

HUMOR THERAPY

It's often been said by those outside the mainstream medical community that "laughter may indeed be the best medicine", possibly because it's affordable but also because it's true. **Humor Therapy** is often considered a type of Psychoneuroimmunology (*see listing*) but this subject deserves its own listing. Everyone already knows how laughter makes you feel good and full of joy, but perhaps I put so much importance on this subject because I've enjoyed the movie *Patch Adams* starring Robin Williams too much!

Doctors didn't seriously consider laughter a legitimate form of therapy until the New England Journal of Medicine published the Norman Cousins case study in 1979 showing how laughter could reverse a serious disease. Norman Cousins published *Anatomy of an Illness* in 1964 about his fight with ankylosing spondylitis, a painful disintegration of the connective tissue in the spine. He designed his own humor therapy and discovered that 15 minutes of laughter could bring him up to two hours of pain-free sleep. Since that time laughter has been found to lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, boost immune system function and release endorphins, the body's natural pain killers. A good belly laugh is considered a type of exercise providing good cardiac conditioning for those unable to perform regular physical exercise. Best of all, it produces a wonderful sense of well being. It's also a great coping mechanism and is increasingly used for the treatment of cancer.

Today doctors are often still afraid to use humor. There is no reference to humor therapy in most medical training manuals or programs. There has been very little research because humor can't be patented and no research means there are no articles in professional journals. Doctors may also be concerned that it may reduce the professional distance from the patient. All of these are "old school" problems that are slowly fading away as the overwhelming benefits of humor become more accepted.

One example is the Big Apple Circus in New York which created Clown Care twenty years ago to entertain children. Today they have 84 professional clowns working at hospitals in cities across the country. New York Presbyterian Hospital has these clowns working at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital three days each week all year long. Many other hospitals are implementing Comedy Crash Carts for laughter emergencies and adding the Chuckle Channel to their TV channel selection to improve the quality of life of their patients.

Over a decade ago Dr. Madan Kataria in India created Laughter Yoga as a result of his research on laughter. Today there are thousands of Laughter Clubs and other groups around the world to spread the benefits of laughter. One of the most important benefits of laughter is that you live in the moment. Focusing on the beauty of life right now has many wonderful effects.

The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) was created in 1987 to "advance the understanding and application of humor and laughter for their positive benefits". It is an international community of professionals who incorporate humor into their daily lives.



Laughter or Humor Therapy is one of mankind's oldest health treatments. In the Bible, Proverbs 17:22 it says "A cheerful heart is good medicine but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Listen as Lenny Dave, President of the Association for Applied & Therapeutic Humor, talks about this wonderful therapy. He may not be a doctor but he has been known to perform successful surgery on the human spirit!

USER COMMENTS:

- ◆ (From a hospital clown) I went to see a boy with cancer who was about to lose his leg. He asked if there was any way to avoid it and I had to answer him 'No' but then I asked him what he'd like to do. He said 'Jump on the bed'. So I climbed up on to his hospital bed and we both jumped up and down right up to the time when they came to take him to surgery. I gave him something to take with him so he'd see it when he first woke up to bring a smile to his face.
- ◆ I really love creating a welcoming atmosphere for kids in the hospital because it also helps the parents remember the child and not the illness. We have to react to each child differently when we ask to enter the room. If they're quiet then we respond in a quiet manner. Sometimes they're angry so we help them release it at the clown or in a comedic manner like a paper-towel duel. Finding laughter in the worst of circumstances isn't easy but it is so rewarding.
- ◆ (From a doctor) Bringing joy, laughter and play calls them to their natural state of health.
- ◆ I first learned about humor therapy from a dear friend dying with cancer. She watched every funny movie or show ever made, over and over, because it relieved her pain and gave her a feeling of happiness for a few moments. Ever since then I start each day by reading the funnies first to begin the day with a chuckle. I take my wife to see almost every animated movie and comedy we can find. I'm determined not to wait until I'm dying to see the beauty and humor in every day.