



Laughing Through Life!

Want to live longer? Have better health? Deal more effectively with a long-term or critical illness? Then you'd better start laughing!

Author of "Anatomy of an Illness", Norman Cousins, had an incurable, progressive, connective tissue disease and was told he would only live a few months. Cousins decided that rather than wait for death, he would become proactive in his health care management and attitude. He obtained movies he'd always enjoyed, including infamous Marx Brothers films and Allen Funt's "Candid Camera" episodes. Cousins read humorous books and reported 10 minutes of 'genuine belly' laughter would relieve his intense pain for hours. While hospitalized, he began a routine of watching movies, laughing, sleeping, re-watching the movies to relieve pain...over and over. Eventually, he was moved out of the hospital because his laughter was disturbing other patients. He continued his 'treatment' with astounding results.

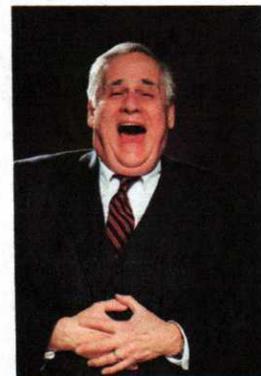
Possible reasons?

- Laughter doesn't allow you to be caught in a cycle of despair, depression or pain.
- Laughter releases 'endorphins' in the brain, which act as a natural medication for both the body and mind.
- Laughter, even for the very ill, causes the muscles of your body to work/exercise. Remember the phrase, "I laughed till I hurt?" Didn't your stomach & side muscles feel like you'd been weight-lifting?
- Laughter is contagious!

When we are depressed or down, we don't feel like laughing. In times like these, we may have to 'jump-start' the process. This is basically the role clowns play at a rodeo or circus. Not only do they redirect a panicked or angry animal's attention, but their irreverent, seemingly foolish behaviors also effectively redirect the crowd's attention and relieve tensions.

Here are several ways to engage in laughter when we don't feel like laughing.

- Watch a movie which has always caused you to laugh in the past. We're talking about full-bodied laughter, not just giggles!
- Read comics in the newspaper
- Read humorous books or your favorite collections of cartoons
- Go to a bookstore and read only material in the humor sections
- Watch television sitcoms
- Watch tapes of stand-up comedians
- Rent a video of sports 'bloopers'
- Visit that old friend who was the proverbial 'class clown' or jokester
- Sign up on the internet for jokes which can be emailed to you
- Share funny stories and jokes over the telephone, at home, mail or internet with friends and family....anything which will help you laugh.



Norman Cousins speaks of families who competed with each other to find the funniest jokes to share with ill family members. As a patient and the family began to focus on this activity rather than on the depressing prognosis of the illness, there was an improvement in the health issues and also a marked improvement in the family's relationship. Where despair had been, laughter was the highlight of the day.

A ten year U.S. Grant research study by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Building Family Strengths study, indicated one of the six major indicators consistently found in strong families was their shared humor. And those who didn't have it, but developed shared humor and became stronger...and happier. The power of family or group involvement in humor may have a greater impact on 'community' than society tends to acknowledge.

"Laughter in the Basement" tells the story of a group of behavioral scientists who designed, constructed and tested a 'humor center', where jokes, costumes, humorous material and expressive creative outlets were utilized at participant's own choice. Participant's actions were recorded through one-way mirrors. Standardized psychological tests (before and after they entered the area) revealed the environment elevated moods of each participant.

Scientists concluded, 'mirth promotes social harmony'. ("It's a Funny Thing, Humor") "Laughter provides the outlet for otherwise unacceptable feelings, behaviors and impulses by facilitating talking about or acting out conflicts or emotions in a safe, non-threatening way." (Dr. Laurence Peter, The Laughter Prescription).

In his book, Dr. Peter emphasized the powerful impact one person's laughter may have on another. "Make others laugh. By creating happiness for others, you will experience a special joy of accomplishment that only a lively, generous sense of humor can bring."



Dr. Peter also states that humor serves an important role in easing tensions, in both the individual and in relationships with others. "...although each ethnic group has a unique humor style, humor itself is universal....a unifying force...it is hoped that mirth will be developed as one of the new ways of easing international tensions and communicating similarities among peoples of all nations".

Comedian Jimmy Durante (of the humongous nose!) once said, "It dawned on me then that as long as I could laugh, I was safe from the world; and I have learned since that laughter keeps me safe from myself, too. All of us have schnozzles—are ridiculous in one way or another, if not in our faces, then in our characters, minds or habits. When we admit our schnozzles, instead of defending them, we begin to laugh, and the world laughs with us." Ethel Barrymore shares similar sentiments, "You grow up the day you have your first real laugh—at yourself."

Humor is used as a way to break tension. Some individuals or groups use alcohol to create a 'relaxed' environment; however, alcohol is actually a depressant.

Laughter utilizes the body's natural chemicals to heal or relax. Following or during times of crisis, trauma or loss, don't be afraid of offending others or feeling guilty about getting back to normal.

TV Host and comedian, Steve Allen, realized that, no matter how innocent the intent, someone would always be offended by any joke he told. He said, "Tragedy plus time equals comedy." He recognized there is a time and place for everything and one must evaluate the circumstances as best they can. If the crowd isn't yet ready for humor or laughter, make certain you personally, possibly even privately, take steps to manage your own mental and physical health by engaging in laughter.

Humor helps put life back into perspective, no matter what burden one may carry. It's good to get your mind off troubles and turn away from images or thoughts which are painful.



Biblical Proverbs state, "He that is of a merry heart has a continual feast" and "A merry heart is a good medicine".

Following loss, tragedy or depression, returning to normal will take time. Joy and laughter greatly speed the process toward recovery, both physically and mentally.

Make time for laughter today! Better yet, make time to laugh with family and friends!

This article provided by Clifton Fuller, LCSW LPC, LMFT (Professional Counselor and Clinical Member: American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy) Copyright©2002
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