

Keeping spirit alive at work: Taking care of the caregiver

L'ESPRIT SAIN AU TRAVAIL : PRENDRE SOIN DU SOIGNANT

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Une carrière enrichissante est une expression de notre humanité. Elle peut définir en grande partie qui nous sommes ainsi que la contribution que nous faisons à notre communauté. Pour une vie satisfaisante il nous faut tous des activités qui nous semblent importantes, des personnes proches sympathiques et compatissantes et l'habileté de demeurer ouverts aux possibilités de joie, de beauté et d'humour. Il est souvent dit que nous passons autant de temps avec nos collègues qu'avec nos familles; il est donc important de trouver des manières d'apprécier le temps que nous passons ensemble.

KEEPING SPIRIT ALIVE AT WORK: TAKING CARE OF THE CAREGIVER

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Meaningful work is an expression of our humanity. To a large degree, it defines who we are and what contribution we make to our community. To have a satisfying life we all need to have meaningful purposeful activity, be surrounded by caring and compassionate people, and have the ability to remain open to the possibility of joy, beauty and laughter. Many people say that they spend as much time with their colleagues at work as they do with their families. It is important that we find ways to enjoy being together.

Healthy humour is a symptom of mental, emotional, spiritual and organizational well-being for both the care-giver and the care-receiver. Healthy humour helps to reduce stress, create support networks, increase creative energy, build morale and produce healing chemicals in our body^{1,4,11,16}. A joyful attitude helps us strengthen our inner resources and cope

more effectively with things we cannot change^{4,7}. Life does not cease to be serious when we are laughing – indeed, it is during our most trying times that laughter can be most beneficial^{3,6,12,15}.

A healthy sense of humour has long been recognized as an indicator of mental health and maturity. Joy, beauty and laughter build bridges of trust and help us to maintain a sense of hopefulness. This helps to create connections with others^{7,8}. Laughter helps to alleviate fear and protects us against personal vulnerability^{14,15}. The physical benefits include relaxation, better blood circulation and oxygenation, and production of beneficial body chemicals such as endorphins^{1,14,16}. Healthy laughter helps us to feel better and get along with others^{2,9}.

When we enjoy being together, our communications are more likely to have positive outcomes^{7,13}. When we enjoy each other we become more attentive listeners, increase cooperative interaction and build trusting relationships.

While humour and laughter have many benefits, we should not assume that it is always welcome or appropriate¹⁰. During times of medical, emotional or spiritual crises, humour can be harmful. Sensitivity, intuition and rapport are crucial to selecting the appropriate use of humour with patients and colleagues. Receptivity, timing and content are important in deciding when, and if, to encourage laughter. The best humour is both spontaneous and meaningful in the moment. A good rule of thumb is to take cues from the other, watch for opportunities to bring light-heartedness to the situation.

Healthy humour comes from a position of love and support. If we develop our own humour skills we will be ready when the right moment presents itself. If humour is appropriate to the situation, the other will respond to it. If they do not respond, then this is not the right time. Initiate gently and with respect for others.

We should not confuse professionalism with seriousness. A sense of humour is a valuable

component of both self-care and patient care. We can maintain professional behaviour and still find lots of opportunities to share joy and laughter⁵. Humour skills, like any other skills, can be learned and improved. As with everything else we learn, our humour skills become better with practice. Most of us would benefit from laughing more than we do. Joy and humour counteract fear, anger and depression – people under great strain often find things to laugh about.

Humour that heals is compassionate; it brings people closer together and is mutually supportive. For me healthy humour is more about sharing personal stories than it is about telling jokes. In order to share joy, we first need to experience joy. When we focus on the things that cause us to suffer we soon get tired and discouraged and our feelings shut down. When we shift our focus to the positive things that are around us, we notice beauty, experience joy, become receptive to the possibility of laughter, and feel energized.

The ability to laugh, play, and enjoy life are good indicators of a healthy sense of humour. Children are naturals at this but most adults have lost much of their ability to play. What happens to us in the process of growing up – where does our laughter go? As we grow older we are expected to *act our age*, whatever that means. We take on responsibilities, go to school, get a job, and get sick – not necessarily in that order. We suffer losses, big and small. There are many reasons behind our loss of laughter.

To bring more joy in to your life start by making a list of the things that make you laugh. Who are your favorite comedians, clowns, or funny people? If you haven't laughed in a long time, think about the things that brought you joy in the past, then go out and start doing those things again. Your home life probably offers an endless supply of humorous material. Television, movies, books, and songs provide an abundance of laughable material.

