

## How do you handle the challenge of caring for aging parents or loved ones? A sense of humor is a good start

Nothing feels better than after a good laugh. Our bodies feel lighter, our moods have become more upbeat, and any problem that was once overtaking our minds has somehow lessened or vanished completely. Laughter is a natural relaxer. It relieves muscle tension and stress. It may also protect the heart by improving blood flow, which may protect against heart attack. On average, a child laughs 300 to 500 times a day, while the average adult laughs approximately 15 times a day. As we progress through our life span, we become more serious and less relaxed. As a direct result, we fail to laugh or find humor in our lives.

Senior care experts know that laughter is the best medicine. Laughter has tremendous short-term positive side effects. When a person laughs, there are physical changes that occur. Laughter can help the heart to function more efficiently, it increases blood supply and expands the inner walls of the arteries, helping blood to pump more freely, individuals tend to feel better physically, which also helps to boost mood and general health. As described in a Huffington Post report, a study conducted by Loma Linda University in California found that laughter is linked to better short-term memory, decreases in cortisol (a stress hormone) and can even burn up calories. The University of Maryland has also done a study which suggests that laughter may protect against heart attacks because laughter lowers one's level of stress, something which

can have detrimental effects on blood vessels. An article by the American Heart Association further indicates that laughing can promote a healthy heart by increasing HDL, also known as "the good cholesterol." Laughing also enhances the immune system. Older persons tend to have weaker immune systems, causing them to catch more viruses than young adults. Laughing can help ward off these illnesses by decreasing stress hormones and increasing immune cells and antibodies that fight infections.

When you are caring for an aging loved one, there can be a lot of challenges along the way. As a caregiver, you probably have days when you are not upbeat. Caregiving job can be a stressful, tiring, and emotionally draining job for adult children caring for their parent or a loved one. Humor can be a healthy coping skill and a form of relief. Several suggestions to lighten the mood and make yourself and your loved one feel better include:

- Laugh along, make stressful situations funny when you can and realize how humor can make the day easier for you and your loved one.
- Sometimes sharing a little humor is necessary to lighten the mood and reduce a stressful situation. Of course humor isn't the right approach to every situation, but it is important to reduce the stress both for you and your aging loved one.



- Find humor in things your parent thinks are funny even when you don't. Laugh at the moment, when your parent reminisces about something funny from the past. Take time to recognize and appreciate those moments. Your laughter can send a positive, comforting message to your loved one. If you don't get upset during a challenging moment, it's likely they won't either. It's okay to laugh while providing care for a loved one, especially when providing dementia or Alzheimer's care. Whether from unprompted remarks or unexplained antics of an aging loved one, caregiving is filled with unexpected humorous moments. While there may be a part of you that feels guilty for laughing out of disrespect, laughing is an essential part of caregiving to help an individual stay upbeat. Finding and holding onto humorous stories can help you keep an upbeat perspective in spite of the challenges of being a caregiver.

The complex effect laughter and humor have on your health is still being explored. Nevertheless, one can safely conclude that laughing is good for you, as it helps us all meet the challenges of caring for an older loved one.



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*continued from previous page*

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