“A time to cry and a time to laugh
A time to grieve and a time to dance.”
Ecclesiastes 3:4

Whether it be on an individual level or a national level, we all experience grief. Grief is a normal response to loss. There are many types of losses, such as the loss of a home, job, pet, relationship, body part, or a loved one — the list is endless. The key is to not be paralyzed or frozen by the grief, but to move through it by using healthy ways of coping. On September 11, 2001, our world was changed forever, and we will never “get over the losses;” however, we are trying to pick up the pieces and adjust our lives. Many years ago, Dr. Kubler-Ross provided pioneering work with understanding death, dying, and grief. She described the five stages of grief as:

1. Shock and denial
2. Anger
3. Guilt
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Keep in mind that no individual experiences grief in the same way. However, these feelings are expected when someone is grieving. Since experiencing these feelings may often be painful, many people turn to maladaptive coping, which offers help for a very short period but has the potential to make things worse. Eventually, when the time is right, which could be from months to years, we can all learn techniques to help promote adaptive coping.

As a nurse who works for The Hospice of the Florida Suncoast, I often recommend joining a bereavement support group or seeking individual help from a chaplain or counselor in the community. One of the most important ways we need to explore during the life journey is developing a positive attitude. Common sense tells us that if we wake up thinking, “Today is going to be a terrible day,” you can be assured that each day will follow your thoughts. Dr. Arnold Pangrazzi published the following Ten Suggestions To Help Overcome Grief:

1. Take time to accept death.
2. Take time to let go.
3. Take time to make decisions.
4. Take time to share.
5. Take time to believe.
6. Take time to forgive.
7. Take time to feel good about yourself.
8. Take time to meet new friends.
9. Take time to laugh.
10. Take time to give.

Humor and Hospice

Step number nine states that we need to take time to laugh! Learning to laugh helps us survive and re-enter life. One of the first signs of depression is the loss of our sense of humor. As a part of our hospice’s Comfort Works Program, we offer patients and families a variety of creative techniques, such as aromatherapy, massage therapy, music, art, and humor therapy. To help provide comic relief, we formed The Hospice Smile Team, which includes clowns, volunteers, and staff who promote laughter techniques in a variety of settings.

The words humor and hospice do not seem to fit like a hand into a glove. Even our famous comedians admitted that after 9/11, they lost their desire to be funny. Ecclesiastes 4:3 so clearly states: “There is a time to cry and a time to laugh...”

The late Steve Allen wrote dozens of books on how to be funny and shared this formula: “Tragedy plus time equals comedy.” Many of our chaplains have shared that one of the most frequent requests by families for the funeral service is, “Make sure you talk about his or her sense of humor.”

Many individuals want to share their humor on their headstones. Here are two examples: “I told you I was sick” and “Now I know where he is every night.” What a wonderful legacy and unique way to remember our loved ones. Try to create a journal and record some of your family’s funniest moments.

In several of the articles written about the memories of Britain’s “Queen Mum,” Prince Harry and

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Note: We look forward to sharing some of your funny stories. Please send them to: Comic Relief, Urologic Nursing, East Holly Avenue/Box 56, Pitman, NJ 08071-0056; e-mail: uronsg@ajj.com
Prince William shared how much she laughed at herself and always told them jokes. My grandmother lived to be 99 and looked a lot like Queen Mum. She was a very proper Bostonian lady with a well-developed sense of humor. My favorite memory of her is an interview she gave to a reporter doing a story on longevity. She still lived alone in her apartment until she was 96 years of age. The reporter asked her if she used any assistive devices, such as a walker or a cane. She said, “No, I can walk perfectly fine on my own.” Then he asked her if she took any medication for a bad heart or lungs. She said, “No, I do not take any medications at all.” Then, he slumped in his chair and said to my grandmother, “It’s amazing that a woman of your age isn’t bedridden!” Well he said the wrong words to my grandmother. She straightened right up and said to the reporter, “I never said THAT. Honey, I have been bedridden many times and twice in a buggy.” Needless to say, her quick wit put him into his place. We all laughed and he included that comment in his article. Our sense of humor has no age limits, no cultural barriers, and is a universal skill to provide stress relief!

The Best Medicine

With all the good psychological relief humor provides, I am surprised more health care facilities and hospices have not incorporated “Comic Relief.” Research has demonstrated many benefits of laughter. When we chuckle or laugh out loud, we provide exercise to the lungs. If you laughed to the point of tears, you triggered a release valve eliminating stress and toxins from your body.

Additional physical benefits from laughing include increasing blood circulation, clearing bronchial secretions, boosting the immune system, and as the late Norman Cousins described, providing internal jogging. So, if you have friends who suffer from constipation, offering them a funny story could help them to get things moving. There are a few areas that should be approached with caution. Some individuals with asthma need to laugh at their own pace, and if you suffer from urinary incontinence, you may need to wear a pad, but don’t stop laughing because the exercise is good for both your body and your mind!

Our Hospice Smile Team has sponsored several activities for our staff, such as giving every department team member a red sponge nose celebrating April as National Humor Month. One of our vice presidents sends weekly funny e-mail messages and promotes cartoons on bulletin boards. Our volunteers stuff 30 clean jokes and riddles into real prescription bottles that we give to doctors, nurses, support groups, and patients. The RX label says:

Laughter Is the Best Medicine
Take as Needed
Dr. Riddle A Day

Once, after providing a lecture on humor for a cancer support group where everyone received a prescription bottle, the director of the cancer center called me the following day. She shared not only her delight with the positive attitudes from the participants but said, “I wish you could see our waiting room right now! The patients and families came with the prescription bottles and are reading the jokes to the others who missed the support group and everyone is laughing.” Just think about this for a minute. People do not generally laugh in a doctor’s waiting room, especially when going for various cancer treatments.

Refueling the Heart and Soul

Over the last 15 years of promoting humor in health care settings, the wonderful stories continue to refuel my heart and soul. I returned recently from presenting this topic at the Humor Projects International Conference in Saratoga Springs, New York. One of the participants won a RX bottle for sharing a funny moment. After the session was over, he and several others came to share their stories with me. When this young man approached me, he gave me the most embracing hug I have ever had and told me that he could not thank me enough for helping him rediscover his sense of humor. He is a surviving New York City fireman who lost most of his friends and co-workers on 9/11. He showed me a smiley-face button that had blood drops dripping from it because they had lost their ability to laugh. He said he was anxious to take the information on the healing powers of humor back to his fire station. When you can help even one person smile or learn to laugh again, it is the greatest gift you can ever give.

Consider starting your own humor first aid kit because reaching out to share some comic relief will fill your heart with joy. The key ingredients for a humor first aid kit are:

- A big smile (your own).
- Joke or comic books.
- Games to play.
- Cartoon albums.
- Gag items like red noses, rubber chickens, or funny hats.
- Funny buttons or stickers.
- Watch or listen to comedy video or audio tapes.

As we move through the grief process, the journey will take you from moping to coping to hoping. My challenge to you is to try smiling or laughing with at least 3 people each day. Ask families to share their funniest memories and live, love, and laugh together. My Dad sent me this little message a month before he collapsed and died with a massive stroke.

“Honey, I thought you might be able to use this message in one of your motivational lectures: Yesterday is history,
Tomorrow is a mystery,
Today is a gift,
That’s why we call it the present.” We believe that every day is a gift and invite you to enjoy the journey.