

Does Humor and Cancer Mix?

By **Enid Schwartz**

- Humor helps when trying to cope with cancer.
- Humor helps a person realize there is life beyond cancer.
- Humor helps decrease stress and improve perspective.

Sometime in our lives someone we know will be diagnosed with cancer. Hopefully it won't be us, but either way the news is devastating. How does humor come into the equation? After all, as one person with cancer mentioned, "There is nothing funny about cancer." So true, the emotional roller coaster a diagnosis like cancer brings is not a fun ride. The highs are good, but all too few, and the lows can be devastating. However, without humor it is worse.

As a cancer survivor, and a lover of humor, I know that life without laughter during my cancer trip would have been more devastating than it actually was. There were other women in my cancer world that had also used humor but, while exploring the literature on humor and cancer in preparation for my dissertation, I found very little research. I found books written by funny people, like Gilda Radner and other less known women who were willing to humorously share their struggle. But information about the normal person on the street was missing. Needing a topic for my dissertation, I decided to explore the use of humor as a coping mechanism.

This exploration led me to 12 wonderful women, all of whom had been diagnosed with breast cancer. This is what I learned:

1. Cancer without humor would have been devastating. Each of the women, no matter what their circumstances, said they didn't know how they would have survived the experience without humor.
2. There is a definite time and place for humor, so it is important for others around the person with cancer to be aware that sometimes humor is not appropriate. Listen for cues from your loved one, friend, and co-worker. If they approach a topic in a humorous manner, it is most likely OK for you to respond in kind.
3. Don't overdo the funny stuff. One woman became hesitant to open emails from one of the other employees because he often sent her humorous material, and she resented his attempt to cheer her up.
4. The higher the fear level, the less likely the person was to use or appreciate humor.

5. Humor was a shared experience. It was easier for the women to find humor when they could share it with others.
6. Humor helped change perspective. It is hard to be scared, angry, or frustrated when you are laughing. It is believed humor works to change perspective by causing a cognitive shift, which results in offering a different view of the situation.
7. Using humor, or finding something to laugh at, not only seemed to change perspectives, it led to a feeling of having a heavy weight lifted.
8. Being able to laugh allowed the women to realize that life does continue. One woman stated, "If I can laugh, I can live."
9. Humor fosters connections between people. It is a way of decreasing tension, and, respectful humor tells the other person that someone cares about them.

What does this information mean for the cancer patient and for those around them? Here are some suggestions:

For the cancer patient, finding methods to cope with the overwhelming feelings that go along with diagnosis is important. Remember that, even though having cancer is not funny, there are still many funny things that occur in every day life. It is known that how you feel depends on the messages you give yourself about the events in your life.

1. Look for the humorous side of things:
 - Watch a child at play
 - Watch animals at play
 - Think back on events that were fun
 - Remember that embarrassing moment, like when you had toilet paper trailing behind you as you left the restroom
2. Keep a diary of things that happen that make you laugh or smile.
3. Utilize stress-relieving toys, such as toys that sing and move while singing. I had a toy hammer that squeaked when it was used and when I got upset I would pretend I was hammering a nail, it would squeak and I would smile.
4. Stay alert for funny things at home or work
 - Dumb ads on TV or the newspaper
 - Mistyped words on the Internet or newspaper
 - Laugh at your faux pas
 - Check out cartoons online or read those in the newspaper

5. Hold on to hope. Cancer, although it still can kill, is not longer the definite death sentence it used to be. I've been cancer free for 16 years! You are not dead yet. If you were you wouldn't be reading this, so find something to smile about, and remember that new cures are found frequently.

So what should you do if you are the friend, or relative, or neighbor? What can you do to help lighten the burden for the one with cancer? The following are some suggestions:

1. Be sensitive to the need of the person with cancer. They may need to talk, to cry or to laugh.
2. Share funny or humorous stories
3. There are a few books on the market that demonstrate humorous things that happen with cancer. Two books that deal with breast cancer are "Not Now I'm Having a No Hair Day" by Christine Clifford and "Chemotherapy Gives New Meaning to a Bad Hair Day" by Eileen Morin. Buy them one.
4. Watch a humorous movie together
5. Keep this in mind, cancer patients say that one thing often missing in their lives is others willingness to laugh around them, to tell jokes and be themselves.

Even though cancer can be devastating it is important to remember that life is continuing. Being able to laugh, being able to share funny stories and events, making fun of a bad experience, all these things help the person with cancer realize that they are still alive and that, maybe, they will continue to be alive for a very long time. As a cancer survivor I can say: I'm not glad I had cancer, but I'm not sorry either. Cancer teaches many lessons, and one of them is that humor is all around if we open our eyes and our hearts and hear the birds sing, watch a dog or cat at play, listen to a child laugh or stop and realize how lucky we are to have friends to laugh with us.