

Humor Helps Maintain Dignity

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December is a time for reflection, which may be accompanied by a heightened awareness of emotions while caregiving for a loved one with dementia. There are caregiving challenges that arise almost daily and the needs of your loved one may become more complex as time progresses. When consumed by caring for your loved one and meeting his or her needs, laughter and joy are prescriptions that no doctor can write. These serve as effective medications for those who are overwhelmed and in need of something to smile about again.

We live in a world that is in constant motion and we get caught up in the day-to-day tasks, challenges and loved one's needs. We don't take time to stop and smell the roses or laugh and experience the joys that life can bring. It would be nice if there were manuals for being a caregiver, but none exists because the needs of each loved one is unique.

As 2017 approaches we encourage you to reflect over the last year and ask yourself if you smiled or laughed? If your answer is "no" then it is important to stop, take a deep breath and find some humor. Smile and inhale a dose of laughter because it is the best medicine. Our holiday wish is a world without Alzheimer's. As the search for the cure continues, we wish for a holiday filled with laughter and joy.

There is nothing humorous about dementia. However, laughter can help dementia caregivers, and improve the quality of life for those afflicted by the disease. Studies show that laughter boosts the immune system and triggers the release of pleasure-



inducing neurochemicals in the brain. **In terms of dementia-specific benefits, the greatest advantage of humor is that it provides sufferers with much-needed mental stimulation.** Humor challenges our loved ones to engage their minds as fully as possible. It's also an effective tool for keeping social links active and reducing the sensations of paranoia and agitation that many people with dementia struggle with.

Currently more than 5 million Americans have progressive dementia and it is predicted that as baby boomers age that number will more than triple by mid-century. Dementia is usually a family matter that confounds the job as caregiver. Many caregivers find that humor is a good way to help distance and relieve the stress caused by the increasingly complex needs of a loved one.

It is common to hear caregivers say "I laugh to survive and if I didn't laugh I would cry." Many caregivers agree that

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Tips

Humor helps with the stress that comes with caregiving by:

- * Relieving stress
- * Promoting mental health
- * Strengthening family relationships
- * Strengthening the immune system so caregivers stay healthy
- * Easing tension
- * Lightening the mood
- * Allowing time for enjoyable moments

Humor helps people who live with dementia by:

- * Allowing them to redirect negative emotions
- * Easing symptoms of depression
- * Tempering signs of aggression
- * Reducing stress
- * Improving social interaction
- * Maintain their dignity

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laughter can help. Living with dementia is not in itself humorous, however, in finding the lighter side of a difficult situation, it is ok to laugh. Because of the many benefits of laughter, finding humor in the day-to-day realities of caring for a loved one with dementia produces this positive response.

In her 1995 nominated documentary film, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, Deborah Hoffmann tenderly explores love and the meaning of memory. She does this while having a conversation with her mother, who mentioned off handedly that it was the month of April. Deborah got so involved with wanting to **correct** her, as it was June, that her mom was reduced to tears. Deborah then hurried over to her mother's apartment saying, "I'm here to show you June." By that time her mother had no memory of that difficult conversation.

Deborah's liberating moment came when she realized that while reality was important to her, it had no meaning for her mother. Enjoying each other's company did not depend on accurate facts.

The sheer craziness of trying to control the uncontrollable allowed Deborah to finally say, "What does it matter if she thinks its April?" Taking the time to recognize the bright spots and laugh whenever the opportunity presents itself can work wonders for both those who have dementia and those who care for them. Too often dementia is seen only as defeat and decline, but it is not necessary to endure such incident in grim seriousness.

It is true that as dementia progresses mental functioning is reduced and a person will

become less capable of understanding complex jokes. Thus, they may become defensive if they perceive that someone is laughing at their expense. However, if approached with sensitivity, the lighter side can produce positive feelings in a person with dementia, leading to the benefits of increased immune functioning.

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A caregiver who understands his or her responsibility to empathize with his or her loved one can easily make the distinction between ridiculing humor and unifying humor, and can thus find plenty of occasions to laugh together. Injecting a little levity into the often-trying process of caring for a dementia patient is a great way to strengthen the relationship and celebrate life. Laughing, and even gentle teasing, can reduce tension for both the caregiver and his loved one who, while cognitively impaired, is still greatly influenced by ambient tensions.

Despite the unhappy circumstances that accompany a loved one with memory loss, it is important to keep in mind that it is OK to laugh. Not only is laughter acceptable, it is considered beneficial to your loved one is strongly encouraged by experts.



Tools

Look for a variety of ways to help your loved one laugh. Playful kidding, visual humor, joke books, DVDs of old comedy favorites such as *The Carol Burnette Show* or anything else that creates laughter is good for all!

