

Humor and Older Adults

Betty was in her early eighties, recently widowed and terminally ill with cancer. For reasons known only to her, she loved me and allowed me to know her as few others did. Most people saw her as a "loner." When it came time for her to enter a nursing home, I went with her and spent quite some time with her as she settled in. As I was getting ready to leave she began sobbing and asked if I would stay the night with her. Knowing she appreciated my sense of humor and knowing she loved my wife as much as she loved me, I said to her, "Let me get this right. You are asking me to spend the night with you. You're sick, you're over eighty years old and will fall asleep as soon as the lights go out. And you're asking me to stay knowing I can go home to my beautiful wife, who loves me as much as you do, and who will not fall asleep as soon as the lights go out. Betty, what choice do I have? I have to go home." Midst a widening grin, she said, "You always did know how to make a girl feel good. Go home to your wife and come see me tomorrow." (Humor had defused a tough situation and had alleviated some fear, as well as allowed the truth to be spoken and heard. Betty had to stay in that nursing home and I had to go home.)

The next day Betty was still chuckling when she said, "Darn you, I fell asleep last night laughing at what you said. I even feel better this morning"

There is something about laughter and humor that releases stress and opens up new possibilities. Humor changes our perspective. Try being angry while you are laughing. Try being mean spirited while someone is tickling your funny bone. It cannot be done. If we want to create a healing environment laughter needs to be a common occurrence. Humor opens the door to finding joy in adversity (which I believe is a definition of humor)

Don't be afraid to use humor when ministering with/to older adults. However, follow a few guidelines in doing so!

1. Be sensitive to the situation.
2. Be sensitive to the person(s) involved. (I knew Betty would enjoy my response.)
3. If you wonder if a particular use of humor will be received badly, don't use it. It is likely inappropriate.
4. Never use humor out of context! A joke is often misunderstood. Humor should respond to the situation at hand.
5. Never use humor as a put down or as a way to deny feelings (yours or the person you are with).
6. Use humor only if it will serve its purpose, relieving stress and opening new possibilities.

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