

Chapter 1

Why Be a Hospital Clown?

You Can Make a Difference

They don't want to be here,
alone in an unfamiliar bed.
Yet this is their home for now,
And you can ask to enter.

They don't know you and weren't expecting you.
They don't know what you'll do
or what to make of you.
And you can't know what they need most.

They may be scared or lonely, bored or hurting.
They may be all of that and more.
They may have only enough energy
to watch you with their eyes.

They may not want to talk
or they may want a listener.
They may long to laugh
and have their spirits lightened.
They may need to cry
and have their hand held.

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Perhaps a nurse can brief you first.
But you may not know much in advance.
What you do know
is that you are a privileged visitor.
Someone who can bring
a new way of relating to them.

*You are a caring clown
and you train for this moment.
Knowing what you give can be like light.*

Lifting a spirit,
Showing things in a new way.
Focusing thoughts away from darkness.
Warming a soul.

*It is not always that way, of course.
Sometimes things go poorly.
Often you never know
the difference you have made.*

But there are times that seem to say
this is where you are needed . . .
as clown and caring person.
This is where you can open your heart
to serve and share God's love.

— By Anita Thies

You Can Make a Difference

The Healing Power of Laughter and Caring

There *is* a healing power in laughter.

Over the past three decades, researchers from many areas of study, including medicine and psychology, have become interested in the scientific benefits of laughter. Today a credit selective course in “The Medicine of Laughter” is offered at a leading medical school—the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

Hooray for endorphins!

Studies have shown that laughter can lower blood pressure and release healthy endorphins, those chemicals in the brain that can ease pain and make you feel better.

Good for the heart

One such study in a hospital setting involved Janet “Jelly Bean” Tucker. The research indicated a rise in the patient’s blood pressure as a clown entered the room (presumably from the patient seeing a non-traditional health practitioner) but after the clown left the room, the patient’s blood pressure dropped to lower than it was before the clown appeared.



A doctor’s perspective

“Not many things are more rewarding and challenging than clowning in a hospital environment.

“Laughter is medicine -- with no co-pay required.

“Humor promotes holistic healing.”

—Dr. John Piatt, a family practice physician who has attended Clown Camp® as “Kernel” the Clown (left).

Why Be a Hospital Clown?



Patty Wooten as
Nurse Kindheart

Nursing Wisdom

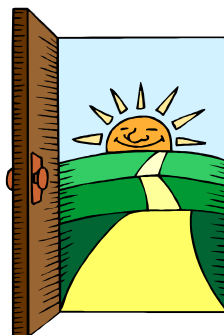
National humorist, clown and nurse Patty Wooten says in her book *Compassionate Laughter*:

“Humor and laughter can foster a positive and hopeful attitude. We are less likely to succumb to feelings of depression and helplessness if we are able to laugh at what is troubling us.

“Humor gives us a sense of perspective on our problems. Laughter provides an opportunity for the release of those uncomfortable emotions which, if held inside, may create biochemical changes that are harmful to the body.”¹

Leslie Gibson, RN, author of *Laughter, The Universal Language*, observes that:

***“Caring clowns
are opening the doors
for patients to experience
the healing power of humor.”***



A chaplain speaks of healing

The healing potential of the hospital clown has been observed by the Rev. George Burn, Director of Pastoral Care at Centre Community Hospital (PA):

“Hospitals tend to be somber places and people tend to be focused on the sadness and struggles of their journeys.

“It is healing to have, even for a moment, the ability to remove yourself from that preoccupation and to find laughter once again in the midst of your darkness.”²

*"We have a healing power that works in many ways,
maybe not to cure, but to lessen the pain."*

—Don "Homer The Clown" Burda

Merry Heart Medicine



Notes Desi "Dizzy" Payne, who developed the Merry Heart Medicine Program at Ottumwa (Iowa) Regional Health Center, "My slogan is from Proverbs 17:22 : *A merry heart doeth good like a medicine*. Based on this, I give a good dose of medicine every time I'm at the hospital."

