

CHRONIC HUMOR



Nearly twenty years ago, Jay Feinberg, a foreign-exchange analyst in Manhattan, had a serious illness, and Lorraine Weiss, an educational coordinator in Brooklyn, had a quandary.

Feinberg, at twenty-two, was diagnosed with leukemia; Weiss, who first heard about Feinberg when she read about a bone marrow drive being organized for him, wanted to help. Not a physician, not a nurse, she was also not a comedian. But she decided to make him laugh.

“What do you say to a boy who’s dying?” Weiss wondered before she called Feinberg for the first time. “I said, ‘I’m going to tell him a joke.’”

Every Friday, in the midst of *erev Shabbat* chores, she would call Feinberg, telling him a few of the jokes she’d collected from friends, from books, from *Reader’s Digest*.

Feinberg loved it. “This is the first joke anybody [has] told since I’m

sick,” he told her in their first phone conversation.

Doctors would approve of Weiss’ method; the movement to bring humor and laughter into the lives of people facing illness—even life-threatening illnesses—has gained support in recent years. Research shows that bouts of laughter help the body’s immune and pain-killing systems, and also help the patient’s morale.

Elijah the Prophet would approve, too.

A Talmudic tale tells of Rabbi Broka, a *tzaddik*, escorting Elijah through a bustling marketplace. Rabbi Broka asked the prophet if any of the people there were destined for the World to Come.

Elijah pointed to two inconspicuous men. Rabbi Broka ran over and asked them what they did for a living. They were jesters, they explained. They cheered up people who were sad.

In this spirit, these days “clown doctors” (like the noted Patch Adams) perform hi-jinks at patients’ bedsides, hospital staff distribute funny books and DVDs from comedy carts and

stand-up comedians entertain people in medical centers.

And, like Weiss, many people tell jokes.

For the infirm, laughter despite pain is serious business. Especially for those with life-or-death conditions like cancer.

“I don’t regard anything that helps a person as frivolous,” says Rabbi Dr. Maurice Lamm, founder of the National Institute for Jewish Hospice and author of *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.

“The very sick do not need the characteristic Jewish look of ‘Oy vey,’” Rabbi Lamm says. They need “not tears, but cheers, not sympathy, but empathy.”

“What is needed,” says Rabbi Lamm, who went through his own encounter with serious illness a few years ago, “is not the standard, usually bellacose jokester—he is the very last person on earth to handle the terminally ill. What is needed is the Norman Cousins type of person, who genuinely uses humor to make it possible for the patient to breathe easier.”

Mr. Lipman, a staff writer at the Jewish Week in New York, is at work on a book about humor and illness.

The humor Rabbi Lamm is referring to is the kind that produces active laughter and is actually proven to assist one's breathing and respiration. It is the kind of laughter the late editor and author Norman Cousins used to heal himself. In his book *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*, Cousins described how his regime of taking vitamin C and watching funny *Candid*

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Camera and Marx Brothers tapes played a crucial role in his recovery from a life-threatening form of arthritis.

The medical professionals and therapists who followed in Cousins' footsteps call this movement psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), the mind-body connection. Jewish tradition calls it common sense. "A joyful heart is good medicine," says Proverbs.

The way that people employ humor to mitigate their own—or others'—pain varies. One therapist tells of a young child who lost an eye to cancer. His parents thought their son would be devastated psychologically. Instead, he turned his misfortune into an advantage. The child would gather other young patients around him in the hospital. When an adult approached—a doctor, nurse, visitor—he would pop out his glass eye, causing it to roll to the adult's feet. The victim of the crime was horrified. The children were delighted. And the child with the glass eye "was the most popular kid on the ward," the therapist reported.

A teenager, also hospitalized with cancer, was an expert, self-taught magician. And a tinkerer. Soon he befriended the younger children on his floor. Somehow, he was able to manipulate the computer-operated machine that controlled his chemo line, making it beep in alarm. The nurses drew to his bedside in a hurry. With other young patients—pre-alerted to his antics—watching, the teen put on a show, pretending to have a seizure. The nurses were not amused. The kids were.

Ram Dass, a former Harvard professor, suffered a serious stroke a decade ago. His physicians feared he was aphasiac, unable to process language.

With Ram Dass' family at his hospital bedside, a pompous doctor came in to test the patient.

"What do we call this?" the physician asked, holding up a pen.

"Pen," Ram Dass said.

The doctor pointed to his watch.

"Watch," Ram Dass said.

Then the doctor pointed to his fancy tie. "What do we call this?"

"Shmatta," Ram Dass said.

The doctor, enraged that his expensive tie was called a rag, stormed out. Ram Dass' family howled. "That was the moment we knew he [was] all there," a friend of Ram Dass' said.

How important is humor when you are sick?

The late actor Christopher Reeve wrote about the initial weeks after the horse-riding accident that left him a quadriplegic. Lying in a hospital room, surrounded by concerned family, facing taxing surgery and rehabilitation, he considered giving up, not going through with the treatments—in effect meaning a soon death.

In walked a squat man in a blue scrub hat and a yellow surgical gown, snapping his rubber gloves. Speaking in a Russian accent, he identified himself as Reeve's proctologist and declared that it was time for Reeve's examination.

"Either I was on way too many drugs or I was in fact brain damaged," Reeve thought to himself.

It was neither. The "doctor" was his friend, actor Robin Williams, who had flown to Reeve's side on a moment's notice in order to cheer him up.

Seeing Williams, Reeve laughed for the first time since the accident. "My old friend had helped me know that somehow I was going to be OK."

Reeve went on to live nine more years, championing spinal cord research and serving as a role model for those living with an extreme disability.

A role model in his own right, Feinberg underwent a successful bone marrow transplant. After he regained his health, he founded the Gift of Life Bone Marrow Foundation, the only donor registry in North America dedicated to recruitment within the Jewish community. Gift of Life has facilitated nearly 2,000 transplants and established a Jewish umbilical cord blood bank. Feinberg credits Weiss' jokes with helping his spirits during his darkest days. "Her calls always put a smile on my face and helped relieve the emotional stress," Feinberg says.

"I reciprocate and volunteer my time to other patients in similar circumstances as a patient advocate," he says. "Sometimes that means making fun of myself by sharing embarrassing failures I may have had. It gives them good advice, and a little laugh." ■

