

# Humor Helps

By Enid Schwartz



Enid Schwartz is a registered nurse educator with a PhD in health psychology. As a breast cancer survivor with an interest in humor and health, she has studied and presented information about humor and its healing powers. While dealing with her own recovery, she became interested in understanding how others with cancer use humor, and her dissertation on humor and coping with breast cancer was the result of that curiosity. She is the author of a continuing-education text on humor and health, but more importantly she practices what she preaches. She does not consider herself a funny person, and she tells people that she takes her humor seriously.

Hearing the words “I’m sorry, but you have cancer” can really ruin your day. When I got my diagnosis, I knew I could let it control my life or I could find a way to lessen the fear and the uncertainty that go along with a potential terminal illness. I knew I had an important tool that would let me take control: I had humor. Humor had been an effective coping mechanism for me for many years; now it was time to put my ability to see the lighter side of things to the test.

I would be lying if I said there weren’t bad times. Yes, I found myself on an emotional roller coaster fueled by fear, anxiety, denial, and forced cheerfulness. However, I believe that turning to humor prevented the roller coaster from careening out of control and plunging me into depression.

It turns out I’m not alone in finding humor helpful in dealing with a cancer diagnosis. Interviews with 11 women undergoing cancer treatment, even those who had high levels of fear, revealed that humor helped give them a moment of relief, and helped change their perspective, if only for a short time.

The following are words the women shared about the power of humor:

*“It allows the spirit to be free.”*

*“I find that the humor comes really natural to get over their [others’] fear or their anxiety.”*

*“It can change a grim situation instantly.”*

*“It just helps us see the lighter side of things.”*

*“Humor helps me lighten what otherwise would be a really morose subject.”*

*“It gives me a way to talk about what’s happening without constantly dwelling on all the down things.”*

*“It seems to kind of wash away the sadness.”*

*“Laughter allows me to have the inner freedom to be peaceful—a sense of permission to not be morbid.”*

So, how can we find humor in those dark hours when everything seems uncertain, frightening, or painful? Here are some methods that seem to work:

- Watch funny movies.
- Watch your favorite sitcom.
- Read humorous books.
- Watch children or animals at play.
- Think about funny things that have happened or could happen, such as the story a cancer survivor shared: “I keep asking my doctors when I’m going to heal enough to get a boobey? I have plans for it: When I get mad at somebody, I’m going to throw it at them. Here, take this. . . . I want to shock somebody.”

Yes, as hard as it is to face the fact that you have cancer, you really do have a choice in how you deal with it. Each of us needs to find what works best for us, whether it’s support systems, prayer, staying busy, exercising, or our ability to laugh and see the lighter side of life. For me and for many others, humor can make a real difference. [cFThrive](#)