



# LIGHTEN UP! THE USES OF LAUGHTER IN DEMENTIA CARE

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## Objectives



Describe the physiological benefits of laughter



Identify common triggers for behavioral expression in people living with dementia



Discuss strategies for using laughter to connect with a person living with dementia



Explore the value of laughter for professional self-care

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## The physiology of laughter: **why** do we laugh?

- Unique to humans
- Complex set of facial movements, contractions of the respiratory muscles, and emotional vocalizations
- Engages multiple regions of the brain
- Releases stress and tension
- Provides social cues: safety, security, fulfillment of needs, connection
- Can be voluntary or involuntary



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## Types of humor: **what** makes us laugh?

- Surprise and incongruity
- Jokes, comics, and cartoons
- Puns and wordplay
- Slapstick and pratfalls
- Sarcasm, dry humor, wit
- Self-deprecation
- Being tickled
- Release from strenuous tension
- Contagion



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## The **benefits** of laughter: how does the body respond?

- Stimulates the heart, lungs, and muscles
- Improves respiration and circulation
- Endorphin release: activates and relieves the stress response
- Soothes muscle tension
- Elevates pain thresholds
- Strengthens the immune system and resistance to infection



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## The benefits of laughter: **mental health** benefits

- Reduces stress, anxiety, and tension
- Improves depressive symptoms
- Elevates mood
- Enhances memory and creative thinking



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## Using humor in difficult circumstances: Is it okay to laugh?

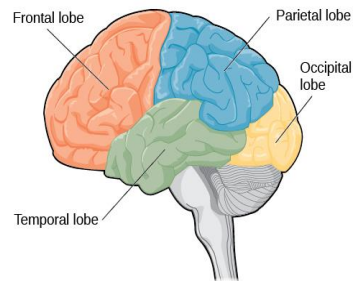
- Laughter, humor, and play are critical social tools
- Humor puts people at ease and promotes the exchange of ideas
- Humor is a coping mechanism
- Laughter allows us to share our humanity and folly
- Connection and kindness



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## Dementia-related changes in key regions of the brain

- Temporal lobes: memory (visual and verbal), speech perception, interpreting the emotions and reactions of others
- Frontal lobes: executive function, language, emotional expression, empathy
- Parietal lobes: perception of sensory information, bodily orientation
- Occipital lobes: recognition of objects, spatial perception



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## Personality changes and behavioral expression

- Insight and judgment
- Social withdrawal
- Resistance
- Confusion or confabulation
- Agitation or combativeness
- Difficulty with initiation and termination of tasks
- Difficulty detecting sarcasm or humor



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## What's **our** role in this?

- Our own emotions and reactions
  - Discomfort
  - Fear
  - Embarrassment
- Forgetting about what remains
  - Non-verbal communication
  - Multisensory skills
  - Music and rhythm
  - Laughter



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## Laughter therapy: what does the research tell us?



Humor therapy, laughter meditation, laughter clubs: general and behavioral health benefits are well-documented



Symptom management in people living with dementia

- Takeda study: the use of humor can be an effective complementary/alternative intervention for BPSD
- SMILE study: humor therapy did not significantly reduce depression but did significantly reduce agitation in nursing home residents with dementia

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## Laughter in dementia care: adapting to changing senses of humor

- Changing personal definitions of “funny”
- Difficulty following or comprehending complex information
- Visual versus verbal humor



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## Laughter in dementia care: current best practices and resources

- Elder-clowns (Canada, Australia)
- Laughter on Call (U.S.):  
[laughteroncall.com](http://laughteroncall.com)
- Laughter clubs  
[worldlaughtertour.com](http://worldlaughtertour.com)



Source: International Network for Critical Gerontology

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## Laughter in dementia care: everyday strategies

- Jokes
- Word play
- Music and singing
- Facial animation
- Physical humor and activities
- Animals and babies
- Storytelling
- Watching or listening to laughter
- Improvisation



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“Self care is  
giving the world  
the best of you,  
instead of what’s  
left of you.”  
-Katie Reed

- Laughter and humor in the workplace provides physical and mental health benefits
- A leadership skill
- Promotes connection and relationship-building: builds community

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## Resources

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