

Humor and Stress Management

by Patty Wooten RN BSN

HOW TO KNOW YOUR PATIENT IS A NURSE

- Takes her own pulse while you get the temperature.
- Asks if she'll be NPO tonight.
- Lists her pills generically.
- Can thread an IV tubing through a gown without making any knots.
- Brings a "Living Will" with her on admission and understands it.
- Makes her own bed - and the roommate's too if she can get to it.
- Takes out her own IV and foley catheter.
- Calls out suggestions to the code team when her roommate arrests.

These whimsical observations clearly demonstrate how our sense of humor helps us see reality from a different perspective.

A sense of humor helps us to manage the stress of caregiving. The "detached perspective" that humor provides helps us to disengage from the suffering we witness and, yet, still remain sensitive. When we allow ourselves to laugh about our situation, we can accept our inadequacies and forgive ourselves. Laughter fills us with joy which we radiate to others. It allows us to rise above our difficulties and experience the beauty of life beyond the hardships of giving care. We transcend our everyday problems and feel optimistic and hopeful. Searching for humor, looking for something to laugh about, keeps us from focusing on the elements that are overwhelming or depressing.

Laughing together can be a time of intimacy and communion, a time when we come forward, fully present and touch into each other's humanness and vulnerability. By joining in humor and acknowledging our oneness, we can have a profound experience of unity and cooperation. That in itself maybe one of the most profound expressions of healing energy of which we are capable.

Barry Sultanhoff, MD

Humor and Burnout

Nurses cope daily with the reality and horror of suffering, and death. Our compassion and caring may leave us vulnerable to feelings of sympathy for those we serve. We often use humor as a self protective technique to help us maintain some distance from the suffering. As a coping tool, humor provides us with a "detached" perspective. It

helps us to disengage from the suffering we witness and, yet, still remain sensitive. Christina Maslach, in her book, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*, describes how nurses use humor and laughter to cope with the stress and horror they frequently witness. "Sometimes things are so frustrating that to keep from crying, you laugh at a situation that may not be funny. You laugh, but in your heart you know what's really happening. Nevertheless, you do it because your own needs are important--we're all human beings and we have to be ourselves"

As a nurse-humorist, I have spent the last twenty years helping nurses understand how to use humor therapeutically for both their patients and themselves. As I travel around the world, nurses often share stories of funny things that have happened during this serious business of healthcare. I have gathered these stories together into the book, *Heart, Humor, and Healing*. One story describes about the pre-op patient who responded to her husband's question about the meaning of the NPO sign above her bed, she lifted up the sheets, looked beneath and stated: "Well, I think it means No Panties On." Recognizing and enjoying these humorous moments are essential to our mental health and emotional balance. The stress and tragedy of health care can be overwhelming. We need the balance that comedy provides, especially during these times of healthcare reform and managed care.

Humor is often used to express our anger and frustration, providing the proverbial "comic relief". For example: "What's the difference between a PPO, HMO and the PLO? Well, you can negotiate with the PLO." About six years ago, Doug Fletcher an ICU nurse from Mesa Arizona started the *Journal of Nursing Jocularity*, featuring stories, jokes, and cartoons about the funny side of nursing. This year's annual conference will feature a Broadway style musical entitled "Who's Got the Keys?" to be performed at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim on May 31st. For more information call: 602-835-6165.

Our ability to laugh about our situation is an essential survival tool for any nurse. Recent scientific research from Loma Linda University has defined the immune response to mirthful laughter. These changes include: increased activity of natural killer cells, increased numbers of activated T cells, increased levels of immunoglobulin A and gamma interferon. All of these changes serve to strengthen the ability of the immune system to protect us from infection and to offset the immunosuppressive effects of stress. This research and others are discussed in my book *Compassionate Laughter*, a comprehensive guide to understanding the therapeutic benefits of humor.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the importance of humor

When we allow ourselves to laugh about our situation, we can accept our inadequacies and forgive ourselves. Laughter fills us with joy which we then radiate to others. It allows us to rise above our difficulties and experience the beauty of life beyond the hardships of giving care. We transcend our everyday problems and feel optimistic and hopeful. Searching for humor, looking for something to laugh about, keeps us from focusing on the elements that are overwhelming or depressing.

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Body

Laughter is a wonderful tonic for the body: our heart beats stronger, our blood flows more briskly, and more oxygen is delivered to our cells. We breathe deeper and exhale more fully, clearing our lungs of stale air. Many muscles are activated as we laugh: the diaphragm, the intercostal muscles, the abdominal muscles

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Humor is a cognitive skill that uses both sides of the brain.

Our ability to laugh provides us with a momentary release from the intensity of what otherwise might be overwhelming. We use humor to gain a new perspective and to find a way to function in a situation that could otherwise be intolerable.

Spirit

Humor expressed with compassion, also connects us with others and is evidence of a strong spirit. Great spiritual leaders have a quick sense of humor and a free and easy laugh.

"Gallows humor" is a type of medical humor usually seen as hostile, inappropriate, or "just plain sick," by the people who are unfamiliar with healthcare professions. Gallows humor acknowledges the disgusting or intolerable aspects of a situation, and attempts to transform it into something lighthearted and amusing

Laughter and Tears

Laughing and crying often go together. They're both cathartic responses that serve to cleanse the body of distressing emotions. They provide an opportunity for people to communicate when they find themselves at the margins of their existence.

Integrating Humor into the Plan of Care

Before we begin to apply humor in a therapeutic way, we must be prepared. First, we must understand our own sense of humor and our ability to laugh (self assessment). Next, we must evaluate the receptivity of the person with whom we wish to share our humor (consider the receiver). And, finally, we must devise a plan and select the type of humor that matches our own style and the needs of the patient (develop skills and resources).

What value do you place on your own personal sense of humor? Do you really believe that humor is helpful? What makes you laugh? Once you understand what tickles your funny bone, you will be on your way to bringing more laughter into your life. Do you enjoy cartoons, jokes, toys, stand up comedy, amusing stories, being around funny people? Your sense of humor can help you cope with the stress of caregiving

Before you choose to use humor, ask these questions:

- Has your patient given you any clues that indicate they are receptive to humor?
- What is your patients' ability to perceive and understand humor?
- How does the patient use humor?
- Are there any humorous topics the patient might consider taboo?
- Do you find your patient has a preference for a particular type of humor?
- Do they prefer a certain comedy artist?
- Will the humor be perceived as annoying? Will it indicate Caring?

Creating Moments of Mirth

- Create a scrapbook of cartoons.
- Develop a file of funny jokes, stories, greeting cards, bumper stickers, poems and songs.
- Collect or borrow funny books, videos and audio tapes of comedy routines.
- Keep a file of local clowns, magicians, storytellers, and puppeteers. Invite them to entertain at your facility, the patients' home, or for a group function
- Collect toys, interactive games, noise makers, and squirt guns.
- Create a humor journal or logbook to record funny encounters or humorous discoveries.
- Establish a bulletin board in your facility or on your refrigerator at home to post cartoons, bumper stickers and funny signs.
- Subscribe to a humorous newsletter or journal to collect new ideas and inspiration.
- Educate yourself about therapeutic humor. Attend conferences, workshops, and conventions.

No matter how grouchy you're feeling,
You'll find the smile more or less healing.
It grows in a wreath
All around the front teeth,
Thus preserving the face from congealing.
--Anthony Euwer