

Using Humor to Cope: Laughing in the Midst of Stress

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"Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is upon me day and night, if I did not laugh I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do." (Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil War)

"If it weren't for the brief respite we give the world with our foolishness, the world would see mass suicide in numbers that compare favorably with the death rate of lemmings." (Groucho Marx)

In the book, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, McMurphy (played by Jack Nicholson in the film) says, "When you lose your sense of humor, you lose your footing." Another character says about McMurphy, "He knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you, just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy."

This is great wisdom from someone who lives in a psychiatric institution. Your sense of humor is one of the most potent tools you have to cope with those days when life seems determined to deal you enough stress to make you crazy. You have enough stress in dealing with your cancer on a day-to-day basis, so you certainly don't need extra sources of stress from your job and personal relationships.

Empowerment has become a major buzzword in corporations, as companies have recognized the value of granting more decision-making power to employees at all levels of the organization. Empowerment is just as important in taking control of your emotional reactions in on a day-to-day basis in connection with your cancer. While you never want to deny the reality of the issues you must deal with that stem from your cancer, there is real a real sense of exhilaration that comes from learning to use your sense of humor to pull yourself up by your "emotional boot-straps" on your down days.

The above quote from President Lincoln occurred when Lincoln read something to his advisors that he found very funny, but they didn't laugh, presumably because of the seriousness of the situation they were dealing with. Lincoln was convinced that it was precisely because the situation was so serious that he needed to laugh.

The same situation occurs with many cancer patients (and their family members), who simply cannot find the resources within them to laugh—because of the seriousness of the situation they or their loved one are dealing with. But just think of what daily immersion in a sobering, serious attitude does to the quality of your life. It is stifling and robs you of the opportunities for joy that a more upbeat, positive attitude brings.

I once came across a woman with breast cancer who discovered the emotional trap her cancer had led her into. She had had a double mastectomy, and had two prosthetic breasts. One day, three weeks after her surgery, she went to her front porch to pick up her morning newspaper. As she bent over to pick it up, one of her breasts popped out. And the family dog, thinking this was a new toy, grabbed it and was running around the yard with it in his mouth. She ran after the dog, shouting, "You come back here with my breast. You give me my breast!"

When she realized what she was saying, she stopped and looked around to see if anyone else was up that early and heard her. To her great relief, no one else was up. But when she realized what she had been shouting, and thought about what the neighbors would have thought had they heard her, she started laughing and couldn't stop. She was laughing so hard that tears were coming out of her eyes.

When she finally stopped laughing, she realized that was what had been missing from her life. She could not remember laughing since her diagnosis of cancer. And she was determined to never let another day go by without having some laughter in her life. She realized that she needed to laugh, even when she didn't feel like laughing. The laughter itself boosted her spirits and made it easier to face the tough days.

She and Abraham Lincoln both recognized the power of humor to help them get through the difficult situation they were dealing with. As you look at your own life, consider the obstacles you've had to overcome in easing into that playful attitude that is so important for finding humor in your own everyday life. If your sense of humor has abandoned you, go right now to "Improving Your Sense of Humor" area of this website and start making the effort to boost your humor skills.

Freud, of course, pointed out a century ago that humor offers us a healthy means of coping with life stress. George Vaillant, in his book, *Adaptation to Life*, reported that in-depth interviews revealed that humor was a very effective coping mechanism used by many professional men under stress. Gail Sheehy reported the same thing for both men and women in her book, *Pathfinders*.

A key idea emerging in both of these books is that you need to actively use your sense of humor in dealing with the hassles and stresses in your life to get the coping benefits. You can have a good sense of humor in general, but still have your sense of humor abandon you when things begin to go wrong. On your good-mood days, you can have quick and easy access to a playful attitude, be the one who comes up with clever quips or finds a funny side to things that happen, and be able to poke fun at yourself. But this won't help you in managing the stress in your life unless you can do the same thing on the tough days.

There is now a great deal of research documenting humor power to help you cope with any form of life stress. The importance of using your sense of humor in an active way was demonstrated over two decades ago, however, in a Canadian study. It showed that even if you're someone who finds a lot of humor in everyday life, it doesn't help you cope with stress unless you also make an effort to actively use humor to deal with that stress.¹ So even if you have a great sense of humor when all is well, you'll be just as stressed out as the next person on your bad days unless you learn to use humor on the tough days.

People who have access to their sense of humor in the midst of stress are much more resilient than the rest of us. They are emotionally more flexible, and can bend without breaking in the midst of the most difficult circumstances. If you're lucky, and have parents who showed a good sense of humor in the midst of stress, chances are you've already got some of those qualities within yourself. You just need to refine them and strengthen them. One study showed that even a 5-session humor workshop was enough to improve adults' use of humor to cope with life stress.²

It's important to know that it's never too late to improve your humor skills—even if you're past retirement age. Going through my Humor Skills Program (described elsewhere at this website) has been shown to significantly improve seniors' ability to cope with the stress in their lives.³

The study used seniors living in different retirement centers. One group spent 8 weeks focusing on the Homeplay (activities designed to build the humor skills associated with each step in the program), while a second group simply got together weekly to watch comedy films (from the 1940s and 1950s). So the first group made an active effort to improve their humor skills, while the second group was passively engaged in humor without trying to improve their sense of humor.

While the two groups showed similar coping abilities at the beginning of the study, the group going through the Humor Skills Program scored significantly higher on two different measures of coping at the end of eight

weeks. The findings showed that they were not only coping better with the stress in their lives; they were also actively using humor as a coping tool more than they had before the program started.

So you're never too old to learn to use humor to cope with stress. Whether you're 25, 50, or 75 years old, you can learn to lighten up. Remember, a good sense of humor prevents hardening of the attitudes.

[Adapted from P.E. McGhee *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*, Kendall-Hunt, 1999.]

References

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