

LAUGHTER CAN BE THE BEST MEDICINE

By Carol Abaya, M.A.

HUMOR: the ability to perceive, appreciate or express is what is funny, amusing, ludicrous.

“An onion can make people cry, but there never was a vegetable invented to make them laugh.”
(Will Rogers)

Paul McGhee, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and authority on humor and health, notes, “Humor, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Humor is not ‘out there’ in the world... It only exists in our experience. We create it.”

Scientific research, says McGhee, confirms the beneficial aspects of laughter in relation to health.

In the 1970s a new branch of medicine came into being -- psychoneuroimmunology. This is based on the interaction of the brain (mind), immune system, and endocrine system.

Work at the University of California has documented that positive emotions, moods, attitudes and beliefs contribute to the optimal functioning of the basic health and healing mechanisms of the body.

Research in this area began to be taken seriously when Norman Cousins, in the 1960s, developed a very painful disease that resulted in the gradual fusing of segments of his spine.

“Cousins reasoned that since it was widely accepted that persistent negative emotions disrupt health and well being, then positive emotions should have the reverse effect,” says McGhee in his book “The Laughter Remedy: Health, Healing and the Amuse System.”

Cousins experimented on himself and wrote about it later in the book “Anatomy of an Illness.” He checked himself out of the hospital, surrounded himself with comedy films, invited friends over, and generally had a marvelous time laughing. He found that 10 minutes of laughter gave him an hour or more of pain-free sleep.

Scientists Confirm Benefits

“Scientists have, in recent years, brought humor and laughter under the microscope and have confirmed what many assumed all along -- that humor and laughter offer extraordinary benefits to those who know how to claim them,” says McGhee.

“Humor makes important contributions to our physical and mental health. It strengthens the immune system, produces muscle relaxation, eases psychological tension, and helps us cope

with stress. Mental benefits include increased alertness, facilitation of learning and heightened creativity in handling everyday problems,” he says.

A New Disease- Terminal Seriousness

McGhee notes that having a positive sense of humor enhances one’s ability to communicate effectively and influence others. It also helps one manage conflicts more effectively. On the job, he says, it has the power to improve morale and productivity.

McGhee and other sociologists and psychologists in recent years have focused on playfulness in children and their ability to not only learn better, but be better able to handle stressful situations. Laughter and fun relax both the mind and the physical components of one’s body. This is healthy.

However, say more than one expert, society has a way of erasing all signs of playfulness. Parents make negative comments. At school, you’re supposed to “learn” not “play.” And once you enter the job market, seriousness is the name of the game.

McGhee notes, “Life’s hassles and stresses themselves contribute to a gradual erosion of our playfulness. The more negative life experiences are, the more we lose touch with our sense of play and fun. The unfortunate part of this is that we could actually use of sense of humor to help deal with hassles and stresses.”

HUMOR: THE BEST MEDICINE

Expert advice: wherever a person lives, bringing humor and fun into that person's life can have major beneficial repercussions on health and overall emotional well being.

“While laughter may very well be the best medicine, determining the most effective dosage and the result of the prescription is not easy. There are no courses, no handy reference guides, and few experts to provide the guidance so necessary for the successful administration of this wonderful medicine.”

Iseli Krauss, Ed.D., headed a unique research project through the University of Southern California, the Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center. The objective was to try to determine how bringing humor and fun into the lives of the elderly can have a beneficial impact on their overall well bring.

After a two year study, Krauss noted success based on behavioral changes of the participants, who were in a nursing home.

Changes included:

- smiles from those who had been withdrawn;
- foot tapping to music from previously unresponsive;
- heightened awareness of events of everyday live;
- Increased interactions with other patients, and
- development of a strong feeling of community among themselves.

Why Humor Helps

Laughing makes a person feel better. But the emotional effects are overshadowed by the actual physical benefits.

According to Dr. William F. Fry, a psychiatrist affiliated with Stanford University, laughter stimulates the production of the alertness hormones catecholamines in the brain, which foster a sense of relation and well being.

According to other studies, catecholamines are also supposed to enhance blood flow and thus may speed healing, reduce inflammation and stimulate alertness.

For the Sandwich Generation, good advice comes from Dr. Joel Goodman, co-author of the book “Playfair” published by Impact Publishing.

Add humor into your own life.

“Start looking for the absurd, silly incongruous activities that go on around you. Take a 5 to 10 minute humor break each day; read jokes; listen to a funny tape. And when you hear a good joke, write it down so you can tell it to someone else,” Goodman recommends.❤️