AMDA Past-President Arif Nazir, MD, FACP, CMD, AGSF, talks about the benefit of guffaws for your older loved one.

The idea that laughter is the best medicine is no joke. In fact, laughter can help relieve stress, ease pain, improve your immune system, increase personal satisfaction, and improve your mood. Laughter as medicine is also free and has no side effects.

Why does laughter make us feel good? There are several reasons. For one, laughing releases endorphins, those chemicals in the brain that create an emotional high. Laughing also triggers the release of serotonin, the same chemical in the brain that some antidepressants target. Laughter can even protect your blood vessels and heart muscles from some effects of cardiovascular disease. At the same time, laughter is contagious: it can spread endorphin release throughout a group of people and promote feelings of togetherness and security.

Research suggests that not all laughter is created equally. Spontaneous, happy laughter, for instance, may stimulate a different reaction in the brain than laughter from being tickled or cruel laughter at the expense of another person’s feelings. For instance, positive mood is most closely associated with spontaneous, happy laughter. Researchers also suggest that happy laughter helps reduce agitation levels in patients with dementia.

What makes someone laugh is very personal. However, humor can also be learned and certainly encouraged. You can help your loved one laugh more in several ways:

• Get humor in your sights. Watch funny movies or TV shows with your loved one. If they have a favorite comedian or comic actor, share those videos or recordings. Pin up funny cartoons or greeting cards in the room. Reminisce about funny stories from the past. If possible, take your loved one out occasionally to a comedy show or movie.

• Try laughter yoga. This is a fun activity where people practice laughing as a group. The laughs may seem forced at the beginning, but the joy is contagious; eventually people are laughing for real.

• Look for ways to spread humor. Read some joke books and come for visits armed with riddles or funny stories for your loved one.

• Find laughter in everyday situations. For instance, if you bring your dog to visit your loved one, put a funny hat or silly outfit on it.

• Revisit humorous memories. For instance, if you bring your dog to visit your loved one, put a funny hat or silly outfit on it.

• Encourage your loved one to spend time with other residents who make them laugh.

What You Can Do

• Make it a point to find ways to laugh with your loved one.

• When you visit, bring things that make your loved one laugh, such as movies, TV shows, records, cartoons, or humorous books or pictures.

• Don’t be afraid to be silly sometimes. Wear a funny hat, do a silly dance, or talk in a funny voice. Do things that make your loved one laugh.

• Find out from others who know your loved one what they laugh at and find amusing or entertaining.

For More Information


