

Nurse Patty Speaks as Caregiver



The word humor comes from the Latin root “umor” meaning liquid, fluid. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, humor was one of the four principal body fluids thought to determine human health and dispositions. Today a dictionary defines humor as “the quality of being laughable or comical” or “a state of mind, mood, spirit.”

Humor, on all levels therefore, is something that flows, involving basic characteristics of the individual which express themselves in the body, in moods and emotional reactions, and in qualities of feelings, of mind and of spirit. The qualities of humor and spirit are similar and, I believe, interdependent. As caregivers, we most often focus our therapeutic intentions on healing the physical body. To be most effective, we must expand our efforts to include attention to the emotional and spiritual needs of the patients.

The root of the word “heal” is “Healen” meaning to make whole. Commenting on the medical theories of his day, Socrates notes:

“As it is not proper to cure the eyes without the head, nor the head without the body, so neither is it proper to cure the body without the soul.” – Socrates

The soul is the cradle of the spirit. Spirit can be defined as the vital essence or animating force of a living organism, often considered divine in origin. Our spirit energy can be influenced by the feelings of joy, hope, and love. The experience of laughter quickly banishes feelings of anger and fear and provides a few moments of feeling carefree, lighthearted and hopeful. These positive emotions are known to stimulate powerful biochemical change that can promote healing.

When the spirit is depleted, caregivers can experience what is known as “compassion fatigue” – feeling that they have very little left to give. Usually this occurs when the self-care program has been inadequate. Finding humor in our work and our life can be one way to lift our spirits, replenish our energy and avoid compassion fatigue.

Humor is one of the pleasures of life. Stimulate laughter and you can directly enhance the quality of someone’s life and perhaps their will to live – this may be the most important result of all. The will to live is a force which is very difficult to define but can be a

powerful influence in the patient’s recovery process. Many of us have witnessed the patient who asserts that he is going to die, despite a normal physical exam and lab results; and then proceeds to do so, often surprising the professional staff. The opposite can also be the case. A patient is given a grim prognosis by his physicians but announces that he will overcome the condition and then lives for many years beyond his predicted demise.

Sometimes mobilizing the will to live can be the most powerful influence one human can offer to another. Humor and laughter create an environment where hope can flourish because it provides a sense of joy, helps us connect with family and friends, and inspires an appreciation and gratitude for life.

Humor and laughter can foster a positive and hopeful attitude. We are less likely to succumb to feelings of depression and helplessness if we are able to laugh at what is troubling us. Humor gives us a sense of perspective on our problems. Laughter provides an opportunity for the release of those uncomfortable emotions which, if held inside, may create biochemical changes that are harmful to the body.

Caregivers, as well as, patients are in need of the therapeutic effects of humor and laughter. Most caregivers are compassionate individuals who choose to work in a profession that places them at risk to their physical, emotional and spiritual well being. Due to our sympathetic tendencies we may feel the same emotions that our patients feel, such as fear, anger, helplessness, and depression. We can experience feelings of failure when our efforts are ineffective. We feel anger and frustration when a patient rejects our care or is noncompliant with treatment. We may feel grief when patients die or families mourn. Our ability to see the humor in a situation and to laugh freely with our coworkers can be an effective way to take care of our own body, mind and spirit.

Caregivers work in a stress-filled environment and are prone to professional burnout. A major causative factor in burnout is a sense of powerlessness. We may not have control over the external events, but we do have the ability to control how we view events and the emotional response we choose to have to them. Humor gives us perceptual flexibility and thus can increase our cognitive control. For example, a friend of mine was caring for a very demanding patient who made continual use of her call light to complain or to make numerous unnecessary requests. The nurse’s patience was wearing thin. Lunch trays had just been passed when the nurse was again called into the patient’s room. The patient pointed to her tray “This potato is bad!” The nurse did the only reasonable thing. She picked up the baked potato and began spanking it, “Bad potato! Bad potato!” They both laughed and the tension of the day was dissolved.

Hoping, Coping and Gallows Humor

Hoping Humor Gives Courage to Face Challenges

The ability to hope for something better enables human beings to cope with difficult situations. Hoping humor laughs “in spite of” the overwhelming circumstances. It reflects an acceptance of life with all its dichotomies, contradictions and incongruities. This type of humor is usually warm, gentle and accepts the reality of the situation. Hoping humor can also be used to sustain the spirit during the shock and trauma of natural disasters. People create

humor to literally, laugh in the face of their loss. Both the disaster victims as well as those who offer professional assistance use humor to provide hope and courage as they deal with the overwhelming task of recovery. As Charlie Chaplin once noted: "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it." Hoping humor is empathetic and compassionate - the quite and gentle humor of the innocent clown.

