February 27, 2014
· Amber Bauer, ASCO staff

Finding a Reason to Laugh [1]

amber.bauer

As Pat McRee showed earlier this week [2], humor can be a potent way to cope with the often intense emotions of cancer. But what do the experts say? Is laughter really the best medicine?

A number of scientific studies have linked laughter to positive effects on the body. For example, laughter may reduce pain, improve blood vessel function, release chemicals that relax muscles and produce feelings of pleasure, and stimulate the body's immune system. Laughter also appears to have positive effects on the mind. It may improve memory and problem-solving abilities and spur creativity.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of laughter, though, is its power to boost a person?s mood and feelings of wellbeing. Laughter can provide a sense of perspective when you are faced with challenging circumstances and help release pent-up emotions. It also may help reduce depression and anxiety and increase self-esteem, energy, resilience, and hope.

In a small study published in 2013 [3], researchers interviewed 17 women receiving treatment for recurrent ovarian cancer about the ways they used and viewed humor related to their diagnosis. The researchers found that nearly all (14 out of 17, 82%) used humor to cope with their diagnosis, and 13 out of 17 (76%) reported it helped reduce their anxiety. In a separate study [4], 93% of people facing a terminal illness (316 out of the 340 patient participants) said maintaining a sense of humor at the end of life was ?very important,? making it almost as important as the absence of pain.

Doctors and scientists still have many questions about laughter?s effects on people?s physical,

mental, and emotional health that require further research. However, as anyone who has shared a laugh with friends and family during a potentially awkward or tense time knows, humor can lighten a mood and bring people together like nothing else. The sad truth is that many people don?t know what to say or how to act when they see someone they care about affected by cancer. However, laughter often eases that tension, allowing friends and family to be more encouraging and supportive.

In addition, laughter has the power to create an important sense of familiarity and trust between people, strengthening relationships and laying a foundation for more serious discussions in the future. And this is true for friends and family as well as doctors, nurses, and other medical staff.

Of course, you won't always feel like laughing. But giving yourself permission to laugh is as important as giving yourself permission to cry. So when you do feel comfortable embracing humor, take the lead and set the tone. This will give those around you permission to laugh and relax too.

?Always find a reason to laugh. It may not add years to your life but will surely add life to your years.?? Author unknown

Tags:
coping [5]
emotions [6]
Related Resources:
Managing Emotions [7]
Talking About Cancer [8]
Read More >> [1]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/blog/2014-02/finding-reason-laugh
[2] http://www.cancer.net/blog/2014-02/keep-fun-funeral
[3] http://www.obgyn.wisc.edu/images/news/rose-humor-ovarian-cancer.pdf
[4] http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=193279
[5] http://www.cancer.net/tags/coping
[6] http://www.cancer.net/tags/emotions
[7] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions
[8] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/communicating-loved-ones/talking-about-cancer