

# Humor Your Tumor

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Humor was the last thing on Sharon's mind. She had recently undergone a double mastectomy, and was trying to get used to her prosthetic breasts. As usual, she had gotten up, put the coffee on, and went out to get the morning paper. But when she bent over to get the paper, one of her breasts popped out, and fell to the porch. Her dog, always on the lookout for a new toy, grabbed it and ran out into the yard for a game of "catch me if you can." Sharon ran after him, chasing him back and forth across the yard, shouting, "You let go of my breast! Come back here with my breast!"

Realizing what the neighbors must be thinking, she suddenly stopped and looked around. No witnesses. Then it hit her-the silliness of the whole situation-and she began to laugh. She convulsed with laughter for what seemed like several minutes, laughing so hard that tears were streaming from her eyes. When she finally stopped, she realized that it was the first time she had laughed since her surgery. And it felt great! She determined that from that point on, she would never again be without humor and laughter in her life-no matter how tough the days.

On June 2, 1996, I found myself in Binghamton, NY doing a program for cancer survivors and their families on National Cancer Survivors Day. A woman came up to me after the program and told me about her struggle against brain cancer during the previous two years, and that her doctors were continually amazed at how well she was doing. While some who were close to her seemed to be preparing for her death, she was very full of life and planning her future. She attributed her success to the fact that she had a good sense of humor, and always tried to find a light side of things- even on the toughest days.

My friends, who know I earn a living by talking to people about how humor helps cope with life stress-while contributing to physical health and wellness at the same time-are always puzzled when I tell them I'm speaking to cancer survivors about humor. "My God!" they say, "How can you laugh at cancer? There's nothing funny about getting cancer." And, of course, they're right. There's never anything funny about the fact that one has cancer. But learning to find a light side of things that happen as a result of your cancer, and keeping your sense of humor about the everyday things that have nothing to do with cancer, give you a powerful tool in coping with all the tough days you face. Your sense of humor also helps bring back some joy into your life.

There's no evidence that humor and laughter add years to your life, but they certainly add life to your years. The reason so many hospitals provide programs on humor for their Cancer Survivors Day program is that shared laughter reminds us better than any other experience that the day is really devoted to a Celebration of Life!

After virtually every program, someone comes up to me and says, "You know, what you said is so true. If it hadn't been for my sense of humor, I would never have gotten through

the treatments, let alone the disease." They note that finding a light side of things was essential to maintaining hope and determination to fight the disease. In the March/April, 1996, issue of *Coping*, Steven Barish noted how important humor and a positive attitude were in his own recovery from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Gilda Radner (*Saturday Night Live*) and Michael Landon (*Bonanza*) were models for us all as they showed the power of humor and laughter to boost the quality of life while battling cancer.

Of course, you don't want to use humor to deny the reality of the disease. You expect to go through a period of shock and denial when you receive your diagnosis. If you use a lot of humor during this early period after getting the news, chances you're probably not using it in a healthy manner. One woman, upon learning about her own cancer, spent the next couple of weeks telling people, "The bad news is, I have cancer. The good news is, I'm biodegradable." The constant joking, in her case, was probably a sign that she was refusing to come to grips with the reality of her disease.

Once you've reached the stage of acceptance, and are ready to move on and battle the disease as effectively as you can, humor is a powerful tool to help you cope on a day-to-day basis. If you haven't yet learned this lesson, perhaps a little information on the latest exciting research on the coping and health benefits resulting from humor will give you the incentive you need to make the effort to build more humor into your life.