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The best medicine

Armed with rubber chickens and toothy grins, humor therapists tap patients' funny bones



Ruth Hamilton, left, a volunteer with Carolina Health & Humor Association (HA HA), dances as volunteer Allen Mele, right, plays the violin for UNC Memorial Hospital patient Annie Ruth Burnette in her room in the Rehabilitation Center. Hamilton visits patients' rooms with her 'laugh mobile' to lift spirits through humor.

Staff Photos by Juli Leonard



By VICKI CHENG, Staff Writer

Ruth Hamilton is not above stashing squeakers in her bra to get a laugh out of a cancer patient. And Carol Cato has been known to take an hour off from counseling patients at WakeMed to ride the go-carts at Adventure Landing, skirt and all.

With April Fools' Day approaching, you might be on your guard for pranks and gags. But scientists and humor therapists know that laughter is good medicine.

In 2003, Stanford University scientists, using computer imaging technology, learned that laughing stimulates the same parts of the brain tickled by cocaine, amphetamines and alcohol. Researchers have known for years that laughter can lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, boost the immune system and trigger the release of pain-killing endorphins.

Cato, a chaplain who works with cardiac rehab patients at WakeMed, has been busy completing a dissertation this month on the reasons so few of us make time for play, and how playing affects our well-being. She asked 16 volunteers to list 25 things they enjoyed doing, and many were surprised at how much they had forgotten about having fun.

"We're so busy working to pay for housing, gas, cars, children and college that we forget to pay ourselves," Cato said. "That's not necessarily having a lot of money in the bank." It's about having the time to do something you love so much that time seems to stand still while you're doing it, she said. It could be tinkering with a car, taking photographs, riding a motorcycle.

Dan Carpenter, one of Cato's volunteers, didn't have much time to play in the decades he spent as a minister. He also crisscrossed the country selling printed polyethylene bags -- the kind you might get at Wal-Mart or Kmart -- to help make ends meet for his wife, mother-in-law and four children, including a son with epilepsy and a daughter who is a single mom.

On a business trip in Atlanta in 2000, he suddenly lost some of his vision. A doctor put him on a treadmill for a test. Two days later, he was on a surgeon's table, undergoing bypass surgery.

For 18 months, in addition to his heart trouble, Carpenter suffered from constant, unrelenting migraines. But there was always one bright spot: His grandson, Jasper, now 4. After cardiac rehab at WakeMed, when the sessions were hard and painful, he knew Jasper would be waiting for him with a "macaroni and cheese" kiss, the slobbery kind you have to wipe off your face.

"He sees me and he runs with his arms wide open," said Carpenter, 63, of Rocky Mount. "He's free. I'm free with him." If Jasper pretends to see an airplane in the sky, Carpenter describes its colors. If Jasper makes funny noises, Grandpa does, too. "I forget about the pain and lighten up," Carpenter

said.

Learning to play

Playing can be hard to do, Cato said. Several patients declined to participate in her project because they said they didn't have the time. Cato herself got the idea for the dissertation years ago, when a friend gave her a "goodie bag" filled with kids' toys just before final exams.

"I brought this home and thought, 'This is very nice,' " Cato recalled. "I did put the Koosh Ball on my desk, and I still have it. I eventually tried the bubbles."

One person in her study decided to try to get in touch with a childhood friend. Another bought some of her childhood toys to create a goodie box for herself. The idea is to create balance in your life by making play one of the priorities, Cato said.

"Even with cardiac patients, there's a death of a spouse, loss of the job, loss of a house, bankruptcy -- it's just so much," she said. "They will say, 'It broke my heart.' And I'm thinking, 'Literally, you're in here trying to get over the damage of all this.' "

In the 1980s, Hamilton was working as an auditor, taking inventory on the cancer unit at the Duke University Health System, when she noticed how badly the patients needed some sort of diversion. She quit her job -- she wasn't really suited for the work anyway -- and teamed up with Dr. David Kleinbaum, a doctor friend from church who was interested in the connection between humor and health. In 1986, they created the nonprofit Carolina Health and Humor Association, better known as Carolina HA HA.

"Our basic thing was to have a place for people to study humor," she said.

Once a month, during meetings of the organization's Laughter Club, members gather to hear tips from stand-up comedians or improv teachers. Some 60 people have taken Carolina HA HA's online course to become certified humor presenters. They learn to develop a comic character, to write a monologue and to target their antics at medical audiences.

The group also volunteers regularly with patients at the Duke University Medical Center and at UNC Hospitals. Last week, Hamilton donned her uniform, a bright orange straw hat with a pair of mod cat-eye glasses. She roamed UNC's rehab unit pushing the Laugh Mobile, a cart stuffed with dancing flowers, a rubber chicken, and titles such as "The Best of Saturday Night Live" and "The Full Monty."

It was a tough crowd. She knocked and peeked her head around many of the doors, only to be waved away by patients in neck braces and wheelchairs who weren't feeling up to a visit from a lady wielding fake teeth.

But Hamilton hit the jackpot when she knocked on the door of Annie Ruth Burnette, 79, who had "fallen like a crazy thing" and broken her hip, said Burnette, nestled into a chair under her lunch tray.

As part of a "humor tune-up," Hamilton checked the size of Burnette's smile with the fake teeth. She brandished a pair of giant scissors and asked if there was anything Burnette needed to be cut out of her. She encouraged her to hide the rubber chicken under her lunch tray to give the nurses an early April Fools' Day surprise. She supplied Burnette with a big red clown nose. And while volunteer Allen Mele played his violin, Hamilton unabashedly danced a jig.

Burnette looked on with polite nods and big smiles. "It's good," she said after the Laugh Mobile moved on. "It's somebody thinking of me. I appreciate it."

Hamilton said that humor therapists need to tap into their intuition to know what will work with someone facing a terminal illness or paralysis. Giving them water guns to shoot at the nurses helps. She told one lady whose hair was falling out and itching badly to pretend to be a gorilla while she scratched her head. She often tells patients to practice their "smile push-ups," because their brains look at their faces to see how they feel.

"I think it's affecting their health outcome," Hamilton said. "There are those that want to be totally immersed in humor."

As for April Fools' Day, everyone in her organization traditionally plays practical jokes. This year, she'll go with the squeakers in her bra.

"When people hug me, I squeak," she said. "Or I'll hit my chest and say, 'I got some bad implants.'"

Actually, the women who have breast cancer find this to be a very funny joke."

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