



"HUMOR & HEALING: THE INVISIBLE WEAPON"

By Steve Wilson, MA, CSP

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"Despair affects the immune system...
I try to leave patients with something to laugh about".
--Bernie Siegal, M.D.

"Perhaps our impulse to enjoy mirth opposes vulnerability to cancer."
--William Fry, Jr., M.D.

"What soap is to the body laughter is to the soul."
--Jewish proverb

According to an old legend, shortly after Adam had been created, he complained: "O, Lord! You have given the lion fierce teeth and claws, and the elephant formidable tusks; you have given the deer swiftness of legs, and the turtle a protective shell; you have given the birds of flight wings, but you have left me altogether defenseless." And the Lord said unto Adam, "I shall give you an invisible weapon that will serve you and your children better than any weapons of fight or flight, a power that will save you even from yourself. I shall give you the sense of humor."

Why is humor called an invisible weapon? I think it is because your sense of humor is like gravity: a powerful force that cannot be observed directly by the five senses but whose effects are consistent and undeniable. You can't see, taste, touch, smell or hear the sense of humor, but you sure can feel its effects. Whether you believe in it or not, it works! You don't have to believe in gravity. Just step off of a roof and it will go to work. Likewise, you don't have to believe in the power of humor and laughter, just start laughing and every system in your body acts as if a master switch had been turned on in the direction of health.

Over the years I have collected many examples of the healing power of humor from clients in my psychotherapy practice who attest to the importance of humor in restoring balance while they resolve other difficult life problems.

Participants in my humor workshops have readily shared numerous accounts of the "saving" power of humor: this invisible weapon saves the day, saves situations, and saves lives.

The Heart Of The Matter

Tom, a 41-year-old research executive had suffered two mild heart attacks and needed to undergo a follow-up angioplasty. In this procedure a tube would be inserted in an artery in his groin and guided up to a blood vessel at his heart where a small balloon would be inflated to open the vessel, clearing the way for an unrestricted flow of blood which would allow him to remain fully functioning in his life. He was scared.

We talked it over and he decided to use his positive outlook and humor to show the operating room team he was on their side and that he was determined to do his part to make the procedure successful. In addition to his invisible weapon --humor-- Tom added some special insurance, a more visible secret weapon in the form of a pair of fuzzy-eyebrowed "Groucho glasses".

In the hospital, he hid this classic "prop" until the last moment and then put it on just as he was wheeled into the operating room. The doctor and the nurses had a good laugh. His display of good humor was his way of showing his faith in them. Everyone was bolstered. One of the assisting nurses played it dead-pan. She removed the toy glasses from his face and handled them as if they were real spectacles. Placing them under his pillow she said, "You won't need these during the procedure but they'll be right here for you when its over". The procedure was a complete success. Later, Tom told me how the humor had worked so well to get him through this frightening experience.

A cancer patient in a support group told me how humor helped her cope. "Immediately following my surgery," she said, "three of my best friends visited me dressed as clowns. They put on song-and-dance routines for me in my hospital room. This was hilarious, up-beat support, a great relief, and set the tone for the coming year of chemo and my recovery".

My case files are loaded with many such stories of humor helping cope with and illness and promote the healing.

The following changes related to your good health have been demonstrated in research and observed clinically to occur as a result of laughter, smiling, and in the presence of a wide range of positive, pleasant emotions such as will to live, determination, love, compassion, joy, creativity, pleasure, frivolity, festivity, and humor:

- Increased heart-rate and blood pressure and oxygenation of the blood (similar to an aerobic workout), followed by decreased blood pressure to very healthful levels.
- Increased endorphin levels (the body's natural pain-killer; also a natural euphoriant with none of the side-effects of drugs).
- Increased levels of immune components in the blood including immunoglobulin-A, a virus-fighting component.
- Enlargement of the thymus gland and its secretions.
- Pleasant memories are triggered.
- Facial, thoracic, abdominal, and extremity musculature gets a workout.

- Muscular tension is released.
- Emotional tension is released.
- Internal organs are massaged increasing blood circulation to them.

Additional benefits of laughter and positive feelings are often cited, such as:

- better doctor/patient relationships
- a sense of well-being.
- pleasant, cooperative response from others.
- increased creativity.
- increased problem-solving ability.
- reduced worry due to better perspective.

There are many explanations of how this works. "Even if laughter produces no specific biochemical changes," according to Norman Cousins, "it accomplishes one very essential purpose. It tends to block deep feelings of apprehension and even panic that all too frequently accompany serious illness. It helps free the body of the constricting effects of the negative emotions that in turn may impair the healing system."

Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D. offers the observation that we all survive best and heal best in an atmosphere of love and support and understanding. "In order to be therapeutic," he says, "it is a pre-condition that the humor be of a type which includes the patient within such warm and comprehensive relationships with fellow human beings." The doctor-patient relationship gets an important boost when it includes warm, appropriate humor.

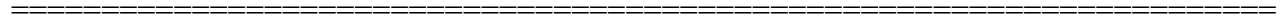
In his book, *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/Body Medicine*, Deepak Chopra, M.D., explains the way you are blessed with an "inner intelligence" that directs your body to maintain and restore health. He says, "All the interpretations you make in life about what is happening to you structures the biological responses down to your cellular level. When you think 'I am happy,' every cell in your body learns happiness and joins in." Cousins put it this way: "Belief becomes biology".

Rx: LAUGHTER

Groucho Marx concisely, if not medically, observed, "A clown is like an aspirin; only it works twice as fast." The healing power of jesters, mimes, and other humorous entertainers is documented in all the recorded history of people and medicine. Clowns continue to be a very effective force for healing in hospital situations. We are all familiar with clowns in children's hospitals and their ability to turn around the depressed, withdrawn, and fearful young patients. We need clowns in "adult" hospitals, too!

Several hospitals around the country are tapping the power of humor by installing "Humor Rooms", "Lively Rooms", and "Chuckle Channels". I had the privilege of helping Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, create and implement such a program. Called "Tickle Me Pink", it consists of a "Humor Cart" full of books, magazines, props, gags, and games available for patients in the oncology unit. Patients and their families get a break from the arduous hospital routines and do themselves a world of good by taking a "time-out" for humor.

It is neither physically nor psychologically economical to constantly dwell on a problem. When you are visiting a friend or relative who is ill, be sure to take along some humor. Of course, the patient needs to be well enough to feel up to joining in the fun, but humor can be energizing, too. Just don't force it. After a humor break, you and the patient (and other visitors) can return to the situation a little more refreshed, your immune systems a little more active, and you may feel a little more optimistic and hopeful. After all, you have an invisible weapon!



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