

# The Best Medicine

Learn the power of optimism and laughter for good health

By Claire Chariton

Twenty-one years ago, a serious car accident left Uta Niemeyer with a legacy of pain.

After countless pain-management programs, physical and occupational therapy, and a difficult experience with pain medication, Niemeyer asked her physician for alternative treatment. In addition to acupuncture, Niemeyer's doctor suggested she check out the Mind Body Medicine Program at Providence Hospital in Southfield. There, Niemeyer attended "Unlearn Your Pain," a class conducted by Program Director Howard Schubiner, M.D.

"I learned such simple things that never occurred to me before," says Niemeyer, 70, a retired finance executive from Brighton, who started the class last summer. "I understand now that I was fearful of being hurt again. My whole outlook was about avoiding another injury. I learned that injury does heal, and chronic pain can be caused by triggers of the subconscious."

Through writing, meditation and self-discovery, Niemeyer has, at last, found pain relief.

## MIND-BODY CONNECTION

For each of us, the mind-body connection holds the secret to good health. Experts agree that for those whose minds are guided by optimism, the result is illness prevention, improved healing, longevity and better quality of life.

"What I have learned is shocking and not taught in medical school," says Schubiner, who says 85% of his patients experience a significant reduction in pain. "If you take a detailed and careful history, a real life story, Schubiner, M.D. you find that stress and emotions affect the mind, and the mind affects the body. These



Uta Niemeyer of Brighton practices meditation to help maintain a positive outlook, which in turn relieves pain.

are real symptoms with real pain, and a lot of people don't want to think it's due to their mind, but that is our human status. It is how we were created."

Combating stress through optimism is a healthful activity long-term. According to a study by psychologist Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, people who are optimistic are less depressed, have fewer physical health problems, and even have better interpersonal relationships. This theory also applies to seniors.

"If all you know about older people was based on what you read in psychological research, you would think that aging is the worst thing in the world," says Christopher Peterson, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, citing examples of health decline, depression and loneliness.



Howard



## THE SUNSHINE YEARS

The senior years should be a time of reduced stress and increased happiness, says Dennis Blonder, a psychological consultant in Bloomfield Hills. He points to a study that suggests beyond the age of earning money, raising kids and career advancement, life can be a much more pleasant.

"When you start getting into your 70s and 80s, those pressures are off, and this leads to a sense of acceptance, which leads to contentment, which leads to happiness," Blonder says, and happier people tend to be healthier.

## REPLACE WORRY WITH LAUGHTER

For Leonard Elardt, 72, of Farmington Hills, optimism means simply worrying less and laughing more.

"I have an optimistic view of life because I don't worry about anything," says Elardt, a tax accountant. "What do you solve by worrying?"

Elardt found his worry-free attitude, plus a few Seinfeld reruns on TV, helped him through recent treatment for prostate cancer.

"I'm willing to bet with friends that I'll live to be 100, and if I'm not here, I don't have to pay out for the bet. If I am here, I collect," he says with a laugh. Freedom from worry can be very liberating, Blonder says. Worrying over what can't be controlled lines a path to depression, he says.

"Not worrying is certainly a part of optimism," he says. "Focus on what you can control and influence. Focusing on what you can't control leads you to a road of denial, frustration, blame and excuses."

Replacing worry with laughter is a positive move toward better health, experts say. "We know that laughter itself has a positive effect on well-being," says Mima Beg, M.D., internal medicine and geriatrics specialist at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit and St. Clair Shores.

"It makes us feel better, but it also has deeper effects. Laughter suppresses stress hormones, and boosts immunization and resistance while releasing endorphins, which are the chemicals that make us feel good and happy," Beg says.

But what if you have nothing in particular to laugh about? Apparently, it doesn't really matter. Beg refers to a study conducted with retired people in India who gathered to laugh out loud. Their efforts paid off with increased relaxation that lasted up to 45 minutes.

"Laughter has a healing quality to it. And saying laughter is the best medicine might just stand true," Beg says.

## GOALS FOR BETTER HEALTH

If optimism and laughing for the sake of better health are elusive goals, adopting a positive outlook for the greater good is just as beneficial, Blonder says.

"Happiness is a moral imperative," he says. "Not for just ourselves, but for those around us. And as we have a moral obligation to be honest, considerate of others, and to fulfill our promises, being happy is certainly in the same league." >

## GIVE YOURSELF A BOOST

Need help setting the wheels of optimism and good cheer in motion? Renee Hinkins, a psychologist in Bloomfield Hills and White Lake, suggests these quick optimism enhancers:

- Count your blessings each day. • Show gratitude for small, kind acts.
- Be mindful of the present moment; don't dwell on the past or on the future.
- Surround yourself with positive peers. • Spend time with small children.
- Laugh at yourself throughout the aging process.
- Tell jokes or engage in collaborative storytelling.
- Watch humorous movies, and read funny books.
- Connect to pleasurable acts from your youth: Ride a bike, or play an instrument.

