

Laughter in the Face of Tears

The above title may seem inappropriate to some. “Death is not funny,” you might think. The idea of laughing at a time of loss seems antithetical to the emotional upheaval that you may be feeling. Yet in a recent collaborative study that investigated the relationship between laughter and grief, we found that it is perfectly understandable to laugh at a time when you least feel like it. The healing benefits encompass body, mind and spirit and help to ease the pain.

Why laughter? If laughter is the best medicine, then is there anything that cannot be eased by using it? When you are grieving several symptoms are common. Your immune system is suppressed. Some research indicates that laughter boosts the immune system. Another common experience that individuals have after the death of a loved one is difficulty in concentrating. This lack of concentration can be a great gift when someone is grieving. We could not function if we were to face the enormity of the loss all at once. So, the brain slows down and lets reality creep in little by little. This process could take weeks, months or even years, but the slow recognition of how life is now forever changed is part of the natural grieving process. This also means that you may find yourself living by Post-It notes. Simple tasks are forgotten and you must rely upon taking copious notes to remind you of the tasks of the day. Many people have found themselves at the grocery store in tears because they cannot remember what they went there for. Again laughter can help with brain function and memory retention. Stress levels rise, sadness and depression increase and it becomes difficult to find joy for even a moment. Laughter, laughter, laughter. Erma Bombeck’s words, “If you can’t make it better, you can laugh at it,” exemplifies this attitude.

Many have found that laughing feels good following a loved one’s death. In a recent collaborative study, our team investigated the relationship between laughter and grieving. A survey of over 400 individuals provided our research team with diverse opinions on humor and coping. For example, one participant wrote that “*Laughter is a way of lifting that heavy burden of loss and all facets of grief if only for a few minutes. It is a wonderful respite.*” Telling stories about their loved one helps them to cope. Others have created their personal Humor Plan of Action (HPOA.) This is a way to schedule laughter into their day. It may be from reading the comics or watching a favorite sit-com or movie. I recommend going to the library. You can check out a funny book, find a book on tape or a comedy on DVD. At home you can go to www.youtube.com and put in your favorite comedian under videos and watch their best clips. Some of the survey respondents turned to gallows humor – making an uncomfortable moment lighter. One woman visited her mother’s grave and found the ground to be cracked and parched. The soil had settled unevenly and it appeared like a hole was forming. She turned to her brother and said, “*It looks like Mom is trying to get out to get her cigarettes.*”

We found that some participants felt that it was difficult to laugh again after the death of their loved one. They may want to laugh, but do not find anything funny. Others may find it objectionable to laugh at such a time. One woman found that others stopped offering her comfort as they took her laughter as a sign that she was fine. For many guilt



often accompanies those moments when they experience happiness again. Living with loss can be a contradictory experience.

When coping with a death you can get all of the physical and emotional benefits of genuine laughter through therapeutic laughter. This is laughing for no reason. Your brain does not need an outside stimulus to make the sound of laughter. You have the ability to produce that sound at will. Your brain cannot fully differentiate one type from another. Try laughing for thirty seconds or a minute right now. Just set this article aside, close your eyes and laugh. Play with the various sounds – chuckle, giggle and tee hee. Feel better? If a doctor told you that he had a prescription for something that could lift your moods, boost your immune system, help you to concentrate, reduce stress and was readily available without cost, wouldn't you take it? That is the gift of laughter.

There is not a single person who thinks that their loved one would want them to remain miserable and never feel happy again. If you are seeking permission to smile and laugh again, then think of it as a path to healing. Perhaps you get onto that road by remembering funny stories about your loved one. You may look at old photos or home movies and recall happier times spent with them. It may be a day spent out with friends or family having a good time and temporarily touching in with joyful feelings. There is a place for every emotion when grieving. Laughter, anger, guilt, joy, tears and bitterness are all appropriate emotions. It is important to identify what you are feeling and visit that neighborhood, but don't build your house on Anger Alley or Offended Lane. Recognize that guilt is a common partner to joy when grieving.

Just as each of us experiences grief differently, so too do we approach humor and laughter individually. What place it holds on your healing journey is a personal decision based upon your comfort zone and inclination towards humor. By understanding the healing benefits of the sound of laughter, you can begin to realize why this is such an important tool to use. Whether you laugh for no reason or develop a full Humor Plan of Action, I encourage you to smile, giggle, chuckle and laugh. You will discover that there is a place for laughter in the face of tears.

This article is offered as part of our funeral home's grief support program. The author, Nancy Weil, serves on the staff at the International Order of the Golden Rule (OGR) of which our funeral home is a proud member. She is a Certified Grief Management Specialist who has run grief support programs for over 13 years. You are invited to join our monthly telephone grief support group that Nancy facilitates. Please call our funeral home for more information.