



## **TAKING HUMOR SERIOUSLY**

By Steve Wilson

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*"... laughter can defeat a fatal disease."* --Depak Chopra

*"Hope, purpose, and determination are not merely mental states. They have electro-chemical connections that play a large part in the workings of the immune system and, indeed, in the entire economy of the total human organism."* --Norman Cousins

*"A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a weak spirit drieth the bones."*  
--Book of Proverbs

The March, 1988 issue of *LIFE* magazine featured a cover story entitled "Gilda Radner's Answer to Cancer: Healing the Body with Mind and Heart," which documented her battle with ovarian cancer. Part of her treatment consisted of joining a supportive environment called "The Wellness Community" which, among other healing activities, provides a weekly "joke fest" for its members. What a contrast to the time 25 years earlier when my mother lay in the University of Pennsylvania Hospital, dying of the same disease.

My mother's ovarian cancer, like most in the early 60's was not detected until it was too late for surgery, radiation, or any other treatment known at the time, to possibly be effective. We were told that all we could do is accept the verdict of a grim inevitability, hope that she would not suffer too much, and pray that her death would be peaceful. Day and night we waited helplessly in darkened hallways and spoke in hushed tones to the procession of family and friends who came to visit Mom one last time. None of the physicians or nurses offered any suggestion or encouragement that a person's state of mind, hope, a positive attitude, or a fighting spirit --let alone a joke fest- - might hold the power to alter the course of her cancer.

### **Updating the Mind-Body Connection in Western Medicine**

For the past several years I have immersed myself in studying the research and clinical observations of the mind-body connection, which point to the healing power of attitudes including humor and laughter. More than anyone else, Norman Cousins popularized the idea that people could laugh their way to health -- perhaps not literally

but with positive attitudes. As Cousins put it, *belief becomes biology*. He garnered millions of dollars for ongoing research projects that continue to support his contentions.

Popular surgeon and lecturer, Bernie Siegel, M.D., is the author of the best selling book "Love, Medicine, and Miracles." He points out that the purpose of this type of approach is meant to heal the quality of lives, not to prevent people from dying. Everybody dies. The value of a life is not measured by its length; it is the quality, not the quantity of life, that counts. It isn't the years in your life that counts, it is the life in your years.

As a psychologist and "The Joyologist," spreading the message of the potential healing power of mirth has brought me the privilege of working with patients who are facing painful and life-threatening illnesses --fibromyalgia, arthritis, cancer, AIDS. Sometimes I address groups of patients along with their families and the medical staff that treat them. I have also worked with survivors' groups (those who have been free of treatments and symptoms for five years.)

### **Hospitals Discover the Positive Power of Humor**

Some healthcare professionals are making humor a regular part of their therapeutic strategy. At DeKalb General Hospital in Decatur, Georgia, patients who seem close to giving up are getting an unusual prescription these days: A few hours in the humor room. "The doctor will write it out just like a regular medication order," says Sandra Yates, head nurse for the medical-oncology unit. A cheerful, brightly-lit room, it contains no medical equipment. Instead, patients find videotapes of old movies of comedians. Reruns of comedy television shows and audiotapes of old radio shows are also in stock. "The room is an oasis," Yates says. After spending a few days in the humor room, she observes, some of her patients who previously had seemed to lose interest in life will revive. "Suddenly, they'll say 'I want to go home.'" Hospital patients discovering the same thing in other cities, too: Orlando, Florida; Schenectady, New York; Houston, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; and Los Angeles, California.

Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, asked me to serve as the psychological consultant to "Tickle Me Pink," a therapeutic humor program for the oncology-hematology unit. The hospital already had a comedy channel on their closed-circuit television channel into the patients' rooms, but "Tickle Me Pink" multiplied the beneficial effects of humor and laughter far beyond that. All of the medical staff attended in-service training on the benefits and appropriate applications of humor. I was delighted to find that some of the physicians were quite receptive to the idea. A few of them even asked for an extra supply of red, sponge-rubber clown noses for use with patients. The heart of the program is a "humor cart" that can be wheeled to patient rooms. Patients find an assortment of toys, games, puzzles and laughter-inducing props that they can borrow or keep in their rooms. The program has been a huge success.

### **Personal Examples**

Here are two of the stories patients have shared with me about how humor helped them cope:

"Following my 21-year-old son's surgery, I was delighted that we were permitted to care for him at home. He was very ill. Our home actually became a hospice. We

converted the living room into a hospital room with rented equipment, which because he needed oxygen constantly, included a very large oxygen tank. To me, that oxygen tank was ugly and because of what it represented I felt heartsick every time I looked at it. I mentioned this to a friend who found a wonderful solution. She created a cover for the oxygen tank in the form of a clown! That way I didn't have to see the oxygen contraption and the clown brightened the room and our spirits. My son and I had many good laughs about the clown in the living room. It really helped me cope!"

"I used humor to help me cope with my hair loss with chemotherapy and radiation. I turned into a different woman for my husband at night by becoming a frosted blonde or a redhead. He was used to beautiful long blonde hair, and this really helped him cope, too."