Coping Humor Provides a Release for Tension

Illness and trauma cause stress and suffering. They disrupt our ability to function smoothly and present many challenges. Coping is what we do to minimize this disruption and attempt to regain some control. To cope effectively, we must change how we think and how we behave. Humor is often used as a coping tool to help us change perspective, release tension, and regain a sense of control. As Freud noted: "Humor has a liberating element, it is the triumph of narcissism. It is the ego's victorious assertion of its invulnerability. It refuses to suffer the slings and arrows of reality." Patients use coping humor to laugh about uncomfortable and embarrassing moments. While they may not always be able to control their external reality they can use humor to control how they perceive their situation. Their ability to laugh about it will give them a sense of power and control.

Gallows Humor Offers Protection from Pain

Gallows humor is often used by professionals who work in situations that are horrifying or tragic. Everyday these people cope with the reality and horror of illness, suffering and death. In this group we find doctors, nurses, police, newspaper journalists, social workers, hospice workers and many others. These professionals, because of their caring and compassion, are more likely to feel the impact of the suffering they witness. Caregivers will often use humor as a means of maintaining some distance from the suffering to protect themselves from the sympathetic pain. Gallows humor acknowledges the disgusting or intolerable aspects of a situation and then attempts to transform it into something lighthearted and amusing. Our ability to laugh in this situation, provides us with a momentary release from the intensity of what might otherwise be overwhelming. We are able to maintain our balance and professional composure so that we may continue to offer our therapeutic skills.

Sigmund Freud named it "gallows humor" when he reported an incident of joking which occurred on the gallows by a man about to be hung. He laughed directly at tragedy and death, as if it were amusing.

Gallows humor is unique to caregiving or any profession which deals directly with the gruesome reality of pain, suffering and death. This type of humor is often misunderstood or unappreciated by those who do not work closely with the suffering person or for those who are new to the profession. One often develops an appreciation for this humor when the tension is so great that one must either release it or feel crushed from its pressure.

Perhaps one of the most accurate, poignant, and personal discussions of the importance of gallows humor for the caregiver was written by a nurse anesthetist working in an emergency room in Illinois.

" You saw me laugh after your father died . . . to you I must have appeared calloused and uncaring . . . Please understand, much of the stress health care workers suffer comes about because we do care . . . Sooner or later we will all laugh at the wrong time. I hope your father would understand, my laugh meant no disrespect, it was a grab at balance. I knew there was another patient who needed my full care and attention . . . my laugh was no less cleansing for me than your tears were for you."

– Wayne Johnston, "To the Ones Left Behind"

[Editor's note: As Hospital clowns we work closely with doctors, nurses and other health professionals. It is important for us to be aware of the stress and pressure these caregivers are under and how they cope. It is part of our job to provide the staff with comic relief in the hospital; however, are we in a position to use "gallows humor?" I have worked on occasion with Patty in a hospital. It was fascinating to see her clown characters relate to staff. I've never been a nurse or a hospital employee. I do not have the knowledge or the permission to go to that sensitive place of staff humor. It seems to me that my hospital clown humor may be that of the innocent bystander waiting in the sidelines to hold a hand, give a hug or blow some bubbles. The hospital clown's humor shows no contempt and leaves no sting.]

Patty Prepares her Clown for Duty

I sit before the mirror, pasting this red nose on my face... It has become such a part of me, a nose I trust to help me open the door to that sick little boy's heart. I wonder if I will have the sensitivity and skill that is required to "be there" with his pain. I know the answers are all in my heart, but how do I keep my heart open in the face of his suffering? How can I keep it together and not become unglued? I need some wisdom greater than that inside of me. I know that I can be a channel, a vessel, an instrument of love and peace. I know that God will help me, if I only ask. But what does God know about clowning? And then I remember, this isn't about being a clown, it's about letting the love of God pour through me, while I'm dressed as a clown. The costume and make-up will get the little boy's attention, but the real healing power will come through my ability to love and accept, to forgive and surrender. I know I must Let Go and Let God.

I leave you with a poem by Serene West, which expresses my beliefs so succinctly.

*Laughter is a melody,
A concert from the heart,
A tickling by the angels,
Creative, living art.
Laughter heals and comforts,
Sometimes gentle, sometimes bold.
Laughter is a healing dance,
Performed within the soul.*

Patty Wooten RN
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