

Is Laughter the Best Medicine?

By Sheri Putnam



Sheri Putnam and guest Paul Henry, executive director of CONTRACT Bucks County.

Over the years, I've interviewed an amazing array of people who have survived various illnesses and injuries. And for several hours each week on my radio program "To Your Health," I realize that we often learn more from the patients than from the medical experts. And sometimes the most important lessons are the simplest.

Based on hundreds of hours of conversations with ordinary folks who have faced extraordinary trials, I'm joining the ranks of far smarter people than me who've already proclaimed that laughter really IS the best medicine... and best of all, it's usually free, readily available and can't hurt you.

In preparation for writing this article, I did what any modern columnist-wanna-be -in a-hurry would do - hit the Internet to see if anyone else had a good article that I could plagiarize! Quickly coming to my senses, however, I was able to find a little blurb about an annual event called "Laughter is the Best Medicine." I have heard this same message from many patients and callers who have graced our program-and it made me wonder: Is there any scientific proof that laughter can heal? That's when my Internet research really heated up.

So my question to you is, who do you believe first uttered the phrase "laughter is the best medicine?" I'll give you three

choices (three of the most commonly cited sources for any famous phrase, you're bound to get lucky with at least one):

- a) The Bible
- b) William Shakespeare
- c) Winston Churchill

If you guessed the Bible, you're right! Two references can be found that indicate that even in ancient times, men believed that a good chuckle could heal the heart and soul. (Proverbs 23:7 "As a man thinketh, in his heart, so is he" and Proverbs 17:22 "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dieth the bones")

But don't despair if you chose Willy Shakespeare, you're also correct! In his play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, a character is quoted as saying, "And frame your mind to mirth and merriment, which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life."

And Churchill? Well, most historic evidence suggests Sir Winston's first choice for medicine was brandy, not laughter-definitely making him my kind of guy. I will say that while the man may not be known for raucous laughter, he is not without inspirational thoughts and wry observations. One of my favorites appears later in this column (everyone knows that any good speech or article should end with a Winston Churchill quote).

THE STUDY OF LAUGHTER

Getting back to my initial premise-is there scientific evidence supporting the healing effects of mirth? I was surprised to find that there actually is a scientific discipline called Psycho-Neuro-Immunology (PNI). This discipline studies how our state of mind affects our health. In a nutshell (a very small shell, at that), PNI focuses on the hormones that affect all of the cells in the body. These hormones dictate the strength or weakness of our immune systems.

We're probably all familiar with some of the writers who've addressed the importance of humor and laughter in dealing with illness. For example, Norman Cousins wrote "Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient" in 1979.

In this unusual publication, Cousins reports that in addition to other treatments, he raised his laughter factor by viewing old Candid Camera and Marx Brothers shows and reading humor books. He felt that by raising his joy, he also raised his courage and ability to face his disease. He and his doctor also reported that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect—resulting in two hours of pain-free sleep.

Cousins and other experts went so far as to call laughter "internal jogging" for its effect on the whole body, reducing tension, releasing endorphins, improving circulation, the whole 9 yards.

In fairness to other studies, a Ph.D. in the Midwest attempted to refute Cousin's approach by producing a scholarly paper that basically states that laughter has nothing to do with happiness. While I can appreciate this alternative view that laughter can be a physiological response artificially induced, I'm still covering my bases with a good dose of "I Love Lucy." (Besides, I saw a picture of this Ph.D. and she clearly hasn't had a good laugh in months, if ever!)

Rather than focusing entirely on the science that proves laughter is good for you and that a positive attitude helps keep your step peppy, let's go back to the simple stuff. Reference after reference says children laugh an average of 400 times a day! Yet adults laugh more on average of 15 times a day. What happened to the other 385 laughs?? How did we grow out of this ability to find humor and be amused by life?

I've noticed in these hundreds of interviews I've done with people dealing with cancer and other illnesses, they DO have an AMAZING sense of humor. One cancer survivor guest noted my headphone hair and commented, "A bad hair day is way better than a no-hair day." So how is it that these people who are dealing with way bigger issues seem to have more of an ability to laugh than the average bear? I found one answer that made sense to me: Robert Heinlein, author of a science fiction novel "Stranger in a Strange Land" (about a Martian who came to earth to try and understand human behavior) reported, "I've found out why people laugh. They laugh because it helps the hurt ... because it's the only thing that'll make it stop hurting. The goodness is in the laughing ... it is a bravery and a sharing against pain and sorrow and defeat."

So I suggest that people who are in pain, who have extraordinary challenges, need to laugh more than the rest of us--and they've become experts at it. I also suggest to you, dear reader, that it behooves us all to think about how and where we can get back some of those 385 laughs we lost since childhood. Maybe you got a couple of extra chuckles out of reading this... for the rest, you're on your own.

I did promise to end on a Winston Churchill quote. Sir Winston observed: "If you're going through hell, keep going." And if a little brandy or a Seinfeld rerun helps, go for it!



"To Your Health with Sheri Putnam" is a live healthcare talk radio program heard 5-7pm on Saturdays on The Big Talker 1210 WPHT and Mondays from 10am-noon on WBCB 1490am and WNPV 1440am. Broadcasting live from the Health and Wellness Center by Doyelstown Hospital, To Your Health answers the Healthcare questions you want answered." Slightly irreverent, often amusing, always informative." Contact TYHSherri@aol.com.