A few years ago I had my own all-too-personal encounter with the benefits of having the family inject humor while the doctor injects other medicines. When our son, Josh, was 14 years old, he decided to make a big impression on his schoolmates by sneaking his older brother's 750cc Yamaha motorcycle out of the garage after school one day when no one was at home. He had intended to drive to the high school to show off for his friends at football practice. With typical adolescent mentality, he failed to calculate an important detail: he did not know the first thing about how to drive a motorcycle! Fortunately, he did wear a helmet (the better to look "cool"). So, he wasn't killed when he failed to complete a left turn and he was thrown through the plate glass window of a nearby store. The motorcycle was a total loss and Josh was in pretty bad shape.

The Emergency Room nurse who phoned to notify us of the accident reported that Josh was "busted up", conscious, and expressing concern over how his parents would react. He was worried that we would be furious. We, of course, were thankful that he was alive and no more seriously damaged than he was. Our immediate hope and prayer was that he would live and be well (and we would wring his neck ourselves, later, when we got all of the details). I remembered the weeks I had spent in the University of Pennsylvania Hospital when my mother was sick with cancer. Armed with the knowledge I had acquired over the years about the mind-body connection, I decided that Josh would get the chance she never had: to experience those extraordinary powers of hope and humor.

Following his surgery, Josh was moved to a private room. He was feeling dejected, embarrassed, depressed, ashamed, and worried. He was in quite a bit of physical pain, too. By the second day, the doctor wanted him to get up and walk around, but Josh was not motivated. He remained bedfast, deep in the doldrums, We became concerned that his emotional slump would delay or prevent his physical recovery. He felt certain we hated him, as he must have hated himself, for his motorcycle escapade.

This is where "humor first-aid" came to the rescue. I gathered up games, posters, and assorted fun stuff that I knew Josh liked: his hand puppets, Groucho Marx glasses, a rubber chicken, puzzles, and put them in a canvas school-bag. I stuffed a red clown nose in my pocket, and went for a hospital visit.

I knew that a basic principle in humor is that smiles and good-hearted humor convey friendship and cooperation, whereas scowls and grimaces convey distrust and

hostility. When someone is willing to be playful with you in a good-natured way, they are helping you to live better and maybe even live longer. When the poet Edwin Albert Robinson was asked if he didn't think that his sense of humor had lengthened his life, he replied, "On the contrary, I think that that my life has lengthened my sense of humor."

I walked unannounced into his room wearing a bright red clown nose, and Josh immediately looked relieved when he realized the non-verbal message: "Dad loves you". But even that wasn't enough to get him motivated out of bed and walking.

My wife, Pam, and I decorated his drab hospital room with pictures of clowns and wizards. He started to cheer up a little. I showed him the "Mirth Aid Kit" kit I had made for him. He smiled. I placed the "Groucho Marx" glasses on him. I suggested we go for a walk as the doctor ordered. He was reluctant and pointed to the IV (intravenous) needle stuck in his arm as an excuse for not getting out of bed. I pointed out that the IV pole was on wheels and I hung his rubber chicken from the top of the pole next to the bags of IV fluids. Finally, Josh broke out laughing, and his laughing seemed to energize him. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and I helped him on with his slippers. We started out into the hall for his prescribed walk.

What a sight we were parading in the hallways of the hospital. I wore wearing the clown nose, Josh wore the Groucho Marx glasses, and the rubber chicken was hanging from the IV pole! We laughed and laughed and laughed, and walked and walked and walked. Then, several other patients and their visitors wanted to walk along with us and join in the fun. We were a small but merry band getting our exercise. By the time we got back to his room, Josh's attitude of the past few days had changed completely. And he received a bonus: in curiosity, some other patients and a few nurses came over to his room to see what was going on and joined in the laughter. Josh got a great infusion of positive, caring attention. He was surrounded by a smiling and mirthful group giving and receiving social and emotional support!

From that point on, Josh rallied. He never had another bad day. He followed the doctor's orders and recovered completely. Twenty-five years earlier at my mother's bedside we had been ignorant about the existence of such tools for healing, but I am convinced that hope and humor saved the day for Josh.

### **Take This Tonic**

Voltaire said, "The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease." There is now growing scientific evidence that when the patient is in good humor, "nature" gets a big helping hand. Bill Dana and Dr. Laurence J. Peter reached this conclusion, "For a long time, medical doctors have known that happy patients generally respond more favorably to treatment and recover faster than do cheerless and complaining ones. The evidence suggests that laughter, confidence, and hope have significant therapeutic value, while sadness, fear, and despondency tend to produce negative outcomes."

Of course, not everything is funny. Many things are too serious to be laughed off and bad timing or bad taste can make jokes and humor inappropriate and unwelcome. And certainly, there is a time to cry. However, the examples I have cited are but a small indication of the many opportunities that exist for taking advantage of humor and laughter as significant factors in the healing process.

Our family knows for sure that laughter is, indeed, the best medicine. And, now you know some of the most important reasons why I take humor seriously.

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