

# MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER BUT WHAT IF IT IS?



CATHY O'BRIEN



“THERE IS NOTHING IN THE WORLD SO IRRESISTIBLY CONTAGIOUS AS LAUGHTER AND GOOD HUMOR”

CHARLES DICKENS

## OUR STORY IN A NUTSHELL

When you're sitting in a hospital waiting to find out why your 20-year-old daughter had no feeling in half of her body, nothing seems remotely funny. As Joy (my daughter) endured endless days of tests with no idea of what was going wrong I realized I started morphing into an alter ego. I go from strong crisis mom to someone who is standing on a cliff so far out of my comfort zone that all I want to do is drink. (and I'm a recovering alcoholic) I am desperately looking for something to help me cope. That's when my alter ego takes over that laughs at the most inappropriate moments, I was so bad that the nurses moved my daughter to a private room that up until then had been unavailable. Well at least one good thing came out my bad behavior. Once we got to the private room, we instinctively started looking for something fun to do, something that would take our mind's off of what was going on around us and make us laugh. On the hospital TV (this was almost 20 years ago, no media on phones) we found this crazy show in Japanese called wipeout, we laughed at that stupid show for a week and it seemed to shift the heaviness of her situation. If you ask her about that week the first things she tells you about is that silly show, not

how it felt to be told you had Multiple Sclerosis. That's my memory too, that's when I really experienced the POWER of Humor. I have always loved to laugh but never knew the power it had to transform me until then.

## **TRUE STORY OF MIRACULOUS RECOVERY FROM AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE**

This story is from a book called "The Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by The Patient" by Norman Cousins, the patient. The newspapers at the time labeled him as the man who cured himself by laughing, That's a simplified version of his journey but essentially true. Here's a brief overview of his experience with an Autoimmune Disease that can be a game changer in your recovery.

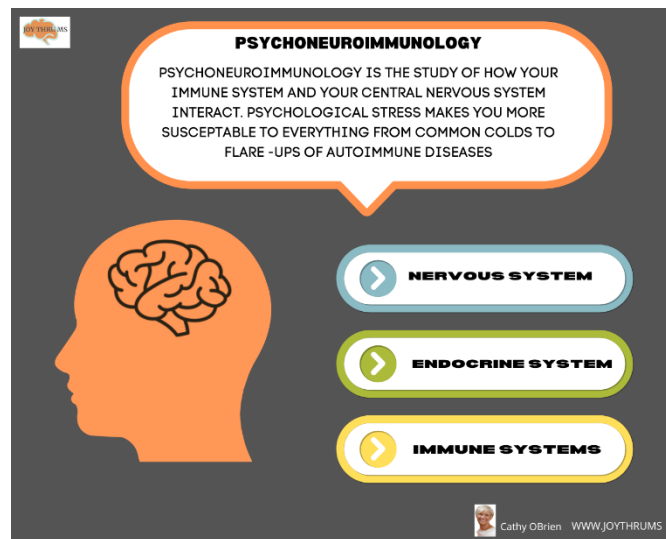
Ann Harrington, a professor of science at Harvard University identifies him as the man who triggered a revolution. Here's why: in August 1964 Cousins, well known in literary circles as the editor in chief of the Saturday Review was on his way home from a business trip in Russia. He arrived home with a slight fever and general achiness that rapidly grew worse. Within a week he was hospitalized and diagnosed with a life -threatening disease called degenerative collagen illness or Ankylosing Spondylitis. Mayo clinic describes it as an inflammatory disease that can cause bones in the spine to fuse and has no known cure. Cousin's symptoms were severe pain, high fever and near paralysis of the legs, neck and back. His physicians gave him a 1 in 500 chance of recovery. "Being unable to move was all the evidence I needed of the seriousness of the condition he wrote but deep down I knew I had a good chance and relished the chance of bucking the odds". Cousins began his attempts to understand this disease believing that if he can understand what caused it that it could be reversed. This journey led him to several conclusions which helped him create a plan of action, all of which he discussed with his doctors. He outlines every step of what he did and why in his book. For now, let's jump ahead to the plan itself, he cut out all medications, took huge amounts of vitamin C, left the hospital and checked into a hotel for Peace and quiet, healthy food, and laughter by watching funny movies to bolster his body chemistry. His doctors agreed to help him test his theories and watched him closely throughout the process. Their biggest concern was him being able to tolerate the pain with no medication. Initially he found after 10 minutes of belly laughter he would have at least 2 hours of pain free sleep. He continued the laughter episodes regularly throughout the day and found that it had other beneficial side effects as well. It also improved his body's ability to fight inflammation which the doctors concluded were cumulative. Laughter was actually proving to be good medicine. He witnessed improvement after only 8 days, was off of all medications and was now able to sleep naturally without any pain. Within several months he was back at work full time. This was after being told by his doctors that they had never seen anyone recover from this Autoimmune disease. Cousins concluded several insights from this experience, listed below are a few.