The very act of laughing is beneficial. "One of the greatest parts about laughter is that your body doesn't know you are faking it sometimes," says Tammy Miller, (*right*), author of *The Lighter Side of Breast Cancer Recovery*. "It will still release endorphins that help us heal and cope with situations."



Jo "Josie Posie" Moore of the Happy Valley Alley, World Clown Association, joins with gusto in the group's belly laugh time.

Mark Twain to Emmett Kelly

The benefits of humor were observed many years ago. Mark Twain once said, "*Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand.*"

When Emmett Kelly performed, he noted, "*By laughing at me, they really laugh at themselves, and realizing that they have done this gives them a sort of spiritual second wind for going back into the battle of life.*"

"Our patients have remarked that just seeing these clowns makes them smile in a time when smiles can be hard to come by."

--Rosemarie Tucci, RN, MSN, AOCN, Administrator,
Main Line Health Community (PA) Clinical Oncology
Program, speaking of the Bumper "T" Caring Clowns.

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Humor Therapy

In the 1970s, Norman Cousins' work *Anatomy of an Illness*³ sparked popular interest in the physiological effects of laughter. Today "humor therapy" is underway in such diverse fields as pediatrics, oncology, geriatrics and psychology and in hospitals such as Rochester General Hospital in New York and Morton Plant Mease Healthcare in Florida.

Arts and Health Outreach Initiative (AHOI)

The convergence between the arts and healing is drawing increased attention from researchers and educators.

"There is an increasing body of empirical research that demonstrates distinct health benefits from participation in live arts experiences," says Ermyn King, Coordinator of the Arts and Health Outreach Initiative (AHOI) at Penn State University.

This innovative initiative at one of the nation's leading land-grant universities is bringing together four principal Penn State partners (including the College of Medicine) to stimulate cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research and programs in the intersection of arts and health. (For more on AHOI see p. 70)

The inspiration of Christopher Reeve

While bringing laughter is rarely a matter of life and death, connecting with a patient's inner spirit through laughter can be profound. Aviva "DR HuggaBubbe" Gorstein (*right*) of the Bumper "T" Caring Clowns says their clown team is inspired by reports of what happened when actor Robin Williams first visited his paralyzed friend Christopher Reeve and prompted him to laugh.

"Robin didn't come to visit a 'spinal cord' or 'nerve endings' but the essence of who Christopher Reeve is," she says, "and when Christopher realized that, he understood that even though his body might be compromised, his mind and his spirit were alive and well. That essence of what a caring clown can be is what motivates us to enter a patient's room with nothing on the agenda but to help rekindle that special spirit that is often hidden inside a hospital gown."





Treating themselves to a healthy workout, members of the Happy Valley Alley of the World Clown Association in State College, PA schedule a time of “belly laughing” at each business meeting, adding one second to the laugh time every month. A high achieving group, at last laugh, they were up to 43 seconds of belly laughing at a time.

The value, the worth and the power of mirth

“The value, the worth, and the power of mirth
 Can help each of us to get through,
 When the going is rough and incredibly tough,
 And even the sunshine looks blue.
 For once you give in to a chuckle or grin,
 Your spirits just natur’lly lift,
 And life is worthwhile each time that you smile,
 For a laugh is a God-given gift.”

—author unknown, quoted in *The Caring Clowns:
 How Humor Smiles and Laughter Overcome Pain;
 Suffering and Loneliness* (Richard Snowberg)⁴

The gift that keeps on giving

Why be a hospital clown? Because with the healing gift of laughter and caring, you can make a difference in the life of a child or an adult; a patient, caregiver, or friend.

The wonderful joy for you is that by giving the gift, you too receive it back many times over. In the words of Patch Adams, M.D.:

“Giving to others is really a gigantic gift to yourself.”

The Healing Power of Laughter