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Family Caregiver Resources

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Staying positive

Adding humor to caregiving



As comedian Victor Borge noted, "Laughter is the shortest distance between two people." Humor is good for social relationships. Laughter, especially when it's a shared joke, creates a bond between people that generates a feeling of intimacy. Humor also helps people to think more creatively and come up with more flexible solutions. But humor, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.



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Tips for interjecting humor

- **Is everyone in on the joke?** Is the funny comment something all of you will appreciate? The bonding occurs when the joke is shared. If it's not funny to everyone present, then it's more likely to alienate than bring you closer.
- **Is there a hidden agenda?** Some people use humor to express dissatisfaction. These little jibes actually hurt and build distrust.
- **Could you offer an apology?** If your comment doesn't generate laughter, are you ready to say, "I'm sorry! I guess that wasn't funny"?

Laughter is good medicine. Studies show that it supports the heart, relaxes muscles, lessens pain, boosts immunity, and eases mood. Fortunately, we are built to laugh. Kindergartners average 300 laughter episodes a day. Adults, by contrast, are stunningly deficient, with typically only 17 chuckles in 24 hours.

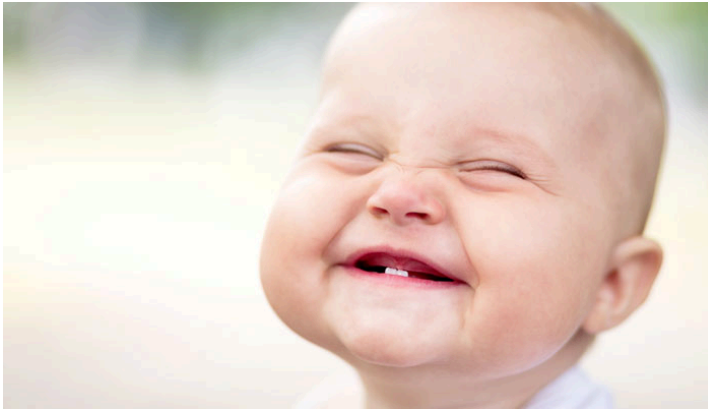
Want more laughter in your life?

- **Read children's books.** They are often silly (*Amelia Bedelia*, anyone?). Ask a librarian for recommendations.
- **Look for humorous gift cards.** Put a different one on your refrigerator each month.
- **Play with a pet.** If you don't have a pet, go to a nearby dog park and watch. Dogs are naturally happy.
- **Spend time with funny people.** Some people have a knack for finding the humor in things. Laughter *is* contagious.
- **Choose a comedic movie over drama or thrills.**
- **Make silly happen at home.** Dress your toast with raisin eyes and jelly mouth. Wear goofy socks.

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The habit of happiness



Happiness is in our nature. We are born with the ability to be happy. And then life happens. Our life experiences affect our attitude about happiness. They influence how much we believe we deserve happiness or convince us we don't deserve it. Especially in stressful situations such as caregiving, feelings of happiness can be rare!

A happiness set point

Research suggests that we each develop a happiness "set point"—a level of happiness or unhappiness that is our usual attitude. Like a bad habit, we may feel at the mercy of our happiness quotient. But like a habit, it can be broken and reset to a new level.

Happiness training

If caregiving has taken your level of happiness down a few notches from usual, or you would like to raise your set point a bit, some simple mental exercises can help. Far from self-help mumbo jumbo, research has shown brain training to be effective.

Make strategic choices

You wouldn't start training for a marathon with a 26-mile run. Similarly, there are many ways to strengthen your happiness. Be choosy about which happiness exercises you try first.

- **Start with a quick win.** Some exercises are more difficult than others. For instance, mindfulness techniques are very effective. But they take time to master. Instead, try an easier strategy, such as consciously savoring an experience you enjoy. Extend the pleasure by telling others about it.
- **Pick a strategy that is fun.** In happiness studies, researchers found some strategies were considered more fun than others. For instance, study participants reported that reflecting at the end of the day on three things that went well was more enjoyable than practicing forgiveness.
- **Get the biggest bang for your efforts.** Some strategies are more effective than others. Exercising, for instance, is a proven winner in terms of improving mood quickly. Plus it has other health benefits.

Focus on the rewards of caregiving

Research on stress often involves family caregivers. That's because no matter how much you love your relative, taking care of another person can be stressful. Despite the challenges, stress studies also indicate that the more you can focus on the rewards or benefits of caregiving, the stronger and more resilient you will feel.

This doesn't mean ignoring or denying the negatives. Instead, it means taking time to notice the "micro-moments" of things that are going well. People who "seed their lives" with moments of positive emotions are more resilient in the face of challenges.

Are there activities in the caring of your loved one that you truly enjoy? For instance, one caregiver loved the tenderness of giving her mother a pedicure. Another enjoyed taking his dad for drives in the country. Try to work some pleasant activities into your time together.

According to the research, the most lasting avenues to happiness involve focusing on activities that are personally meaningful. For instance, rewards that bolster you internally:

- "I am grateful to be able to give back."
- "I now feel much closer to my mother."
- "I've become more patient, more compassionate."
- "I've learned to appreciate the little joys and triumphs in each day."
- "I'm proud of the new skills I've learned. I had no idea I could do these things."
- "This has given me a chance to reexamine my priorities and be sure I am living the life I want to lead."

Which of these rewards apply to you? Any others you would add?

Sometimes you can't make the stressful situations go away. But you can feel stronger and less stressed by engaging in activities that bring joy and provide meaning.

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