You could throw a 'tell only funny stories' party. Invite people you know who love to laugh and



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have everyone come prepared to share their favourite stories. Our stories won't be about laughing at others. We will avoid stories that might be hurtful. Healthy humour invites everyone to laugh and is based on caring and building confidence; we don't get laughs at the expense of someone else. Write them down and add them to your own humour files.

Create a *laughter first-aid kit*. This can include anything that gives you a lift or makes you chuckle. Write a laughter contract with yourself promising "I will do one thing each day to bring more joy and laughter into my life. Today I will _____." Make a conscious decision to find the extra-ordinary in everyday events. Create an atmosphere of caring, support and joy at home and at work. Take ten to fifteen minutes, particularly during the most stressful parts of your day, to read the funnies, play a game, or share something wonderful with someone. Be a clown, liberate your funny bone, and release your playful inner child. Become more childlike (not childish – there is a difference). Spend time with children and let them teach you about healthy laughter and play.

Humour can be a tricky tool. Healthy humour is not used as a defense mechanism, to escape ones responsibilities, or to hurt another person. We do not want to use humour to diminish the seriousness of certain situations. Your patients and clients will toss humour lines so be ready to respond to them.

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Taking Care of the Caregiver (cont.)



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I was about to sign the permission for surgical removal of my right breast when I noticed that the consent form read, "removal of left breast". I called attention to the error and was assured, with sincere apologies, that the correction would be made. The next morning, before going into surgery, I put a note over my left breast that said, "This is not the one!" I heard later that the operating room and recovery room staff had a good laugh. As I grow older more and more of my friends are learning to live with physical disabilities, chronic illness, and difficult life events. They are determined, courageous, and honest about their feelings. In between the times of tears we spend a lot of time laughing together.

There are many ways to connect with colleagues or patients. Smile, laugh, or share hugs (when it is appropriate). Introduce creative ways to greet one another, instead of shaking hands with each other, try shaking elbows, shoulders, knees, etc. Initiate conversation about topics of interest to the other. Use open-ended questions such as, "If you had loads of time and money what would you do?" or "What's the funniest thing that happened to you today?" or even "When are you happiest?" Play *happy* music. I remember the music that was playing in the operating room while I waited for the anaesthesia. It was Stevie Wonder singing "I just called to say I love you." My eyes still well up with tears when I hear that song and remember the kindness of the OR staff.

I lost my laughter during cancer treatments. To get it back I took up clowning and started a *thanks-giving journal*, as ways to get it back. Clowning, while not for everyone, is an excellent technique for creating joy and laughter. We will be healthier and happier if we hang on to our sense of humour and have some fun *every day*. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). From my thanks-giving journal I composed a poem, which I dedicated to all OR staff:

*Thank you, Great Spirit, for the gift of laughter; for the people who bring me joy, for the comedy that makes me forget, if only for a moment. Thank you for the gift of creativity; for artists, whose work takes me out of the sadness and into a kinder place. Thank you for the ability to find great joy in simple things; for the peace of long walks in the country, for a cool lake on a hot day, for snow in winter, for music, meditation and prayer. Thank you for the gift of compassion, and the joy of forgiveness. And please, let me be at peace with whatever happens today.*⁷

I believe that meaningful work, caring people, beauty, joy, and laughter are the best stress busters. They help us to keep things in perspective and to face each day with renewed hope. Look for balance in life, strive for excellence (not perfection), and take time to stop and smell the roses. Keep physically fit, eat healthy food, get enough sleep, and make time for family and friends. Concentrate on taking care of yourself and taking care of each other. Give yourself rewards for small successes, pay attention to all the wonderful things you do, and try not to worry so much about what can't be done. Tap into your healthy humour attitude, build healthy relationships, focus on the things that really matter, be the best that you can be, and fill your life with beauty and joy. All of these things will help you to keep your spirit alive... at home and at work.

For more information on this topic please contact the author at www.healingwithhumour.com or cfenwick@sasktel.net.

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This award is presented at the ORNAC National Conference, if there is a suitable candidate, to an outstanding nurse who through major commitment has made a significant contribution to perioperative nursing in Canada. The Award winner will reflect the practice and ideals of Mrs. Isabelle Adams of Montreal. The Award was established on the initiative of the Operating Room nurses of Quebec, in 1987, and is one of high-profile recognition with no monetary award.

More details can be found at

www.ORNAC.ca

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