



The Healing Power of

Laughter

by Candace Brown

All too often, precious moments of our lives are consumed with anger, sadness, or worry. Although each of these feelings plays an important role in an emotionally balanced lifestyle, when they get out of control our emotional health begins to suffer and we fall victim to undue worry, insecurity, and hostility. When our emotions continue to go unchecked, the consequences grow and spread to other parts of our lives, affecting our relationships with others and even our physical health. Luckily, we all have laughter on our side. Humor, like anger, sadness, and fear, is an enduring characteristic of the human condition and acts as nature's counterbalance to the other three. Here are some reasons to consider adding laughter into your routine.

Laughter Dissolves Distress

We're told the neural activity in our brains that occurs when we experience anger makes it physically impossible to think clearly. Similarly, science has shown that introducing humor to the emotional equation temporarily bars our brains from experiencing fear, anger, or sadness. If we can consciously apply this technique, it can help us in just about any situation.

For example, if you can't shake a bad case of the nerves while you're preparing for a job interview or a business presentation, just take a step back and have a little laugh, whether at your own situation or something else, and feel the anxiety disappear; it's the same principle behind the age-old technique of picturing an audience in their underwear. Learning to limit how seriously we take ourselves can have positive long-term effects, such as increasing our ability to find solutions to complex personal issues and helping us to maintain a healthy self-image.

If your emotional burden stems from

something more far-reaching, like the loss of a loved one, it may take more effort to interrupt the cycle of negativity. First, though, remember that sadness has a rightful place on the emotional spectrum, and grieving is a normal, healthy reaction. If it gets out of hand, however, you can try remembering your loved one in a humorous way, or just purposefully devote some time to laughter every day and see if your emotional scale doesn't tip back in the direction of balance.

It may sound difficult, but just remember that painting humor into your perspective goes a long way toward creating a psychological distance, which in turn can provide relief from the toll taken by a heavy emotional load.

Laughter Loves Company

Humor can be a lot easier to come by, and a lot more meaningful, when it's shared. Often it's the irony in different perspectives that brings the humor in a situation to light. Other times, we simply need someone less burdened by a negative outlook to point us toward the brighter side. In any case, whether we're dealing with frustration, bitterness, or loss, sharing the emotional weight of our circumstances with another person can make the difference between being able to bear it and being crushed beneath it.

Sharing humor helps us in many other ways as well, as it triggers positive feelings and strengthens the emotional bonds we share with others. The stronger these bonds, the better equipped a relationship is to withstand stress and disappointment. Laughter in a relationship can also be synonymous with joy, satis-

faction, and buoyancy, as humor helps us be more spontaneous and expressive, as well as less defensive. Incorporating more laughter into our lives can not only aid us in our most intimate relationships, but also in our interactions with friends, colleagues, and even strangers.

Although we might not think of humor as a habit, it can be a healthy one to cultivate. When we're in the middle of a destructive emotional storm, sometimes laughing seems like the last thing we care to do, and it's true that the chemistry behind our negative emotions can make finding the humor in a situation a nearly impossible task. The good news, however, is that if we make a habit of laughter, then we will not only be less likely to fall under the dark spell of our own anger or anxiety, but we'll also be more capable of breaking any cycles of negativity that we do find ourselves in. There are many ways to do this, but maybe the simplest way is best: laugh sincerely, laugh often, and laugh together. ■

