Article Series Caregivers

Joy Is Good Medicine For Caregivers

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All Caregivers

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Caring for someone with cancer is often an act of love, but it can also be emotionally and physically exhausting.

Many caregivers experience chronic stress because of the constant demands they face. Research shows that caregivers sometimes feel guilty for wanting a break.

But caregivers should be reminded that making space for joy isn't selfish — it's what helps you stay grounded, resilient, and better able to care for someone else.

"Finding joy often requires remembering what brought you joy before caregiving," said Donna Benton, associate professor of gerontology and director of the USC Family Caregiver Support Center.

In short: finding opportunities for joy is useful strategy for caregivers. Here are some ways you can bring joy into your life:

- Laughter has been shown to increase endorphins, relieve stress responses and improve overall wellbeing.
- Activities like playing or even listening to music or dancing may stimulate brain chemicals that give you a mood boost.
- Spending time outdoors in natural surroundings has been shown to improve emotional wellbeing.
- Focusing on gratitude can support feelings of satisfaction and enjoyment, and may support resilience during difficult times as you care for your loved one.

Consider trying these Microsteps to help you support moments of joy as a caregiver.

Setting aside time each week to do something fun with the person you care for.

Consider listening to music together, looking at photos, or just having a nice conversation. This helps you both enjoy time together, not just as caregiver and patient, but as loved ones again.

Dedicating time to a hobby that brings you joy.

Whether it's painting, cooking, gardening, or reading, doing a creative activity that's just for you, is important and can help you relax and find meaning in your life beyond being a caregiver.

Watching a funny show or listening to your favorite comedy podcast.

Smiling and laughter may lower stress and ease tension, which may contribute towards positive, relaxed feelings.

Taking a few minutes to dance to your favorite upbeat song or listening to music you love.
Music can help lower stress by activating the brain’s pleasure and reward centers.

Scheduling time to go for a walk in the fresh air.

If you can’t leave the person you are looking after, ask a friend to take over caregiving duties for a short time so you can get outside and move. Research shows that enjoyable regular exercise can help lower the burden of caregiving and improve wellbeing.

Dedicating a few minutes every day to appreciating the beauty and awe of the natural world.

Experiencing daily moments of awe in nature such as watching a sunrise or sunset has been shown to boost the mood and lower levels of inflammation in the body. Consider sharing the experience with the person you are caring for if they are able to go outside.

Thinking of three small things you’re grateful for each evening, such as a shared laugh, a peaceful moment, or a kind word.

Gratitude may lift your spirits, and help you find joy, even on tough days.

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