



Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

To Play or Not to Play: Caregiving needs levity

by Kari Berit

Shortly after my Mom died in 2002, Dad, my sister Anne and I decided we'd watch the Academy Awards and dress as if we were attending. Even though it was soon after my mother's death, playing "dress up" helped all of us have a silly,

wonderful time. It didn't lessen our grief. But it did help keep it from consuming us.

Helping your parents deal with the issues of aging—physical, mental, emotional, financial, geographical—will test your balance and stamina. It will stress your spouse, your

family, your work life, your basic sense of self. Sometimes, it will bring you a level of joy that will surprise you. Sometimes, it will bring you down.

No matter how serious things get, you owe it to yourself, and everyone who loves you, to preserve a sense of fun. It may seem simple advice to give, but odds are you'll find it difficult to do as the responsibilities—and sheer amount of time—involved in caregiving begin to mount up.

No matter how tough it gets, remember: Life goes on. It goes on better with a smile.

Childlike, not childish

Unfortunately, in our society, playing is often considered a mindless activity, one usually permitted to children, but not to adults. Sure, you can play when you're playing with children. But to play on your own or with other adults is generally frowned upon, especially if you have other, supposedly more "serious" or "important" things to do. By one estimate, before we send them off to school, our children laugh about 300 times a day. The average for adults? Just 17 times a day. Uff da!

If you're not connected to kids on a daily basis, it's sometimes difficult to give yourself permission to play. "Act your age," is what we're told. Forget that noise—act your smarts instead! By now, you should have learned how important it is to leaven the tough stuff with some laughter. All you're doing when you let an overactive sense of dignity and decorum dictate your actions and attitudes is setting yourself up for a big fall. And that brings us back full circle, because when you're the caregiver, your parents are depending on you not to fall.

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Much of playing has to do with letting go. Let go of what others will think. Let go of the negative self-talk or your fears of appearing silly. Often, silly is the point of the exercise. That voice in your head saying, "I don't have time for this kind of foolishness" or "It's too late to try something new," is really just fear of embarrassment talking.

If you are someone who dares to try new

things, who can and does play like no one is watching, you'll find you have a better attitude and more energy for your caregiving activities, as well as for your family and the "rest of your life." Plus, you'll be a positive influence on your parents whenever they're feeling that there's no fun left in life. Live light-hearted and know that play is good for the heart, soul and brain—yours and theirs.

LOOKING FOR PLAY IN EVERY DAY

"I don't have time for play." Sure you do. You just forgot where to look for it. So look. Read a joke. Tell a joke. Watch a pet do something goofy. Sometimes, my dad and I just get up and dance—for no reason at all other than we like to. Yes, it's good for our emotional health, but that's not why we do it. It makes us feel good.

Here are other ideas:

- Watch "Saturday Night Live" reruns (you know, with the Coneheads)
- Remember dumb stuff you did with high school friends
- Get a "humor buddy," someone to remind you to lighten up
- Look at silly cards and magnets
- Sing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" from Monty Python
- Listen to "A Prairie Home Companion" on Public Radio
- Tickle someone
- Go to the zoo—both for the animals and watching kids respond to the animals
- Make funny faces



Kari Berit (www.KariBerit.com) is the author of The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent (2007: Attainment Company). She helps seniors and their adult children create effective dialogue around things that matter.

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