The Benefits of Laughter

You’ve most likely heard the phrase “laughter is the best medicine,” but have you stopped to think about this? Can laughter and positivity help a patient, nurse, or MLT who’s having a bad day? Many doctors and health professionals believe it can; scientists don’t need to tell us that laughing is fun and makes us feel better.

While we know that laughter and positive thinking aren’t going to cure illness, research verifies that humor has both short and long term benefits. Short term effects of laughing include relieving stress and raising spirits, but it can also cause positive physical changes in the body. Some physiological changes which can be noticed during and shortly after laughing include:

- enhanced intake of oxygen-rich air which stimulates your heart, lungs, and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain (Mayo Clinic, 2013)
- activated and relieved stress response which increases your heart rate and blood pressure and is followed by a feeling of muscle relaxation (Mayo Clinic, 2013)
- enhanced circulation, decreased production of stress-related hormones, relaxed muscles, and improved respiration (Butler, 2005)

Long-term effects of laughter and a positive emotional state have been looked at as well and include:

- less depression and anxiety which makes you feel happier and satisfied
- enhanced immunity as positive thoughts release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses (Mayo Clinic, 2013)
- an increase in pain tolerance
- undoing of the cardiovascular consequences of negative emotions caused by chemical reactions bringing more stress into your system (Butler, 2005)
- easing of pain as the body produces its own natural painkillers (Mayo Clinic, 2013)
- making it easier to cope with difficult situations as you have a less serious perspective

Health care workers who use humor when caring for their patients find that it not only benefits the patient, but it affects them and their interactions with the patient as well. Humor is shown to create stronger relationships between patient and nurse, to help the nurse and patient deal with difficult situations, and to help the nurse cope with the stress of work. Being positive will help in just about any situation, and joking usually produces laughter.

Remember to use laughter in an appropriate way; it shouldn’t be used as a weapon or at the expense of others. Positive humor makes people feel good and negative humor doesn’t, so use your best judgment to discern a good joke from a bad or hurtful one. A positive attitude and a funny story about yourself is usually a safe bet.

Laughter is the best medicine, unless you have broken ribs.

References
