

Expert says humor, health are linked

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Have you ever gotten a big chuckle from an item in the long-running Reader's Digest column "Laughter, The Best Medicine"? Perhaps without realizing it, you did exactly what the title advocates.

According to Barb Cacia, a long-time physical therapist and health educator, numerous health studies have shown a link between laughter and physical well-being. "The immune system responds to positive thoughts. There's no question about it," she said.

As an arthritis exercise specialist, Cacia works with many senior citizens and "prescribes" humor to them as part of their therapy. Positive results have occurred "more times than I can tell you," she said.

Cacia, 47, who attends Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Parish, also lectures frequently to civic and corporate groups on the advantages of increasing one's daily dosage of laughter. She cited two widely acclaimed books to support her views: *The Healing Power of Humor* (1989) by Allen Klein, and *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (1979), in which author Norman Cousins, faced with a debilitating illness, details how he improved his condition by watching comedy movies and television shows and engaging in prolonged belly laughing.

Cacia noted that laughter, in addition to emotional benefits, also gives muscles a good workout; burns calories; and creates a hormonal rush that increases alertness and numbs pain. Yet although humor might seem like an easily embraceable goal, Cacia said it isn't sought nearly often enough.

"There's this insurmountable stress. We're way too busy and way too serious," she stated. For instance, she feels that workplace conversations are moving away from telling the latest good joke and more toward such comments as "The hot-water-tank broke, there's no gas in the car, the kids were driving me crazy, I had to go to the mall and they didn't have what I



needed," she said.

Although there is a certain satisfaction in complaining, Cacia contends that as a habit it "doesn't really bring joy to life when you keep reporting all that's wrong. It doesn't draw people to you, it drives them away."

Meanwhile, retired people who are products of the Depression era may feel it's their obligation to remain dour. "Suffering becomes a way of life, even though they might have the money and health to enjoy life. The truth is, that's only in their head. They really need to celebrate life," Cacia said.

With these natural tendencies toward negativity, Cacia said a conscious effort to create humor may be needed. "You have to have a plan. It is a training ... it's all about changing your attitude and your perspective," Cacia emphasized.

She suggested adding a comic

book or humorous video, TV show or movie to the daily agenda. Wearing funny clothing can also serve as a good reminder to lighten up, she said.

Another key factor is the company one keeps: "I'd surround myself with people who are going to encourage me to see the lighter side of life," Cacia said. She added that telling a humorous anecdote helps keep conversation on the upbeat side. "It's making it a point to share those stories, rather than how bad your knees are and how your medication isn't working," she said.

Observing children and talking about them are helpful as well. "You can learn from the children. They're wonderful because they're so uninhibited," Cacia said. "We have too many rules and regulations."

Cacia is not suggesting that people suppress or ignore grief, depression or other negative feelings. "But there comes a time you say to yourself, 'Hey, time's up,'" she said.

That also goes for people with chronic pain: "There's still life to be lived in the state that you're in. I don't know if we teach people that," she remarked.

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