

Humor? Laughter? At a Time Like This?

By Bill Andrew

Humor -- laughter -- at a time like this? I am sure that thought has crossed your mind as you go about your daily routine as a caregiver for your loved one. It crossed mine early in the "long Alzheimer's journey" that my wife, Carol, and I embarked upon almost 12 years ago. After all, without humor and laughter in our caregiver lives, we become like "zombies" doing our job without a thought about our own personal health.

I was reminded of this last Saturday as I ran my Alzheimer's Support Group, which I have been doing for almost 5 years. This meeting was focused on what I call "share and care" -- that is, those in attendance tell the group a little about themselves, their problems in caring for their loved one, and looking for solutions that other members of the group have used. More than 25 caregivers and their loved ones attended this monthly meeting, and believe me, they expressed a lot of problems and solutions in the 2½ hour meeting -- amid much humor and laughter!

Yes! Laughter, like crying, is a form of catharsis. It provides an outlet for relieving feelings of stress and anxiety. Laughter can help "clear your head," helping you look at a situation from a new angle.

The benefits of humor on the human condition have been widely researched. Clinical studies have shown that laughter:

- Lowers serum cortisol levels (a hormone that suppresses the immune system).
- Increases an antibody called Immunoglobulin A, and increases Killer Cell activity - which attack and destroy abnormal cells.
- Increases the heart rate, while respiration becomes more rapid, causing a profound process of air exchange. This is the exhaling of carbon dioxide, with the replacement by oxygenated air, which in turn supplies oxygenated blood to the entire body, including the brain (a very good thing for improving our ability to cope with the challenges of caregiving!).
- Exercises large and small muscles, including facial, thoracic, abdominal and pelvic, in particular. This activity creates benefits very similar to those of traditional exercise. This action allows fibers and tissues that make up the muscles to efficiently and effectively access the previously mentioned oxygenated blood, improving the health of those muscles.

Try the following tips for cultivating humor in your life:

- Learn to laugh when facing life's challenges. Rather than saying, "We'll laugh about this someday," look for the humor in the situation, and give yourself permission to laugh now.
- Seek out funny cartoons and articles online or in the daily newspaper.
- Create a humor file of cartoons, articles, and jokes you hear and jot down. Share them with others, including your loved one.

- Realize that you can't control the world around you, but can control your inner reality and perceptions. Use positive self-talk.
- Take yourself lightly. Learn to laugh at your situation, at your mistakes, and at yourself.
- Memorize at least two jokes. Tell them to your loved one, your friends, and your support group.

Some of the above is taken from the [website](#) of Family Caregivers Online. I have also written about humor in previous columns including [In Caregiving, He Who Laughs -- Lasts!](#) and intend to write more columns about adding a "pinch of humor and laughter" to our respective spousal caregiving recipes.

WORDS TO CARE BY...

***"Laughter gives us distance.
It allows us to step back from and event,
deal with it, and then move on."
Bob Newhart (1929-)***

Bill Andrew identifies himself as a former "nutritionally-empowered Alzheimer's caregiver" who attributes the slow-down in progression of Alzheimer's disease in his wife, Carol – and the growth of his own personal emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual capability and strength to provide quality 24/7 care for her in their own home – to the targeted nutritional supplements they both took on a daily basis. Carol went to her Heavenly reward on June 9, 2008 – Bill continues on to advocate for family caregivers. Contact Bill with your caregiving questions and comments via email at ASKBill@caregivershome.com.

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