

Laughter: Prescription for Pain Reduction

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"A clown is like an aspirin, only he works twice as fast." (Groucho Marx)

A nurse once told me of a Methodist minister who had been in a serious accident and had to spend several weeks in the hospital. He had a lot of pain, and was given shots to reduce it. The procedure was always the same. When the pain got bad enough, he would ring a buzzer near his bed, and a nurse would soon come to give him the shot. One day, he rang for the nurse and then rolled over on his side (with his back to the door), pulled his hospital gown up over his exposed backside, and waited for the nurse to come in. When he heard the door open, he pointed to his right bare buttock and said, "Why don't you give me the shot right here this time?"

After a few moments of silence, he looked up. It was a woman from his church! The minister—realizing what he had done—started laughing. He laughed so hard that tears were coming out of his eyes when the nurse arrived. When he tried to explain what had happened, he began laughing even harder.

When he was finally able to tell the nurse the whole story, what do you think he noticed? His pain was gone! He didn't need the shot, and didn't ask for one for another 90 minutes.

At some point following their diagnosis of cancer, many cancer patients find themselves thinking, "How will I deal with the pain?" The last coping resource they consider is their sense of humor. And yet there are many stories like the one above, along with a growing body of scientific research, showing that humor and laughter can play a significant role in reducing pain. In fact there are now over 30 studies documenting the capacity of humor and laughter to reduce pain.

The idea that laughter has analgesic properties is not new. Dr. James Walsh, an American physician, noted in his 1928 book, *Laughter and Health*, that laughter appeared to reduce the level of pain experienced following surgery. This observation then disappeared from the medical literature until the publication of Norman Cousins' 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness*.

Cousins was suffering from ankylosing spondylitis, a degenerative spinal disease which left him in almost constant pain. With the consent of his doctors, he checked himself out of the hospital and into a hotel across the street. He invited friends over and watched a lot of comedy films—and laughed a lot! He discovered that as little as 10 minutes of laughter would give him 2 hours of pain-free sleep.

The pain-reducing power of humor and laughter is now well documented in research. For example, several studies have shown that watching or listening to humorous tapes increases the length of time participants are able to keep their hand in ice water before it became painful.¹ There is even evidence that those who find the comedy material funnier are able to endure the ice water longer than those who find it less funny.²

In a study of 35 patients in a rehabilitation hospital, 74% agreed with the statement, "Sometimes laughing works as well as a pain pill." These patients had a broad range of conditions, such as spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, arthritis, limb amputations, and other neurological or musculoskeletal disorders.³

The explanation for why laughter reduces pain is not yet clear. While most people assume that it's because of the production of endorphins (one of the body's natural pain killers), there is still no published scientific evidence to support this view. The reduced pain may also be because of the muscle relaxation that occurs from laughter, or because humor and laughter distract us from the source of pain.

If you're a chronic pain sufferer, it doesn't really matter why humor and laughter ease your pain. The important thing is that it does. So you can just accept it as a gift on the days when you manage to find something to laugh at.

While laughter clearly helps ease pain for many individuals, it doesn't do so for everyone. It is not clear at this point just what kinds of pain a good laugh can and cannot soothe. The best advice at this point is to just build more laughter into your life and see whether it works for you. What do you have to lose? Even if it doesn't eliminate your pain, it will boost your spirits and bring more joy into your life on the difficult days.

[Adapted from McGhee, P. E. (1999). *Health, Healing and the Amuse System: Humor as Survival Training*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.]

References

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