

Words About Wellness

Humor, Healing, and Health

It is well known that our moods, thoughts and feelings profoundly impact our physiology, immunology, and overall health. Humor and laughter are core cognitive and emotional processes that are vital to our well-being.

Humor can be defined as “a personality based cognitive emotional style of processing situations, characterized by the ability to find positive aspects even in negative situations, and the ability to communicate this point of view to others and to cheer them up.” (Wild, 2017) People who approach life with humor tend to be more realistic, flexible and less fearful.

Humor and laughter have been found to positively influence healing processes. Studies have found that humor-associated mirthful laughter can reduce cortisol and catecholamines, enhance immune response and increase the production of endorphins. Laughter has been found to facilitate healthy function of blood vessels and reduce unhealthy inflammation. Humor has been found to have a significant positive impact on mental health, cognitive function, and coping. Research has shown that humor can quickly reduce stress and alleviate anxiety. A study of older people found that humor improved short-term memory and enhanced learning ability.

In the health care setting, inclusive and kind-hearted humor among patients, providers, and staff can facilitate communication and make the experience more enjoyable and less stressful. Studies have shown that an atmosphere in which cheerfulness and humor is encouraged can reduce the risk of burnout in staff. It is important that humor be sensitive to cultural norms and be inclusive; one of the most healthful and adaptive forms of humor involves spontaneous conversational humor, which people generate in everyday life interactions. Such warmth and shared humor create a gentle, enjoyable, and healthful environment at work and in life.

References:

Bains GS, Berk LS, Daher N, Lohman E, Schwab E, Petrofsky J, and Deshpande P. The effect of humor on short-term memory in older adults: A new component for whole person wellness. *Advances* 2014; 28: 16-24.

Kurtz, LE and Algoe, SB. Putting laughter in context: Shared laughter and behavioral indicator of relationship well-being. *Pers Relatsh* 2015; 22: 573-590.

Martin R and Kuiper NA. Three decades investigating humor and laughter. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*; 2016; 12: 498-512.

Mora-Ripoll, R. The therapeutic value of laughter in medicine. *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*; 2010; 16: 56-64.

Savage BM, Lujan HL, Thipparthi RR, and DiCarlo SE. Humor, laughter, learning, and health! A brief review. *Adv. Physiol Education*; 2017; 41:341-347.

Wild, B. Humor in medicine – the art of leaping over the shadows. *Dtsch Med Wochenschr*, 2017; 142: 1919-1924.