

Health Notes

By Marla Lichtsinn, RN, MPA, CIC, FCN, Parish Nurse

“... Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat and to drink, and to be merry...” Ecclesiastes 8: 15

APRIL: NATIONAL HUMOR MONTH!

(How appropriate... in the month that begins with All Fool's Day, a day which has sanctioned frivolity and prankish play since the 1500's!)

‘You’ve heard the one about the priest, the rabbi and the Methodist minister...’

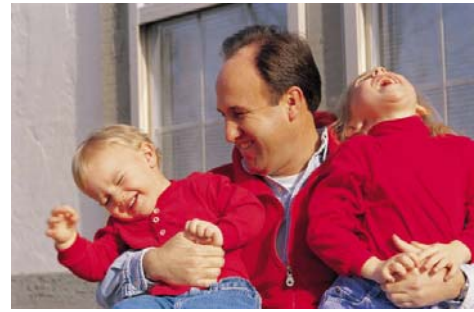
We all love to hear a good joke, or love to hear folks laughing at a joke we’ve told... Any why not? Laughter is natural – what sounds better than the giggle of a toddler being tickled? – and, best of all, laughter is healthy! Larry Wilde, founder and director of the Carmel Institute of Humor, notes “The act of laughing allows the body and mind to relax, to become more receptive to positive energy, to be refreshed! It’s complementary therapy – it eases anxiety, helps patients cope so that they benefit more fully with clinical procedures!” Voltaire said it first: “The art of medicine consists of keeping the patient amused while nature heals the disease.”

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE!

A positive attitude, with a healthy dose of laughter, has been shown in medical research to increase our natural “killer” cells (destroy tumors and invaders of our bodies such as viruses), as well as gamma-interferon (a disease-fighting protein), T-cells (the “sentries” of our immune system) and B-cells (these produce disease-fighting antibodies). In addition to lowering blood pressure, laughter increases oxygen in the blood, which also encourages healing. On the other hand, lack of a sense of humor is directly related to lower self-esteem, self-degradation and depression.

After a church service on Sunday morning, a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, “Mom, I’ve decided to become a minister when I grow up.”
“That’s okay with us,” mom replied, “but what made you decide that?”
“Well,” said the little boy, “I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell, than to sit and listen.”

A jovial outlook doesn’t require large amounts of time or money. Articles in both lay and health professionals’ literature have reported the virtues and cost-effectiveness of humor, as well as the idea that



humor or laughter can be therapeutic goes back to biblical times. The sound of laughter is far more contagious than any cough, snuffle or sneeze, and laughter can cause a domino effect of joy and amusement, as well as setting off a number of positive physical effects:

- Laughter lowers blood pressure: when people have a good laugh, initially the blood pressure increases, but then decreases to levels below normal; breathing then becomes deeper which sends oxygen-rich blood and nutrients throughout the body.
- Changes biochemistry: laughter decreases stress hormones and increases infection fighting anti-bodies and endorphins; it improves our attentiveness and heart rate.
- Protects the heart: an active sense of humor may help protect you against a heart attack, according to a study from the University of Maryland Medical Center: people with heart disease were noted to have been 40% less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people of the same age without heart disease.
- Gives your body a great workout: it exercises your diaphragm, abdominal, respiratory, facial, leg and back muscles; massages abdominal organs, tones the muscles that control intestinal action and support the organs in your abdomen, improves the absorption of nutrients... even burns as many calories as a few minutes on the rowing machine or exercise cycle!
- Improves brain function: laughter stimulates both sides of your brain, which enhances learning, reduces stress and improves retention of information.

More reading:

Let There Be Laughter, by Richard W. Bimler and Robert D. Bimler (Concordia Publishing House, 1999)

Angels Can Fly Because They Take Themselves Lightly, By Richard W. Bimler (Concordia Publishing House, 1992)

Laughing Your Way to Good Health, by Susan Vass (HMR Publications Group, Inc., 1999)

A Chuckle a Day Keeps the Doctor Away: Therapeutic Humor and Laughter by C. MacDonald (Journal of Psychosoc Nurs and Mental Hlth Serv., 2004; 42: 18-25)

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