

Professional Survival: You Can Laugh or You Can Cry

by Patty Wooten RN BSN

Nurses cope daily with the reality and horror of suffering, and death. Our compassion and caring makes us vulnerable to feelings of sympathetic pain. Caregivers often use humor as a self protective technique to maintain some distance from the suffering. As a coping tool, humor provides 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 country, nurses often share stories of funny incidents. Some of these stories are gathered together in my book, *Heart, Humor, and Healing*. One of my favorite stories is about the pre-op patient who responded to her husband 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 health care 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."

In 1991, Doug Fletcher, an ICU nurse from Mesa, Arizona started the *Journal of Nursing Jocularity*, that featured stories, jokes, and cartoons about the funny side of nursing. Over 35,000 nurses subscribe or attended the annual educational conference.

In 1998 the conference featured a Broadway style musical entitled "Who's Got the Keys?" performed at the Disneyland Hotel in California.

An ability to laugh about our situation is an essential survival tool for any nurse. Recent scientific research from Loma Linda

University has measured the immunological changes in 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. Laughter strengthens the ability of the immune system to protect us from infection and to offset the immunosuppressive effects of stress. This research and more are discussed in my book *Compassionate Laughter*, a comprehensive guide to understanding and creating a therapeutic humor program. Sometimes, patients or other caregivers may not understand how we can laugh when our work is so serious or the situation is so tragic. One group of nurses hung a sign outside their unit to explain.

You may occasionally see us laughing,
Or even take note of some jest.
Know that we are giving your loved one
Our care at its very best.
There are times when the tension is highest,
There are times when our systems are stressed.
We've discovered humor a factor
In keeping our sanity blessed.
So if you're a patient in waiting,
Or a friend or a relative of one seeing,
Don't hold our smiling against us,
It's the way that we keep from screaming.

And so, for professional survival during these stressful times of increased workloads and decreased resources, when tension is high and morale is low . . . try a healthy dose of humor. After all, laughter may just be the best medicine.