Why older adults benefit from regular doses of humor

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Having a sense of humor and finding time to have a good laugh could be keys to aging in good health.

“There are a lot of physical benefits of laughter,” according to Rebecca Abenante, MA, MSW, LSW, ASW-G. She is the healthy aging coordinator for New Jersey’s Atlantic Health System.

Atlantic Health is a member of the AMA Health System Program, which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

The benefits of laughter include boosting the level of oxygen in the blood and the release of cortisol, endorphins and the immune system’s T-cells, Abenante said during “Chuckles, Chortle and Giggles: The Benefits of Laughter for Seniors,” a web-based seminar on the physical and mental benefits of laughter presented by Atlantic Health.

“It's hard to feel that stress when you're laughing,” Abenante said.

Laughter also boosts levels of dopamine and other stress-busting chemicals and hormones that can naturally help to lower anxiety and depression, added Abenante, who is a social worker specializing in working with older adults and their families.

Laughter also works out the diaphragm and improves “cough efficacy,” which is important for people with asthma, bronchitis or other chronic lung issues to help “get things up and out,” she said.

How laughter helps

Researchers at Vanderbilt University found that “genuine voiced laughter” causes a 10% to 20% rise in heart rate and calorie-burning energy expenditure above resting values, according to their study in the International Journal of Obesity.
Other research on the value of laughter can be found in the Humor Research Library, compiled by the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

The takeaway from most of the studies, however, is that the social benefit of laughter is among its most effective health benefits, Abenante said.

“While laughing alone by ourselves is one thing, laughing with another person and sharing jokes and memories can really help support our social relationships,” she explained.

For physicians looking to incorporate humor into their practice, the best place to start is with start with self-deprecating humor or sharing an experience where the humor comes at their own expense, according to an article on the topic published in the *AMA Journal of Ethics®* and written by Paul Osincup, who is president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor.

“People may not be looking for humor in their health care experience,” Osincup wrote. “That’s why—as a clinician—the most important thing you can do is listen, connect with a patient and follow their lead.”

**Daily dose of humor**

For people who need help finding things to laugh at, Abenante recommended websites that send readers a daily joke in an email. There are also calendars that do the same.

Patients “can very easily tell me a hundred things that are going wrong,” Abenante said. “Sometimes it’s harder to kind of tease out what is going right. That takes a little bit of a shift in our brain. It takes some effort to change that internal dialogue a little bit to try to find the opportunity to find the positive.”

The Healthy Aging Program at Atlantic Health System provides helpful resources to help older adults find health and wellness information, including medical equipment and dental, hearing and vision care.

The AMA Senior Physicians Section gives voice to, and advocates for, issues that affect physicians 65 or older, active or retired. The section provides a way for older adult physicians to remain involved with the AMA and the medical community.