

# Surviving Dementia through Laughter

Mark Twain wrote, “The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter. Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.”

Professionals across the medical field agree that laughter is an effective medicine. It’s been shown to improve connections with others, increase blood flow to protect the heart, boost immune cells to fight infection, decrease stress through the discharging of physical and emotional tension, and trigger release of endorphins to relieve pain. But can the effects of laughter extend beyond the basic health benefits? Could it be used as a treatment for even the most devastating and incurable diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer’s?

Debbie Harbinson, a certified laughter leader and outreach program manager at Banner Alzheimer’s Institute, wrote: “For those with dementia, laughter can be instrumental in diffusing conflict and expelling the negative energy that so often causes them to retreat.” To further prove this theory, a group of humor therapists in New South Wales started the SMILE study. Over the course of three years, these humor therapists worked on 400 dementia-stricken people and found a twenty percent reduction in the patients’ agitated behavior like wandering, screaming, and aggression.

Speaking about the results of the study, Anne-Marie Botek from AgingCare.com said, “Laughter may be just as effective as antipsychotic medications for reducing anxiety in elderly people with dementia.” Part of the SMILE study was conducted in Summit Care nursing where the owner, Barry Cowling, said that because of the humor therapy they were able to reduce psychotropic drugs or even have some of the patients come off of psychotropic drugs completely. “We had a woman who was totally non-verbal who started to have conversations with staff and her family,” Cowling said. The effects of the laughter therapy had reduced aggression and depression so well that Cowling and many other nursing homes made the laughter therapy permanent after the study.

There’s no refuting the effect and change that laughter can have in dementia patients, but it’s still not a cure. Dementia and other more serious diseases such as Alzheimer’s are difficult living with but even more difficult to experience as a caregiver or family member watching your loved

one dissipate and forget who you are. As with many difficult situations in life, laughter can be used to help you and your loved ones view dementia in a new light. Laughter in these cases should not only be used to benefit the patient but should also be utilized by caregivers and family members who are also suffering.

Bill Cosby said, “Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.”

Sometimes it’s hard to see the end to the pain and we feel like we’re just trudging through from one day to the next, hoping somehow tomorrow will look brighter. It won’t. Not unless we do something about it.

People with dementia can sense the stress and unhappiness in those around them. You have a duty not only to yourself but to your loved ones to try to make the situation and environment as cheerful as possible. Gary LeBlanc talks about his experience learning to accept laughter as a caregiver for someone with Alzheimer’s disease. He said:

“There is no doubt that there’s heartbreak and despair in watching your loved one dissipate. I would suggest that you keep your environment as cheerful as possible.

I know that some of you are shaking your heads and asking, “How?” Well, take it from a veteran; throughout the decade I spent caring for my dad and searching for ways to cope, I discovered laughter is the best medicine.”

As a caregiver, take advantage of free moments when your loved one is resting or otherwise engaged. Don’t spend this time alone wallowing in your thoughts of the future and allowing yourself to sink deeper into grief and depression. Don’t spend this time watching a movie that makes you cry or reading a book that only dampens your spirits. Find ways to laugh. Spend time with people who are more easily optimistic or in a better situation than you and can help you see the silver lining. Watch movies and read books that are humorous and take your mind off the situation.

Keep things in perspective. You won’t be a caregiver forever, and the world doesn’t revolve around you. Thousands of others across the globe are suffering with dementia whether they have the disease themselves or are affected through someone they love. Find healthy ways to deal with stress and depression. If that means you need to take medication, see a therapist, or simply go

running more often, find what works for you. Look at what you do have, the small, almost unnoticeable blessings that make life worth it. Focus on those. Focus on love. As a caregiver or a family member, you are suffering because your loved one is suffering. Instead of focusing on the suffering, focus on how much you care about them and spend as much meaningful time with them as possible.

But above all, remember to laugh. Find a way, find a moment, and laugh *every single day*. As caregiver Gary LeBlanc said, “If I’m going to hurt, I’d rather have the pain be caused by laughing too hard. Throughout our caregiving journeys we deal with enough doom and gloom. Try to bring some sunshine and humor into your life. Never forget to laugh.”

In addition to helping yourself and the environment stay cheerful, you can find moments to laugh with your loved one. Depending on the stage of dementia your loved one is in, you may want to be more careful about telling a joke that could offend them because they don’t understand. For those with mild to moderate dementia, blatant, obvious, slapstick humor works best as they won’t get as easily confused.

For those with advanced or late-stage dementia, play games like you would with a child, tossing a ball back and forth and laughing when you miss catching it. Read silly books and make funny sounds. At this stage they may not specifically smile or laugh with you, but the enjoyment will still have a positive impact.

Whether you’re laughing on your own or with your loved one, make laughter a priority. It may seem cliché to say that ‘laughter is the best medicine.’ But it has been proven time and time again to improve health, both physical and emotional. Life is much better as we laugh through it. As William Shakespeare said, “With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come.”

*This article was provided by the National Care Planning Council, a group dedicated to helping families recognize the need for long term care planning and helping to implement assistance for that need.. For more information about their organization, please see [www.longtermcarelink.net](http://www.longtermcarelink.net).*