suggests there's no real need to worry.

Internet memes use images to celebrate, mock or satirize current events and popular culture, and they have become a defining part of how teenagers communicate in the digital world. The recent rise of memes seeming to make light of the Wuhan virus or international tensions offer a glimpse into how teenagers learn about and process world events. Today's tweens and teens get their news via memes on Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, while parents, teachers and grandparents still largely rely on news reports and Facebook and Twitter posts.

As a result, there's a generational gap between how I learn about and perceive the news, and how my teenage sons learn about and react to the same events. When I learned (on Facebook) that an American drone attack killed Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the powerful Iranian commander, my stomach dropped. Having been married to a Marine deployed in the gulf war in the 1990s, I know that war is no joke.

Our sons came home from school that day laughing at World War III memes claiming their generation is ready for war because they've been "training" in the video games Fortnite and Call of Duty.

My first impulse was to lecture my sons about the seriousness of war. But lectures almost never change teenagers' behavior, so I dug deep into meme culture instead. What I found: Kids use memes to express and channel all kinds of emotions, including fear.

Many are harmless but some coronavirus memes risk spreading both misinformation and racist attitudes.

Here are some ways parents can use memes to connect with teenagers and provide essential context.

Recognize Humor as a Coping Strategy

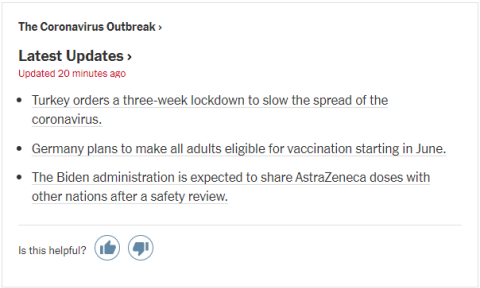
Shortly after the drone strike in the Middle East, "my 14-year-old jokingly said that Iran should just blow up the U.S.A. and get it over with already," said Tanya Brown, who lives in Ontario, Canada. "His comment caught me so off guard that it made me cry right then and there in front of him."

She added: "We've raised our boys to be kind and empathetic to others, so when my son made such a hurtful comment, it really made me sad and angry."

Making light of a deadly virus or the prospect of war may seem crass or thoughtless, but humor is often a way of coping with something we cannot control, whether it is a comedian joking about having cancer or the "Saturday Night Live" cast lampooning the Trump administration.

Listen and Provide Context

"Ask open-ended questions," said Carla Marie Manly, a clinical psychologist in Sonoma County, Calif. Ask where they first saw the meme, what they think about it and what their friends are saying. Offer to fill in facts on the virus or other current events.



Remember that most adolescents do not have personal experience with life-or-death experiences. "Even as adults, we can get something cognitively, but not really understand it until we experience it," Dr. Manly said.

My four boys, ages 14, 16, 19 and 22, were born years after their father left the Marines and don't know what it's like to have a loved one deployed. They don't know what it's like to live through a pandemic.

According to Dr. Manly, sharing personal stories may be one way to help children understand the impact of international conflict and emerging health threats on individuals and families.

Teach Digital Citizenship

Today's teens are definitely more tech-savvy than previous generations, but they need adults to help them develop a personal

code of ethics to guide their actions both on- and offline. Memes present an opportunity to discuss your family's definition of healthy and unhealthy behavior. You can look at images together and point out exactly which ones you think go too far and why.

"Talk about your thoughts, feelings and values, and use that as a springboard to let the kids talk about their thoughts and feelings," said Jo Langford, a Portland-based therapist who teaches parents and teens about technology. "You also want to give kids really clear boundaries" — outlining for your kids what is and is not O.K. according to your family values — "so they can make appropriate judgment calls when they're out in the world."

Parents should also remind their children that "memes could be made by anyone, including foreign governments and those who want to spread rumors and dissension in society," said Andrew Selepak, a media professor at the University of Florida. It's also a chance to point out that fraudulent information may be spread in other forms, as happened with text messages that appeared to be sent by the Army telling the recipients they were being drafted. The Army said those were fake. Similarly, memes can spread false information about the coronavirus, often with anti-Asian racist messages — an opportunity to remind teenagers about the harm in using slurs.

It's O.K. to Show Emotions

Boys, especially, feel a lot of societal pressure to appear strong, stoic and unconcerned. In her new book "Boys & Sex," Peggy Orenstein writes that boys often use the word "hilarious" as "a safe haven; a default position when something is inappropriate, confusing, upsetting, depressing, unnerving, or horrifying … 'hilarious' offers distance, allowing them to subvert a more compassionate response that could be read as weak, overly sensitive, or otherwise unmasculine."

A response like Ms. Brown's tearful outburst after her son's insensitive comments can be a way to "break through that mask of bravado," Dr. Manly said. In fact, Ms. Brown said that she and her son then talked at length about war and why some people might find his comments hurtful.

Of course, children should never feel responsible for an adult's behavior. As a parent, it's important that you take time to process your feelings of grief, confusion, anger and being overwhelmed, so that you're not "oozing unprocessed, undigested personal material out to your children," Dr. Manly said.

But don't be scared to express emotion, even (or maybe especially) if your child seems stone-faced. Dr. Manly frequently works with veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder; some have suffered traumatic brain injury. At first, many convey horrific stories with a flat affect because absolute control of emotions is essential for survival on the battlefield.

"There are times they're not able to cry, and I feel my eyes watering," Dr. Manly said. "I'll say something like, 'Excuse me, that's really hard to hear. Wow. Let me grab a tissue.' By modeling, I teach them. They see an appropriate emotional response without being preached at." Eventually that may help them begin to express their suppressed emotions.

If your teenager says something like, "Maybe we should just get it over with now, before we develop even deadlier weapons" or "I *want* to get the coronavirus" — both things my 16-year-old has said to me — try saying something like, "That is really scary for me. Can I give you a hug?" Dr. Manly said. Verbalizing your fear gives kids permission to do the same.

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