LIGHTEN UP!
THE USES OF LAUGHTER IN DEMENTIA CARE

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Objectives

- Describe the physiological benefits of laughter
- Identify common triggers for behavioral expression in people living with dementia
- Discuss strategies for using laughter to connect with a person living with dementia
- Explore the value of laughter for professional self-care

The physiology of laughter: why do we laugh?

- Unique to humans
- Complex set of facial movements, contractions of the respiratory muscles, and emotional vocalizations
- Engages multiple regions of the brain
- Releases stress and tension
- Provides social cues: safety, security, fulfillment of needs, connection
- Can be voluntary or involuntary
Types of humor: what makes us laugh?

- Surprise and incongruity
- Jokes, comics, and cartoons
- Puns and wordplay
- Slapstick and pratfalls
- Sarcasm, dry humor, wit
- Self-deprecation
- Being tickled
- Release from strenuous tension
- Contagion

The benefits of laughter: how does the body respond?

- Stimulates the heart, lungs, and muscles
- Improves respiration and circulation
- Endorphin release: activates and relieves the stress response
- Soothes muscle tension
- Elevates pain thresholds
- Strengthens the immune system and resistance to infection
The benefits of laughter: **mental health benefits**

- Reduces stress, anxiety, and tension
- Improves depressive symptoms
- Elevates mood
- Enhances memory and creative thinking

Using humor in difficult circumstances: Is it okay to laugh?

- Laughter, humor, and play are critical social tools
- Humor puts people at ease and promotes the exchange of ideas
- Humor is a coping mechanism
- Laughter allows us to share our humanity and folly
- Connection and kindness
Dementia-related changes in key regions of the brain

- Temporal lobes: memory (visual and verbal), speech perception, interpreting the emotions and reactions of others
- Frontal lobes: executive function, language, emotional expression, empathy
- Parietal lobes: perception of sensory information, bodily orientation
- Occipital lobes: recognition of objects, spatial perception

Personality changes and behavioral expression

- Insight and judgment
- Social withdrawal
- Resistance
- Confusion or confabulation
- Agitation or combativeness
- Difficulty with initiation and termination of tasks
- Difficulty detecting sarcasm or humor
What’s our role in this?

• Our own emotions and reactions
  — Discomfort
  — Fear
  — Embarrassment
• Forgetting about what remains
  — Non-verbal communication
  — Multisensory skills
  — Music and rhythm
  — Laughter

Laughter therapy: what does the research tell us?

Humor therapy, laughter meditation, laughter clubs: general and behavioral health benefits are well-documented

Symptom management in people living with dementia
• Takeda study: the use of humor can be an effective complementary/alternative intervention for BPSD
• SMILE study: humor therapy did not significantly reduce depression but did significantly reduce agitation in nursing home residents with dementia
Laughter in dementia care: adapting to changing senses of humor

- Changing personal definitions of “funny”
- Difficulty following or comprehending complex information
- Visual versus verbal humor

Laughter in dementia care: current best practices and resources

- Elder-clowns (Canada, Australia)
- Laughter on Call (U.S.): laughteroncall.com
- Laughter clubs worldlaughtertour.com

Source: International Network for Critical Gerontology
Laughter in dementia care: everyday strategies

- Jokes
- Word play
- Music and singing
- Facial animation
- Physical humor and activities
- Animals and babies
- Storytelling
- Watching or listening to laughter
- Improvisation

“Self care is giving the world the best of you, instead of what’s left of you.”
-Katie Reed

- Laughter and humor in the workplace provides physical and mental health benefits
- A leadership skill
- Promotes connection and relationship-building: builds community
Resources


Positive Approach to Care (n.d.). www.teepasnow.com


References and sources


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