

Caregiver's Corner Column (March 2012)

Humor in Caregiving ~ How Can I Laugh at a Time Like This?

By Kendra S. Schumaker
SarahCare Adult Day Center

When we think of caregiving, very rarely do we think of laughter. After all, it is laughter that brings us back into the joy of the present moment, usually in an unexpected way. Famous actor Bob Newhart once stated that, "Laughter gives us distance. It allows us to step back from an event, deal with it, and then move on." Isn't that just what we need as a caregiver? As a family caregiver, it is often too common to leave our sense of humor behind. After all, what is funny? At serious times, we tend to focus on the sickness, disability, or care needs of the person we love. Research has shown us that even in the grimmest situations, laughter and humor are good for us.

Finding humor in our day will allow us to lighten up, relax, and become more likely to find an improved mood. Many studies have shown that laughter is good for our health. Laughter is life's natural relaxant. When we laugh our whole body relaxes. Our immune system is boosted, and antibodies are increased which defend our body against abnormal cells. Blood flow to the heart is increased which provides a better air exchange, which oxygenates the entire body, and is a very good thing for our brain. This natural blessing also helps us deal with the challenges of caregiving and can help protect you, a caregiver, from a heart attack. Laughter also is a natural form of exercise for many of our large and small muscles including facial, thoracic, abdominal, and pelvic muscles. If we are optimistic about our daily activities, it is likely we will be better prepared to find the blessings in our caregiving journey. Humor can help us do this by shifting our focus off ourselves and on to other people. Laughter often is the best medicine. Laughter is contagious and helps us connect with others, especially the one we are caring for.

We have all heard the saying, "I laughed so hard I cried!" It turns out that there is strong evidence to support that these emotions are much more closely related than we once thought. [The Magic of Humor in Caregiving](#) by James R. Sherman discusses the therapeutic effects of humor in the caregiver situation. In his book, there is a story about an adult son who gave his father (whom he was caring for) a Super Soaker. The two ended up laughing and playing in a way that they had not done in years. It was a way for the father and son to connect in a very intimate, yet non-verbal and very powerful way. This was especially important for the adult son, because his father had lost many of his word-finding abilities due to dementia and his son really felt that he and his father were "on the same page." Often as caregivers, we miss the reassurance from our care recipient that we are doing a good job. We want reassurance that they know who we are, and that they know we love them.

If you have seen the movie, [The Bucket List](#), you may remember the discussion of the ancient Egyptians belief that when their souls got to heaven, there were two questions that would be asked before they could enter heaven. The first question was, "Have you found joy in your life?"

The second question was, “Have you brought joy to others?” It is especially true for us when we are going through the most serious times in our life that we remember there were joyful moments before the illness, and that there can be similar moments during, and after the caregiving has stopped. Often we are so caught up in the moments of caregiving that it does seem like it will last forever, but in reality caregiving will come to an end. As caregivers we dread that time, often don’t want to think about it, but if we recognize it we can make better choices, take better care of ourselves, and further enjoy the time we have with our loved one.

Now that we have discussed how valuable humor can be in a caregiver’s life, how do we realistically incorporate it in our daily life? My first step toward this was realizing that I can’t control the world around me, nor can I control my mother’s physical health. I can do everything I can to help her on her life’s journey, but ultimately I am not in control. This is where people often turn to their higher power for help. Next step: Be nice to yourself. Use positive self-talk, treat yourself as you would your best friend. Don’t always notice what you have not done as you think you should; instead focus on your best. Live as though you want to have “no regrets” with your caregiving at the end of your journey. Realize that this journey is uniquely yours. Learn to laugh now, rather than waiting for “someday” to laugh about life’s little quirks. Don’t take yourself too seriously. Think about creating a file of funny jokes, special cards, and other positive reminders that your time on earth as a caregiver will ultimately be brief, although sometimes it may not feel like it! Lastly, make time for a special friend(s) to spend time with. Fill your emotional bucket whenever you can and remember that without you, your loved one would have a deep void in their life. You are special. You are important. Take care of yourself.

Caregiver’s Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American’s Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664