### **Cousins 4 Beliefs regarding his recovery**

1. Negative emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, are directly linked to the disease. Symptoms of the disease tend to worsen because of panic, fear, and despair

2. Positive emotions such as laughter, love, hope, and faith produce positive effects on a cellular level
3. Being in partnership with a physician you can trust can make the process of recovery faster, easier and longer lasting. However, the days of blindly trusting physicians are over.
4. Never underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate. Life Force may be the least understood energy on earth.

As accounts of his experience became more widely known scientists began to explore his recovery and a new science was born called "psychoneuroimmunology". It is defined as a process where "Your thoughts and feelings affect the chemicals in your brain which affects the hormones that fight disease or replicate viruses". His remarkable contributions in what he described as a "New Dimension of Healing" are still vital today. At 71 Cousins stated that he felt no residual effects from his disease, he played tennis several times a week and rarely goes without a round of golf. Norman Cousins lived until the age of 75, almost 25 years after his near fatal diagnosis.



## HUMOR, HEALING AND ITS HISTORY

Clowns Care Units, or CCU

The World Health Organization defined health as a "state of physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or bodily infirmity. They use a holistic approach in assessing health. While the relationship between humor and health is a complicated one a much clearer picture has been emerging recently that demonstrates

its benefits. A study conducted by Mahatma Gandhi Medical college examined the relationship between individual personalities, levels of laughter and their effects on disease...Laughter was shown to affect the release of various immune mediators demonstrating the connection between the brain and the immune system. Dr Michael Miller, another researcher on the benefits of laughter noted that he envisioned a time when 15-20 minutes of laughter daily could be a catalyst for change. Patch Adams the founders of the GESUNDHEIT Institute where laughter therapy is a daily medical routine is a well-known supporter of this belief. His website describes hospitals where they have created clown care units or CCU that go on rounds to bring laughter to the patients. Duke University Medical Center has created the DUKE HUMOR PROJECT, a mobile cart used in their facilities to deliver laughter by their humor volunteers. Clear signals that the medical world is evolving albeit slowly.

## TOP 5 BENEFITS

- Boosts immunity
- Relieves Pain
- Reduces Depression
- Lowers Blood Pressure
- Reduces Stress and Anxiety



## **IT STARTED WITH THE FRENCH**

In the late 1300's Henri de Mondeville, a French professor of surgery was well known for telling his patients jokes after an operation. Fast forward several hundred years and you will see that we are slowly catching up with Henri's wisdom. Science today shows that laughter boosts the immune system, increasing the number of anti-bodies producing T cells in your body. These cells help fight infection. It also lowers the levels of at least four hormones associated with stress and anxiety. A 2018 study found laughter therapy delays cardiovascular complications from type II diabetes. Additionally, the risk of heart attacks is lowered, lowering glucose levels, increases pain tolerance and increases serum immunoglobulins A and E, that's just a few benefits from a very long list. Surprisingly There's an enormous amount of information and research on this topic from a wide range of medical specialties. My personal favorite is Sigmond Freud's discussion about "Gallows" humor qualifying as a support mechanism during traumatic circumstances. Gallows humor or Black humor is another way to relieve stress or tension. I lean towards this one as I tend to laugh at inappropriate moments. The studies that surprised me were written under the header of "philosophy" of humor along with a variety of studies done by different psychologists. No disrespect intended but I found it a little dry. Any article discussing historic sarcasm or the three-stage theory of humor explaining how to set up a joke seems un-funny to me but I am Irish.

## **EVEN BUDDAH LIKED HUMOR**

SPIRITUAL HUMOR (it's a real thing)

Six types of Laughter from a 5<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit Classic Smiling Buddha

Atahasita: uproarious laughter accompanied by doubling over

Apahasita: loud laughter that brings tears to the eyes

Upahasita: a more pronounced laughter associated with some body movements

Vihāsita: a broader smile accompanied by modest laughter

Hashita: a smile which slightly reveals the tips of the teeth

Sita: a faint smile

“Through HUMOR, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.”

UNKNOWN

## FINDING THE FUNK

I'd say its official, Laughter is the most awesome tool for your body, mind and spirit but unless you come from a family of comedian's you're wondering how to get more of it in your life. Its easier than you think. Victor Frankl, the famous Austrian Psychiatrist and Neurologist wrote about his experiences in a concentration camp during WWII in his book "Mans Search for Meaning". During his time in the concentration camp he had patients who for obvious reasons were depressed, he decided the following homework would help in these circumstances. He asked them to find one funny story from their lives per day for a week as a means of changing their attitude. I tried Dr Frankl's idea and liked it, especially if you start first thing in the morning as it sets the tone for the day. Dr. Frankl believed that under the worst of circumstances our greatest human freedom was the ability to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances. While those circumstances are obviously extreme, dealing with the life and death issues of chronic disease pushes us in a way most people never expected nor prepared for. One place to start is to take the time to create a list of your favorite funny movies and favorite comedians to watch. You can also find some friends to check out your local comedy clubs and do that regularly. Theres even laughter yoga, yup it's a real thing that combines breathing exercises with forced laughter, it's like tricking your brain into happiness. Once you start on this laughter path it's easy to become addicted, you start surrounding yourself more and more with friends who like to laugh and play and never look back, all on your road to health.